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Understanding Writing Assignments: Tips and Techniques

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I'm sitting at a table in the Writing Center when my 2:00 appointment stumbles in, confusion evident in his bleary eyes. "I've been up all night trying to write this history paper," he says, "but I just don't understand what the professor wants us to do!" I tell him to take a deep breath, stay calm, and have a seat. I ask him if the professor has given him a handout explaining the process he should follow while composing, and I assure him that he's not the first college student who's ever arrived confused about what to do next. He's taken the time to come to the Writing Center for help, and that's a good start.

When your teacher presents you with a writing assignment, whether it's a first-year writing class or a class in a different subject area, she will usually hand out a written description, detailing what she's asking you to accomplish. Of course, not all teachers do this, a situation I'll discuss later in this chapter. For now, though, I want to discuss seven tips for understanding any kind of college writing assignment and provide an insider's view by discussing one of my own assignments in first-year writing, a review paper.

Review Essay

In the review essay, you're going to choose a campus event to review. It can be any kind of event—a lecture, a musical performance, a museum show, a fiction reading, and so on. We're going to include these reviews in our class anthology, so *your audience is your peers, not your teacher.* To get a sense of what a review might look like, we'll read some examples from the campus newspaper. Most reviews provide an audience with a brief *summary* of the events, as well as an *evaluation* by the reviewer. As you begin to brainstorm, you might ask yourself: What were the main aspects of the event that readers will want to know about? What did you like best about the event, and why? What did you like least about the event, and why? What descriptive details can help give the readers a sense of the event?

Your review essay should be between three and five pages long. *Your review essay will go through a number of drafts.* You'll bring a rough draft to a peer response workshop next Friday, and then you'll sign up for a one-on-one conference with me to get feedback on a revised version. The final draft will be included in your portfolio, so you will have until the end of the semester to revise the essay.

I will evaluate the review based on the *progress* you made in your revisions, the appeal of the review to *a peer audience*, and the development of your *summary* and *evaluation* of the event. Please take another look at the grading rubric I handed out the first week of class to review my general evaluation criteria.

Assume you're in my first-year writing class and I just gave you this assignment. Take a moment to think about some strategies you would use to better understand this assignment. What do you think are the most important aspects to focus on? What questions would you have for me about the assignment? Although every assignment and every teacher is different, the following tips will be useful in any writing situation.

Tip #1: Look for Key Verbs in the Assignment

Most assignments have key verbs, such as *argue*, *define*, *summarize*, and *evaluate*, that can help you understand what kind of thinking and writing skills the instructor wants you to demonstrate. Notice that in my review assignment I keep mentioning two key verbs—*summarize* and *evaluate*—again and again. I even highlight them twice. The reason these key verbs are so important to me is that I'm hoping they show classroom authors just what kind of approach they should take in a review essay.

Since these key verbs have different meanings in different classes and different subjects, teachers will often describe what they mean by these key verbs in the assignment sheet. Notice that I give writers a list of questions that will help them better understand what I mean by *summarize* and *evaluate*.

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Summarizing an event means getting across to the reader the "main aspects" of the event, and in this kind of summary I want writers to be descriptive in order to give the readers a sense of the event. Evaluating means talking about what you liked and didn't like about an event and why—making judgments and then backing them up with arguments and examples.

Of course, my definitions of *summary* and *evaluation* may be different from the definitions used by instructors in other subjects. These differences aren't just random. Each subject has its own conventions and methods. For example, here's one paragraph explaining the key verb *evaluate* from an assignment sheet in a sociology course. The instructor wants students to write a critical evaluation of an article in a sociology journal:

> What were one or two problems with this research? How could the author have done a better job of investigating the questions he or she posed? Did the author interpret his/her findings correctly, or did he or she overstate or understate their importance?

This instructor's definition of *evaluate* for his assignment is much different than my definition of *evaluate* in my review assignment. This kind of evaluation focuses on problems with research and whether findings were interpreted correctly by the author. My definition of *evaluate* in the review assignment focuses much more on the students' tastes and personal opinions. Reading an assignment sheet carefully and closely will help you make these kinds of subject area distinctions.

Sometimes teachers don't really describe what they mean when they say *argue* or *summarize* or *evaluate*, and this can get confusing when you're trying to understand their assignments. Let's pretend that a psychology professor has given you this assignment:

> Your paper will be a literature review of a topic in cognitive psychology. A literature review is a well-organized overview and evaluation of the relevant research or findings related to your topic. I place emphasis on the words "overview" and "evaluation." You will be interpreting the available information and research findings and then drawing conclusions.

