

Campus Academic Resource Program

Addressing the Prompt

This handout will:

- Explain what a prompt is
- Explain six steps for addressing a writing prompt
- Address various sample writing prompts throughout
- Provide a sample prompt for practice

What is a Prompt?:

A prompt is a set of guidelines that informs students what to write about as well as how to write about it. You will encounter a prompt at the beginning of most writing assignment in both academic and nonacademic settings. Not all prompts will use the same language or equal clarity, so ultimately it is up to you to figure out exactly what the prompt's instructions mean. Thus, to write a paper that meets the professor's expectations, you must address the prompt. Addressing the prompt requires learning how to break down the prompt to fully understand it. Speak with your professor if you have any questions about the prompt.

How to Address the Prompt:

Addressing the prompt may seem daunting at first, but the process can be broken down into five manageable steps.

1. Read the prompt carefully
2. Identify key terms or concepts that need to be defined
3. Break down the prompt into more manageable pieces
4. Restate the writing prompt in your own words
5. Rank the directions from the prompt into a checklist to address

Step One: Read the Prompt Carefully

The prompt represents the professor's directions, so it is crucial to read it carefully to fulfill the assignment. If you do not read the prompt carefully, you risk doing the assignment incorrectly. Reading the prompt is the easiest way to begin addressing the prompt and to familiarize yourself with the assignment. This might include reading the prompt multiple times. As you read the prompt, keep these questions in mind:

- What key verbs such as "explain" or "analyze" or "discuss" are used?
- Are there specific topics or questions that must be addressed?
- What sources are you working with?
- What limitations do you have, especially in terms of space and format?

As you answer these questions, take notes and mark up the prompt so you can refer to your analysis as you continue the writing process.

Step Two: Identify and Define Key Terms

While reading the prompt, try and identify key terms. These terms can act as basic signals for what the prompt is asking you to do. Beyond identifying key terms, it is important to make sure you fully understand each term. Here are some strategies for identifying and defining key terms in a prompt:

- Identify and translate key verbs such as "analyze", "evaluate", "compare", and "contrast" to make sure you understand what the task of the paper will be.
- Search for important concepts that will need to be addressed. Look for any questions being asked as well as terminology specific to your course that you may need to respond to or define in your paper.
- For unclear concepts, look them up or ask the professor.
- Look for bolded, italicized, or capitalized words or sentences.

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Example A: Steps One and Two

"Explain Darwin's idea of natural selection in his theory of evolution."

Notice that this prompt is only one sentence. Prompts can sometimes come with few parameters and guidelines. When you come across these kinds of prompts, key terms should still be identified. Notice the key verb here would be "explain" and the key concepts to understand would be "natural selection" and "evolution." Identifying these keywords will help you better address the prompt.

Step Three: Break Down the Prompt

After identifying and defining key terms, you can now break down larger portions of the prompt. To do this you should:

- Mark terms that need to be defined in the paper for a reader
- Mark terms and sentences that provide specific writing instructions
- Markup areas of the prompt that will be relevant throughout the writing process, such as the citation and reference style that must be used
- Mark and ask questions about any words or sentences that are unclear or confusing

Example B: Step Three

*"In 1971, President Nixon ended the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates by suspending the United States' obligations to convert dollars into gold. This would eventually lead to the establishment of a floating exchange rate system. Analyze the causes behind President Nixon's decision to end gold convertibility and the Bretton Woods system that had been in place since 1944. Use Fred Block's book, *Origins of International Economic Disorder*, for evidence in the paper and cite all sources using the Chicago style."*

- Notice that this prompt is more complex and needs to be broken down to be properly addressed. After breaking down the prompt, here is what it should look like.

*"In 1971, President Nixon ended the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates by suspending the United States' obligations to convert dollars into gold. This would eventually lead to the establishment of a floating exchange rate system. **Analyze the causes** behind President Nixon's decision to end gold convertibility and the Bretton Woods system that had been in place since 1944. Use Fred Block's book, *Origins of International Economic Disorder*, for evidence in the paper and cite all sources using the Chicago style."*

- To break down this prompt, the main components are underlined, bolded, and highlighted. To help you keep each type of component (keywords to define, instructional terms, and technical instructions) they have been marked in different ways.

Now when you look at the prompt you can quickly see that you need to

- Define and engage with the terms "Bretton Woods" and "floating exchange rate system,"
- **Analyze the causes**
- Use Origins of International Disorder for evidence and the Chicago citation style.

