

DECODING ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES

The first step in successfully completing a paper or other writing task is to make sure you know what you are being asked to do. These “decoding” strategies will help you make sense of your guidelines and develop an effective writing plan.

GETTING STARTED

1. Read (and reread!) the guidelines as soon as you receive your assignment. Highlight or underline specific requirements, and make note of any questions you have.
2. Create a checklist of the assignment’s required components. Consider the following:
 - What is the purpose of the assignment? *Why* are you writing?
 - Who is your audience?
 - What do you need to know before you begin writing a draft (background reading or genre guidelines)?
 - What kind of evidence is required? What are your source requirements (type, number, etc.)?
 - What are the length, style/documentation (i.e., APA, MLA, etc.), and formatting requirements?
 - Make a note of due dates (including drafts, peer review, etc.).

Be sure to distinguish between content and format; both are important, but content (thesis, topic, etc.) typically matters more than format (title, margins, etc.).

3. Contact your instructor immediately if you are confused or have questions.
4. Begin to brainstorm ideas and conduct any required research early so you can seek help from research librarians. Keep notes as you conduct research so you can organize the information and avoid accidental plagiarism.
5. Return to your checklist throughout the process of writing your paper to make sure you're on track.

IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE

Look for keywords, especially verbs, to clarify your task/purpose. Use the chart below as a guide for what *action* these keywords are directing you to take in your writing. *Remember that most academic writing requires you to present and support an argument of some kind.*

INTERPRETATIVE			INFORMATIVE			RELATATIONAL		
<i>Support thinking using evidence (often by applying theories, principles, course concepts/readings, or research).</i>			<i>Present facts; demonstrate knowledge. (May be part of an assignment that also includes informative or relational tasks.)</i>			<i>Find connections or explain relationships among concepts.</i>		
assess	analyze	argue	describe	illustrate	explain	compare	use	apply
evaluate	support	consider	demonstrate	define	summarize	distinguish	contrast	employ

IDENTIFY AUDIENCE

- Your instructor will be part of your audience, but some assignments specify other audiences (e.g., *Write a letter the editor.*). In some cases, particularly in upper-level or graduate classes, the audience may be experts in the broader field or discipline.
- If you are unsure about a specific audience, imagine an educated reader—but one who knows less about the topic than you do.
- Will the audience already be familiar with your subject? With your sources? With your terminology?
- Will your audience agree with or object to your argument?
- Use a tone appropriate for your audience and purpose. Consider how you would address such an audience if you were speaking face-to-face.