

## Understanding Your Assignment

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The first, and most crucial, step in the writing process is understanding what your assignment is asking you to do by carefully reading the assignment outline! Failure to do this could result in an unfocused and unanswered paper. Use the following steps to break down and understand assignments:

### 1. Circle key words in the assignment question to know what kind of assignment and analysis is needed.

Circle or underline the words that indicate the skills needed to answer the assignment question and keep in mind the discipline (course) you are writing in. If you are unsure what key terms are or mean, see the **Assignment Wording and Expectation** link. Such words include: *summarize*, *present*, *discuss*, or *evaluate*. Remember some writing assignments are only used in certain disciplines, and the analysis/essay structure is not the same across disciplines. Ask yourself: what kind of assignment is it (research paper, persuasive paper, critical analysis) and for which class; is this a sequence of assignments- such as an annotated bibliography that builds into a research essay?

### 2. Carefully read the assignment objectives.

Students have to demonstrate their understanding of course content in their assignments. These are the objectives of assignments and they are listed in the assignment outline; such as research, critically analyze, argue, etc. If not listed in the assignment outline, they will be provided in the assignment grading rubric.

### 3. Read what course methods/concepts/theories need to be applied in the assignment.

Assignments also ask that students apply course methods, concepts, and/or theories in their assignments. Make sure you have a strong, grounded knowledge of your course material or else you will sacrifice the quality of your paper.

### 4. Determine what type of research the assignment requires.

Look back to your assignment outline to see what materials are required for the assignment. Do you need to include a certain amount of scholarly articles, peer-reviewed materials, or materials accessible through the library? This will determine the type of research you do and how much research you need.

### 5. Highlight the academic writing conventions that must be followed.

Looking back at your assignment outline, take note of what citation format is asked (MLA, APA, Chicago). Then look at the assignment description to find out how your instructor wants your paper formatted; do you need a title page, subheadings, margins, or size 12-Times New Roman font? This is important information, and a place where students lose a lot of easy marks.

### 6. If you don't understand the assignment, ask for help!

If at this point you do not understand what the assignment is asking you to do, you need to make an appointment with your instructor first, then if you need the writing specialist. The time you put into understanding your assignment- reading, marking, understanding- the easier it will be to write.

## Understanding Your Assignment: Notes Sheet

**1. What kind of assignment is this? What are the key words in the assignment question?**

**2. What are the assignment objectives? How do they relate to the type of assignment?**

**3. What course methods/concepts/theories could be applied to the assignment question? How?**

**4. What kind of research do I need to do? Were the assignment instructions specific about this?**

**5. What academic writing conventions (citation, font size, margins, etc.) do I have to follow? What did the assignment instructions say?**

**6. What questions do I have about the assignment? When can I book an appointment with my instructor?**

Need help improving your academic writing skills? Contact the writing specialist for support:  
Online: <http://www.mhc.ab.ca/Services/AcademicSupport/WritingSupport>  
or at the Student Success Centre located in the  
Vera Bracken Library.