Step Four: Restate the Prompt in Your Own Words

Restating the prompt in your own words is an excellent strategy to foster a deeper understanding of what you are supposed to write about. By using your own words, you can convert complex concepts into more accessible ideas while checking your own comprehension of the text. While using your own words to summarize the prompt, you should:

- Keep the ideas and overall purpose of the prompt in mind.

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- Focus on the central ideas of the prompt without simply summarizing them.

Step Five: Creating a Checklist

Now that the prompt has been simplified into more manageable pieces, it is helpful to create a checklist for those components. This checklist will allow you to prioritize which parts of the prompt you will need to approach and guide you throughout your writing process. When creating your checklist, you should differentiate between:

- Any questions in the prompt that refer to key ideas
- Any keywords that need to be discussed
- Instructions related to content
- Format guidelines

Remember to rank portions of the prompt in order of what should be addressed early to what should be addressed at the end. Ultimately, this means focusing on important areas such as formulating a strong thesis while addressing format guidelines such as double spacing at the end. Your prompt checklist can be a useful editing tool and is a great way to double check how well your finished assignment addresses the prompt.

Example C: Steps Four and Five

"SFSU provides free tutoring services for students. Two programs that provide these services are: the Campus Academic Resource Program (CARP) and the Learning Assistance Center (LAC). However, the two programs have some similarities and differences. Write a paper in which you compare and contrast the two tutoring programs. Do the two programs serve the same students? What kind of classes does each program support? Do the two programs only offer tutoring services? What are the tutoring philosophies behind the two programs? Which one would you prefer and why? For this paper, be sure to use MLA style to cite and reference all sources used. The paper should be no longer than 5 pages with 12-point font, one inch margins, and double spacing. Proofread diligently as all grammatical and spelling errors will detract from your overall grade. Late papers will not be accepted."

- After reading the prompt, consider its central ideas. Make sure you understand all of the terms used and what the prompt asks you to do. Now it is time to create a simpler version:

"Discuss the Campus Academic Resource Program and the Learning Assistance Center and what sets them apart and makes them the same. Address questions such as: what kinds of students go to each program, what services they offer, and how they approach tutoring. The paper requires MLA format, 12 font, double space, 5 pages and polished papers turned in on time."

- Notice that the restated version narrows down the original prompt to its key terms while also using less dense language to convey a more manageable set of instructions. The restated version is easier to refer back to when needed, and the process of simplifying and consolidating will help attune you to the central ideas from the prompt that should be addressed in the paper.

However, since this prompt is very dense, it can be broken down further into a checklist.

Checklist:

- A. Describe what the two programs are
- B. Discuss what makes them similar
- C. Highlight what makes them different

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- D. Address who comes in for tutoring in the two programs
- E. Address which program tutors more classes
- F. Address what services besides tutoring are offered
- G. Address the approach of the two tutoring programs
- H. Address which program you prefer
- I. Proofread carefully
- J. 5 pages
- K. Double space, 12 font, and one inch margins

For this checklist, we utilized Step Three and broke down the prompt to pick out important information, keywords, and instructions. Here we have arranged each of those components in the order that they need to be addressed to make this complicated prompt significantly more approachable.

Activity 1:

Now it is your turn to practice addressing the prompt. Utilize the five steps outlined above to address this sample prompt:

"In the fictional universe of *The Hunger Games*, Panem is a nation consisting of the capitol and 12 districts that provide precious resources to the capitol. The Hunger Games help to serve a number of purposes in preserving the political order in Panem. Discuss the role of the Hunger Games and how it is a form of political control by the Capital over the districts. Draw on evidence from the movie or the book to support your claims. This assignment should be no more than 4 pages long and all citations and references should be done in MLA format. Please use 1.5 inch margins and double spacing. Late papers will lose a full grade for each day late."

Step One: Read the Prompt Carefully

Step Two: Identify Key terms

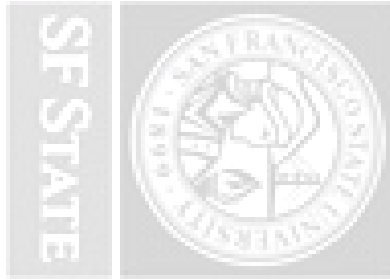
Step Three: Break Down the Prompt

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Step Four: Restate the Prompt in your Own Words

Step Five: Create a Checklist.



Continuing the Writing Process:

After sufficiently addressing the prompt you can now move on to brainstorming your response, outlining your paper, and ultimately writing your assignment. For further information on these steps, refer to the CARP handouts under the Writing the Paper section on CARP's Helpful Handouts webpage (<http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>).

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