Just like my review assignment, *evaluate* is a key word for this literature review. But it's hard to tell what the professor means by *evaluate*. Students are supposed to "interpret the available information," but what exactly does the teacher mean by *interpret*? If I were given this assignment, before I started trying to write, I would ask the professor to discuss *evaluate* and *interpret* in more detail. Most teachers appreciate it when students have questions about an assignment after they've looked over the assignment sheet, so don't be shy. You might also ask the professor if she can tell you where to find some examples of the kind of literature review she's asking for, since the literature review is a common type of writing you might find in a psychology journal. I talk more about assignment types and model assignments with Tip #2.

Tip #2: Figure Out What Genre—What "Type"—of Essay You've Been Assigned

Many of the writing assignments you get in college will fit into genres. "Genres" are essay types that have certain forms and purposes, for example, lab reports, business letters, editorials, and scientific reports. Not all writing assignments fit into these genres, but many do. The review essay, for example, is based on a very common genre. Classroom authors have probably read movie reviews in the local newspaper or music reviews in magazines like *Rolling Stone*, so they can use this knowledge of the form and purpose of a review when they write their own. I also mention in class that we're going to look at example reviews in the campus newspaper. Of course, I don't want writers to just copy the exact form of someone else's review, but I do want them to think of other reviews they've read in the past to give them a better sense of different possibilities for shaping their own reviews—to give them options for making their reviews more effective.

If your teacher gives you examples of the kind of essay she's assigned, or if she gives you the names of journals or magazines to look at for examples, my advice is to take advantage of this. If your assignment fits into a genre, whether it's a lab report or an interview, it helps to look at models. This will also be true of the writing you do in your career after college. If your boss asks you to write a business plan or a brochure, learning from examples can help you be a more effective writer.

Here's an example of another genre, the chemistry class abstract:

> An abstract of the experiment is to appear on the first page of each lab report. An abstract of an experiment is a short paragraph (3–4 sentences) stating what was done (not what was set out to be done) in a given experiment. It is not a description of the experimental procedure. No data is given in the abstract. The correct form and wording of an abstract, which is found at the beginning of every research article published in chemistry, may be seen in any chemistry journal in the library.

An abstract for a history or psychology article might be much different from this chemistry abstract. This chemistry abstract should only be three to four sentences long, but I've written abstracts for English journals that were a page long. If I were given this assignment, even if I'd written an abstract before in another class, I would take the time to go to the library and look up a few examples from chemistry journals.

Thinking about the type of essay you've been assigned—the genre—can also help you think about things like purpose (Why are you writing?), audience (Who are you writing to?), and tone (How do you want to sound in your writing? Authoritative, personal, formal, humorous?). For example, a scientific paper written for a journal will have a formal tone and structure. A newspaper editorial will usually make an argument to persuade a specific audience. A

personal journal entry will probably be less formal than an electronic bulletin board journal that the entire class reads. When your teacher gives you a writing assignment, think about what genre it is and how that might affect these elements. The better understanding you have of things like genre, purpose, audience, and tone, the better you will be able to persuade and influence your readers. [For more information about writing in different tones for differrent audiences, read Jay Szczepanski's chapter in Part V.]

Tip 3#: Figure Out Who the Audience for the Writing Assignment Is

In my review essay assignment sheet, I make it clear to my students that they're writing to a peer audience, not to me. Notice that I highlight the target audience a number of times. I do this because I know that most of the writing my students have done in high school, and a lot of the writing they will be assigned in their other college classes, had one audience: the teacher. But in this assignment, I want classroom authors to write to each other, not to me, which is one reason we put all of the essays in a class anthology for everyone to read. Of course, in the end, I'm the one who has to put a final grade on these essays. But notice that I tell students I will evaluate them on how well their writing appeals to their peers and not to me. I do this because I want them to see a writing assignment not as a boring task to please a teacher, but as something that generates an interesting idea that a writer can communicate to a real audience.

It's not uncommon for college teachers to assign a hypothetical audience—to ask for role playing. Teachers know that having students write in a situation they might encounter in the real world can lead to much better work. Here's an example from a bioethics course of an assignment that presents a hypothetical audience:

> You are on the board of medical ethics of a major hospital. Your board is still struggling with the best way to advise parents of newborns with an intersexual appearance. Specifically, you must decide if parents have the right to choose surgery and hormonal treatment for their newborns in cases where it is not required for medical reasons.

