



## Tips for Reading an Assignment Prompt

When you receive a paper assignment, your first step should be to read the assignment prompt carefully to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Sometimes your assignment will be open-ended (“write a paper about anything in the course that interests you”). But more often, the instructor will be asking you to do something specific that allows you to make sense of what you’ve been learning in the course. You may be asked to put new ideas in context, to analyze course texts, or to do research on something related to the course.

Even if the instructor has introduced the assignment in class, make sure to read the prompt on your own. You’d be surprised how often someone comes to the Writing Center to ask for help on a paper before reading the prompt. Once they do read the prompt, they often find that it answers many of their questions.

When you read the assignment prompt, you should do the following:

- **Look for action verbs.**

Verbs like *analyze*, *compare*, *discuss*, *explain*, *make an argument*, *propose a solution*, *trace*, or *research* can help you understand what you’re being asked to do with an assignment.

Unless the instructor has specified otherwise, most of your paper assignments at Harvard will ask you to make an argument. So even when the assignment instructions tell you to “discuss” or “consider,” your instructor generally expects you to offer an arguable claim in the paper. For example, if you are asked to “discuss” several proposals for reaching carbon neutral by 2050, your instructor would likely not be asking you to list the proposals and summarize them; instead, the goal would be to analyze them in relation to each other and offer some sort of claim—either about the differences between the proposals, the potential outcomes of following one rather than another, or something that has been overlooked in all of the proposals. While you would need to summarize those proposals in order to make a claim about them, it wouldn’t be enough just to summarize them.



Similarly, if you're asked to compare sources or consider sources in relation to each other, it is not enough to offer a list of similarities and differences. Again, this type of assignment is generally asking you to make some claim about the sources in relation to each other.

- **Consider the broader goals of the assignment.**

What kind of thinking is your instructor asking you to do? Are you supposed to be deciding whether you agree with one theorist more than another? Are you supposed to be trying out a particular method of analysis on your own body of evidence? Are you supposed to be learning a new skill (close reading? data analysis? recognizing the type of questions that can be asked in a particular discipline)? If you understand the broader goals of the assignment, you will have an easier time figuring out if you are on the right track.

- **Look for instructions about the scope of the assignment.**

Are you supposed to consult sources other than those you have read in class? Are you supposed to keep your focus narrow (on a passage, a document, a claim made by another author) or choose your own focus (raise a question that is sparked by course texts, pair texts in a new way)?

If your instructor has told you not to consider sources outside of those specified in the assignment, then you should follow that instruction. In those assignments, the instructor wants to know what you think about the assigned sources and about the question, and they do not want you to bring in other sources.

- **Consider your audience.**

It can be difficult to know how much background information or context to provide when you are writing a paper. Here are some useful guidelines:

- If you're writing a research paper, do not assume that your reader has read all the sources that you are writing about. You'll need to offer context about what those sources say so that your reader can understand why you have brought them into the conversation.
- If you're writing only about assigned sources, you will still need to provide enough context to orient the reader to the main ideas of the source. While you may not need to summarize the entire text, you will need to give readers enough information to follow your argument and understand what you are



doing with the text. If you're not sure whether you should assume that readers are familiar with the ideas in the text, you should ask your instructor.

- **Ask questions!**

If you're not sure what you're supposed to do, email your instructor or go to office hours and ask.