

Analyzing a Prompt

In analyzing prompts, categorize the words and phrases you find in the prompts as follows:

Topic words: Words that tell you the subject, or topic, you are to discuss in your response.

Qualifying or quantity words: These words tell you how to limit or focus your written text. Qualifying words might be “never,” “always,” “few,” or they might give you a quantity like “4.”

Characteristic words: These words tell you what aspects, or characteristics, of the subject you are to discuss. These might include words like “stages,” “characteristics,” or “types.”

Organization or presentation words: These words tell you how you should organize your answer and present your information. You might be asked to “Describe when . . .” or “Explain where . . .” or “List why . . .” or you might be asked to *analyze, synthesize, summarize, compare/contrast, or evaluate*.

Source comments: For most writing tests as well as for out-of-class assignments, your readings, lectures, and other sources, such as interviews, are very important. Even if they are not mentioned, your instructor will expect you to refer to these sources in your written responses.

Exercise:

Using the prompts from the last two assignments, practice analyzing the instructions for the prompts by using the categories listed above. Attempt to restate the instructions for those prompts in your own words.

Outline a plan for responding to those prompt instructions, thus practicing pre-planning for writing.

Key Words in Writing Prompts

The following key words are found in writing prompts, and they signal the specific tasks the writer is being asked to complete in the essay, as follows:

Analyze: Examine carefully to determine why. Separate or distinguish the elements of anything complex. Break the idea into parts, and explain the various parts.

Assess: Examine critically, and estimate the merit, significance, or value.

Compare/Contrast: Point out how things are similar and how they are different. (Sometimes, “compare” means both “compare and contrast.”)

Criticize/Critique: Discuss the good and bad elements in a text, a film, or something else. Give evidence to justify your claims.

Define: Give the meaning of a term with enough detail to show that you really understand it.

Describe: Explain or write about; put in words a picture or an account. Tell how something looks, how something happened. Include how, where, who, and why.

Discuss: Give reasons with details. Explore from different perspectives. Look at the pros and cons.

Effect: Whatever is produced by a cause; something made to happen by a person or thing; result.

Enumerate: Count off or list examples, reasons, causes, or effects—one by one.

Evaluate: Using evidence, discuss the strengths and weaknesses.

Explain: Make clear or interpret the reasons why something exists or is happening.

Identify: List and explain.

Illustrate: Make the point or idea clear by giving examples.

Interpret: Give the meaning of; use examples and personal comments to make clear.

Justify: Give reasons for your claim (in an academic argument).

Outline: Make an organized listing of the important points of a subject. (This outline does not always have to look like a formal outline you may write for your English papers.)

Relate: Show the connections between things or how one thing causes another.

Respond: State your overall reaction (response) to the content, and then support your response with specific reasons and examples, often referring back to the reading.

State: Give the main points in brief, clear form.

Summarize: Organize and bring together the main points, keeping out personal opinions.

Support: Back up the statements with evidence.

Synthesize: Pull together parts to make a whole—this requires looking for common attributes among the parts in order to link them together.