

# Understanding the assignment instructions

The absolute **first step** in writing a paper is fully understanding the assignment instructions.

The most important thing to identify is the **goal** of the paper. A paper can be very well written and still miss the mark if the purpose of the assignment is not fully met.

The verbs used in assignment instructions give some indication as to how to achieve this goal. These verbs can generally be divided into three main categories: verbs of description, verbs of argumentation, and verbs of relation.

## Verbs of description

### Classify / Identify

- Divide elements (items, ideas, facts, etc.) into specific categories.
- Justify the inclusion of each item into its category with evidence from your research.

*E.g. Identify the major causes of the First World War.*

### Define

- Give the meaning of the topic by outlining its specific characteristics.

*E.g. Define Freud's Oedipus complex.*

### Demonstrate / Illustrate / Show

- Use detailed examples to explain the topic.

*E.g. Demonstrate how David Foster Wallace expands the theme of addiction to affect every major character in Infinite Jest.*

### Document / Trace

- Provide a detailed account of a series of events, usually in chronological order.
- This exercise is often used to put an event or phenomenon into context.

*E.g. Document the events that led to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.*

### Enumerate

- Provide a list of relevant facts or items, as required by the topic.

*E.g. Enumerate the problems that Descartes' contemporaries pointed out in his Meditations.*

### Explain

- Describe and clarify the topic.
- "Explain" often requires the writer to provide causes, consequences, methods, etc.
- Provide answers for the "why" or "how" of the topic.

*E.g. Explain why a metallic surface usually feels colder to the touch than a wooden surface, even though they are actually at the same temperature.*

### Outline / Review

- Summarize the most important elements of the topic.
- Provide a broad structure for those elements.

*E.g. Briefly outline Sydney's main arguments in A Defense of Poesy.*

### Summarize

- Give a brief account of the topic's most important elements, usually following the same order of ideas as the original text.

*E.g. Summarize the arguments presented in Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.*

## Verbs of argumentation

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### Analyze / Interpret

- Break the topic down into its most important elements.
- Explain each element to provide a better understanding of the topic as a whole, or to offer a new perspective.

*E.g. Analyze recurrent themes and images found in three recent television beer commercials.*

### Argue / Prove / Show / Debate

- Take a position on a debatable issue.
- Provide evidence and examples to persuasively support it.

*E.g. Is stem cell research ethically valid? Argue.*

### Assess / Evaluate / Judge / Criticize / Critique

- Look at strengths and weaknesses or positives and negatives.
- Use examples to support your assessment.
- Provide a final observation that stems from this evaluation.

*E.g. Assess the current state of the federal government in Canada.*

### Consider / Discuss / Examine / Explore / Investigate

- Highlight the topic's most important issues (controversies, causes, effects, etc.).
- Support your claims through research.
- Often requires an argument to be made.

*E.g. Examine the Acadian Expulsion in 1755 from a historical perspective.*

### Reflect / Respond

- Give your personal reaction to a given topic and provide your opinion.
- Explain your reasoning and justify your personal response.

*E.g. Reflect on Keats's "Ode on Melancholy." What do you think the main themes of the poem are? What kind of ideas do you think preoccupied Keats at the time of this writing?*

## Verbs of relation

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### Apply

- Use concepts, theories, ideas or methods to demonstrate how something works, how things are related or why something happened.

*E.g. Apply your knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis to the HBO television show Rome.*

### Compare / Contrast / Juxtapose

- Identify the similarities and differences between two (or more) elements (events, texts, theories, etc.).
- Explain the significance of the relationship between those elements.
- Provide an underlying reason for the similarities and differences.
- In the case of "contrast", focus on the differences.

*E.g. Compare the two versions (1933 and 2005) of the movie King Kong.*

### Relate

- Establish connections and relationships between two or more elements.
- Use examples and references to demonstrate these connections.

*E.g. Relate your own use of a personal computer with the theories of communication discussed in class.*

## Requirements

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In addition to understanding the goal of the paper, it is essential to follow the **basic requirements** provided in the instructions.

Here are the most important requirements to identify:

### Topic

Check which topics are available to choose from, whether you can create your own topic, and any specific instructions on what to address in the assignment.

### Sources

See how many and which types of sources should be used for this paper.

### Evaluation criteria

Pay attention to the specific criteria on which the professor or TA will base their evaluation.

### Due date

Check when the paper is due, how to submit it, and penalties for lateness.

### Length

Look for the minimum or maximum number of pages or words that your paper should contain. This number will affect the scope of the paper and topic.

### Format

See which referencing style to use (APA, MLA, Chicago Manual, etc.), as well as any additional information on the format or the presentation of the paper (single-spaced or double-spaced, font style and size, title page, table of contents if applicable, etc.).

## More questions?

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Remember that you can always write or go speak to your professor or your TA about your assignment, either to obtain clarifications, or to confirm that you are on the right track.

You can also come to the AWHC and make an appointment with one of our writing advisors to discuss any question you might have about the writing process:

- Understanding the assignment instructions;
- Narrowing down the topic;
- Brainstorming;
- Establishing a preliminary thesis;
- Research;
- Creating the outline;
- Writing;
- Revision.