



UNIT 1

Preparing to Write

- Part 1 Understanding the essay prompt
- Part 2 Taking a position
- Part 3 Doing research
- Part 4 Planning the essay

Part 1

Understanding the essay prompt

Section 1

Identifying the requirements

Academic writing is the result of a process involving the research and careful consideration of a topic. The ultimate purpose of this process is for a writer to present a point of view on a topic that readers will accept as true or plausible. Writers must research their topic in order to present a point of view that is supported by logical and objective evidence.

Planning to write academically begins with the genre of the essay because this affects the organization of the essay. Common essay genres include argumentative, compare and contrast, or problem-solution essays (see Appendix A on page 130 for more on essay genres). The genre is often indicated by the words used in the essay prompt.

Therefore, since researching a topic is often guided by the requirements of an instruction, or essay prompt, it is essential that an academic writer considers:

What is the essay prompt asking me to do?

To understand the essay prompt, first identify its two main parts:

1. **the general topic**
2. **requirements for the essay**

Consider this prompt:

Analyze the growth of Apple's market share since the introduction of the iMac.

The general topic is *Apple, Inc.* The requirement for the essay is to *analyze the growth of market share since the introduction of the iMac.*

Requirements for the essay

After identifying the topic, the writer should look for requirements in the essay prompt. These requirements tell the writer what must be included in the essay.

There are four types of requirements in many prompts:

1. **Recall** – show knowledge learned from a reading, lecture, or some other source.

2. **Analysis** – break down a topic into smaller parts and explain the significance of each part.
3. **Synthesis** – use information from two or more sources (lectures, readings, etc.) to show a relationship and possible deeper meaning.
4. **Evaluation** – judge the value of something based on an analysis of information.

These requirements are often indicated by the use of certain instructional words in the essay prompt. Here is a list of common instructional words.

Requirement	Instructional words	Example
Recall	summarize list identify describe illustrate define	<i>Summarize the most significant theories of early twentieth century psychologists and how they revolutionized the field of psychology.</i> <i>Describe the American judicial system and how it is designed to limit wrongful convictions.</i> <i>Define the term “success” using points from the various assigned readings on Buddhism.</i>
Analysis	analyze examine discuss compare contrast determine	<i>Analyze the growth of Apple’s market share since the introduction of the iMac.</i> <i>Discuss some of the advances in twentieth century technology which have helped transform the workplace.</i> <i>Compare the health care systems of France and the United States.</i>
Synthesis	use refer include incorporate	<i>Using points from the various readings assigned this semester, determine the most critical turning points in the evolution of human societies.</i> <i>Watch the film Mulholland Drive and identify its “film noir” characteristics. Refer to the aspects of the classic movies from the 1950s covered in the lecture.</i>
Evaluation	evaluate assess judge argue recommend comment	<i>Evaluate the effectiveness of anti-piracy laws on curbing the illegal downloading of digitalized video, music, and print.</i> <i>Argue for or against the expansion of the school week from five to seven days.</i>

NOTE: The writer is normally expected to express an objective opinion when the essay prompt asks for an evaluation. For other question types, an objective opinion is not normally expected. For example:

Compare the health care systems of France and the United States.

(No opinion asked for – the writer must only provide evidence to support how the two systems differ or are similar.)

Compare the health care systems of France and the United States. Then evaluate the more successful of the two in terms of overall public health.

(Opinion asked for – the writer must both provide evidence to support how the two systems differ or are similar, and express an objective opinion about these differences or similarities.)

Exercise 1

For each example essay prompt in the table on page 3:

- a. underline the topic.
- b. circle any instructional words indicating a requirement.

Example:

Analyze the growth of Apple's market share since the introduction of the iMac.

Section 2

Understanding longer essay prompts

Longer essay prompts with more details included are commonly assigned. In a longer essay prompt with multiple requirements, identifying the general topic may be a challenge. For example:

Many governments, for a variety of reasons, are seeking energy sources which can help them curb their reliance on fossil fuels. Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs. Be sure to discuss matters of concern regarding energy use, such as cost and environmental impact, and make comparisons among various energy sources regarding these. Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.

In the prompt above, what is the general topic?

- a. Fossil fuels
- b. Nuclear energy
- c. Various energy sources

The correct answer is **b** – nuclear energy.

Identifying requirements in longer essay prompts

With longer essay prompts, the writer must be very clear about the different requirements. One way to do this is by identifying and circling each instructional word indicating a requirement. For example:

Many governments, for a variety of reasons, are seeking energy sources which can help them curb their reliance on fossil fuels. Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs. Be sure to discuss matters of concern regarding energy use, such as cost and environmental impact, and make comparisons among various energy sources regarding these. Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.

In this essay prompt, there are four clear requirements:

- *Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs.*
- *Discuss matters of concern regarding energy use.*
- *Make comparisons among various energy sources.*
- *Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.*

The main requirement is often the first one; it should be the focus of the entire essay. The other instructional words show sub-requirements (or even sub-sub-requirements) – the different levels of focus which the writer should include at some point in the essay.

To distinguish main from sub- and sub-sub-requirements, create an outline of the essay prompt, formatted as follows:

<p>Main requirement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-requirement 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sub-sub-requirement • Sub-requirement 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Etc.
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For example, an outline of the requirements from the essay prompt on nuclear energy could be:

Main requirement: *Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs.*

Sub-requirement 1: *Discuss matters of concern regarding energy use.*

Sub-sub-requirement: *Make comparisons among various energy sources.*

Sub-requirement 2: *Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.*

Exercise 2

Look at the essay prompts on the next page and:

- a. underline the general topic.
- b. circle any instructional words indicating a requirement.
- c. outline the requirements to show the main from sub- and sub-sub-requirements.

1. Select several of Picasso's paintings representing both his pre- and post-war periods. Compare aspects of both periods. Explain the transformations which occurred in his art, making sure to refer to color, images, and expressions.

2. The lectures in this course have thus far focused on the 30 articles in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the historical basis for each. Select one of the Declaration's member countries and describe the challenges it faces in trying to uphold the human rights standards outlined in the articles. Determine how close the country is to being a model human rights state.

3. In the class, examples were given of how socio-cultural factors affect the perception of certain issues which often lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in diplomatic negotiations, protests, and even armed conflicts. Select a particular issue which eventually led to an armed conflict. Contrast how this issue may have been perceived on both sides of the conflict, making sure to include points on differing values, beliefs, behavior, and laws.

4. Analyze a contemporary novel with a female protagonist and compare and contrast it with classic works where women were traditionally portrayed as the villain or victim, such as in the works analyzed in the course (e.g., *Macbeth*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Washington Square*). Be sure to a) comment on whether or not women still come across as being the "weaker sex" in more modern literature, and b) identify where symbolism and allegory are used in defining the woman's character.
