

How to Interpret a Writing Assignment

One way to understand a writing assignment is to ask what it says about three aspects of writing: content, structure, and tone. By asking and answering the following questions, you will be able to identify the key instructions that will allow you to start writing!

I. Content (the claims, arguments, and evidence you put in your essay)

- **Topic:** Does the assignment ask you to write on a specific topic? Do you have options to choose from? Do you need to come up with some specific idea about a general topic?
- **Originality:** Do you need to include original thought in this essay? Are you being asked to summarize another author's ideas, explain your own, or both?
- **Research:** Is the essay on something that you've already read and talked about in class, or do you need to do outside research? Are you required to reference other texts?

II. Structure (the organization of your essay, such as the number and order of ideas)

- **Word Count:** Is there a word minimum or limit? Is there a page minimum or limit?
- **Required Structure:** Are you required to include a specific number of points, paragraphs, or sections in your essay? Does the assignment suggest a certain outline?
- **Introduction & Conclusion:** Do you need to include an introduction and/or conclusion? Are you told specifically to leave these things out? Is it up to you?

III. Tone (the style of language you use in your essay)

- **Audience:** Who are you writing for? Is this a serious term-paper, or a brief essay?
- **Class:** How does this assignment fit in with the rest of your coursework? What kind of tone does this particular class or professor call for?