If you were given this assignment, you would need to keep in mind that your audience is *parents*, and that you're playing the role of an *expert*, a hospital board member. If you were writing this assignment professionally, for a hospital board of medical ethics, you'd also want to keep your audience in mind.

Tip #4: Pay Close Attention to How the Teacher Will Evaluate the Assignment

Notice that the review assignment sheet includes a paragraph devoted to how I will evaluate the essay. I highlight the fact that writers will be graded on the progress they made as they drafted and revised their essays, and this is no surprise considering that I require that students undertake peer response workshops and one-on-one workshops with me. In the evaluation paragraph of the assignment sheet, I also highlight the two key verbs writers need to keep in mind as they structure their essay: *summary* and *evaluation*. Since my grading rubric discusses general things I value in any essay students write, I also remind them to look over the rubric again.

What if the teacher hasn't provided you with a grading rubric or doesn't mention how the assignment will be evaluated? I want writers to understand how to succeed when I give them an assignment, and if I haven't successfully explained how I evaluate an essay, then I hope they ask me questions as we discuss the assignment sheet. Don't be afraid to ask your teacher for more information about what they expect from an assignment and how they will evaluate your writing. Of course, you'll want to be tactful. Don't ask: "What do I need to do to get an A?" Instead, ask the teacher to expand on what she wants you to accomplish in the assignment and what she will value when she grades the assignment. You can also check Hint Sheet B for a list of possible questions to ask a teacher about an assignment.

Keep in mind that every teacher grades differently, based on particular class goals and on the criteria of his discipline. I value originality, creativity, and lots of revision. Other teachers might focus more on how well you can use outside sources to support an argument, while others might be more concerned with grammar. For example, here's a passage from the evaluation section of an assignment in a sociology class:

> Present things in an organized way. I expect your work to be free of spelling errors and grammatical mistakes. Also, your essays should constitute a completed whole. Your paragraphs should be interrelated and work toward the completion of a single, but complex, idea or thesis.

I may grade on revision and originality, but this instructor is more focused on an organized essay structure and error-free spelling and grammar. Unlike a quantitative subject like math, writing is qualitative and subjective, and different teachers will value different things and read your work in different ways. That's why it's important to read each assignment sheet carefully and then ask questions.

Tip #5: Think About the Assignment in Terms of the Class as a Whole

I mention in my assignment sheet that the review essay is part of the class anthology, which is a *magazine* of all the writing the class does. The audience for this anthology is freshmen in college, and all of the pieces we write for it have something to do with college life. I don't grade my students' essays until

the anthology is complete at the end of the semester, and students know that I use end-of-term grading because I want them to do a lot of revising. Knowing these details about the class as a whole can help my students understand this particular assignment and put it in the context of the goals of the class.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself about the context of the class whenever you receive an individual assignment:

- How is this assignment similar to/different from previous assignments? Does it ask me to build on skills I practiced in a previous assignment? Does it ask me to do something new?
- How does the assignment relate to the work I've done in class or for homework?
- How does the assignment relate to the subject area of the class? For example, writing in the sciences is usually logical and formal, but a journal in an English class will usually be more conversational in tone and more exploratory.
- How has the teacher evaluated assignments in the past? Does this assignment call for any new ways of writing and thinking the teacher might be evaluating me on?

All of these questions are also something you could ask your teacher, discuss with fellow classmates, or review with a tutor at your college's writing center.

Tip #6: Don't Be Afraid to Ask the Teacher Questions

I'm a teacher who appreciates thoughtful questions about an assignment. It shows me that students are trying to understand the assignment. And, as hard as I try, when I'm writing an assignment sheet, it's difficult to imagine all of the information writers will need to understand the assignment. So don't be shy. Even if you're in a big lecture class that doesn't allow for a lot of discussion, take the time to visit the professor during her office hours. If she has given the class her e-mail address, then that's another option for communicating about questions you have concerning an assignment. It's helpful to understand an assignment before you start writing, and if questions come up after you start writing, it's crucial to talk to your instructor before you turn in the paper.

When you first come to college, it can seem as if teachers will see you as a pest if you stop by during their office hours and ask questions. But for most of us, just the opposite is true. Most teachers really appreciate students who take the time to visit during office hours and ask thoughtful questions about their assignments. After all, even though it doesn't always feel like it to you, the teacher has created the assignment to help you learn something, not to try to torture or trick you.

