Teaching Tips:
20 Questions About Writing Assignments

Students can ask these questions about assignments they receive—and we can ensure that our own assignment prompts and explanations give students these key pieces of information.

Questions about getting started

1. If I have my own idea for a **topic or angle** that's interesting to me, can I use it, or do I need to complete the assignment exactly the way it is described?

2. Is there an **assignment model**, a sample essay, or a kind of published writing that I could look at to help me better see how to do this assignment?

3. If I write an **essay draft** early, can I come see you [the professor] to talk about it, or email you to ask a few questions?

Questions about the assignment's main purpose:

4. Why do people in this field write or read a text like this? What's the **main goal** for this kind of writing?

5. Should I mostly **review** the similarities, differences, events, theories, or key features, or should I **make arguments**, draw conclusions, or give my interpretations about these ideas? Do I need to answer the question, “so, what?”

6. Should I broadly **survey** the field or issue, or should I narrow my focus and “go deep” with my analysis?

Questions about the assignment's target audience:

7. Should I write for a **knowledgeable audience** that has read (or studied) what I have read (or studied), or do I need to give additional background or summary?

8. Should I try to write for a **resistant audience** that will need a lot of evidence, or should I write for an audience that generally agrees with my point? Should I address and refute counterarguments?

9. What kind of **evidence** will be most convincing in this field (or to this audience): numbers, descriptions, direct quotations, logical reasoning, examples, case studies, expert testimony?

10. Will I need to consult **outside sources**, and if I do, what kind of sources are appropriate for this field, audience, or genre?
Questions about style and format that differ among disciplines:

11. Is it preferred that I use the **scholarly language or format** of this discipline or genre, or should I use standard paragraphs and plain, direct language accessible to a range of readers?

12. Are lively, graceful introductions and extended **paragraphs** expected by readers in this field (or for this assignment), or will short, informative paragraphs be sufficient?

13. Is it important to readers in this field that I write smooth, **stylistic sentences**, or is a straightforward “just the facts, ma'am” style enough?

14. What **citation format** should I use for outside sources?

Questions about the context or specific assignment:

15. Is it okay to use **first person** (“I”) or second person (“you”)? Is it okay to use specific, relevant examples from my own life or experience?

16. Should I try to avoid **passive voice** (“to be” verbs)? Does it matter whether I use present tense or past tense verbs (as long as I'm consistent)?

17. Is the **page-length** specification an absolute requirement, or is it more of a guide to how much information I should plan to include in order to satisfy the audience's needs?

18. Can I include relevant **visual or other non-text information** (pictures, charts, diagrams, sound or video clips), or should I include only text?

Questions to gauge individual professors' goals and concerns:

19. What do you think is the **most difficult part** of this assignment? What are the most common mistakes students make with this assignment?

20. What is the **most important aspect** of this assignment? What should I spend most of my time and energy on as I write and edit?