Tip #7: If the Teacher Lets You Choose the Topic, Pick Something That's Original and That You're Genuinely Interested In

I can say without a doubt that I'm the world's foremost expert on the death penalty and legalizing marijuana. Why am I such an expert? Because I let my students choose their own topics for research papers, and many of them choose these or other well-known issues. So one reason to pick an original and interesting topic is that most teachers have become a little numb to debates that they've already read about over and over again. Of course, it isn't just teachers who are sick of these issues. Arguments about the death penalty and legalizing marijuana have gotten so much attention from the media that almost everyone is familiar with the opposing sides in the debate. And that makes it harder to find something interesting to say about these kinds of topics.

But here's an even more important reason to pick an original topic: You'll be more excited about writing the paper. Students who pick topics that fascinate them, topics that they really want to know more about, almost always write better essays than students who rely on the same old topics. I've had very few students who were genuinely excited about researching euthanasia or abortion. But I've had plenty of students who chose interesting, original topics and wound up actually enjoying their research and writing. For example, one student who liked rap music compared the attitudes of female and male rappers and included lyrics and images from CD covers; another student who was an environmental science major investigated a controversy over the pollution of a river in her hometown, and her research paper turned into an editorial she mailed to her hometown newspaper.

It's not easy coming up with original topics, I know. But here are some ideas to help you brainstorm if your teacher lets you choose a topic to write about:

- Jot down a list of things that you're an authority on, hobbies you have, and things you want to know more about. Use this list to brainstorm topics that might interest you. You can start broadly and then narrow down (for example: Movies > Tarantino > *Pulp Fiction* > Gender roles in *Pulp Fiction*).
- Look over class notes and other class materials. What were some of the issues you discussed in class that interested you the most? Which chapters in your class text were the most interesting to read or raised the most questions for you?
- Think of the personal relevance the course has for you. Why did you take it to begin with? What connections does the course have to your personal goals, interests, and experiences?
- Glance through books, journals, magazines, or websites in the general area of the class or assignment and find out which issues are being debated or which topics might need further exploration.

- Bounce ideas off your classmates, your teacher, or a tutor at your school's writing center. Sometimes just brainstorming with another person can lead to new topics you never considered.

For more ideas about coming up with topics, read Thia Wolf's chapter in Part I and Amy Hodge's chapter in Part II. To practice understanding assignments, turn to the three example assignment sheets in Hint Sheet B.

The seven tips I've discussed can be helpful if the teacher provides an assignment sheet, but what if the teacher doesn't give you any written description of the assignment? Some teachers explain their assignments verbally and expect students to take careful notes, but it can be difficult to fully understand an assignment without some written description from the teacher. If your teacher doesn't give you an assignment sheet, my advice is to take detailed notes about her verbal description of the assignment and ask questions about anything you're not sure of. Again, don't be shy about visiting the teacher during her office hours and asking her to elaborate on what she's looking for in the assignment.

Another place to get help with understanding a writing assignment is your school's writing center. Writing center staff are experienced with helping students who are struggling to understand an assignment or find a topic. They can help you understand key verbs, figure out the audience for the writing, and interpret the teacher's evaluation criteria, much like I've done in this chapter. With all this in mind, good luck with your next writing assignment!

Sharing Ideas

- Think back to writing assignments you were given in high school or in other college classes. Do you have any tips for understanding those assignments that you could add to Dan's list?
- Make a list of the kinds of key verbs Dan mentions in Tip #1 that you've come across in high school or college writing assignments. How are these key verbs different in different subject areas (for example, how is *arguing* different in science than in English?).
- What genres have you encountered in your high school or college writing assignments? How did the genre affect the audience and purpose of the assignment? What kinds of genres might you encounter in your career after college?
- In Tip #7, Dan has a list of techniques for coming up with a topic. Think back to times that you've had to come up with your own topic for a writing assignment. Are there any techniques you used that aren't on Dan's list?
- Practice some of the tips for understanding writing assignments using the three sample assignments in Hint Sheet B.

- In Hint Sheet B, Dan provides a list of possible questions to ask your teacher about an assignment. Think of questions to add to this list.
- How does Dan Melzer's chapter complicate other chapters in this book that deal with finding and developing your own topic, voice, writing style? How does a writer negotiate between the desire to make a topic or assignment personally significant and the need at the same time to meet the requirements of a course or a teacher or a discipline?