

Fundamentals of Prompt Design

Designing assignment prompts is one of the most important forms of writing we undertake as teachers. Whether for **low-stakes** or **high-stakes assignments**, students rely on your language choices to understand your expectations and their goals. Consequently, prompts also shape students' writing *process*, and by ensuring your prompts accurately and precisely reflect what you want students to produce, you can guide their actions toward efficacy. Taking the time, then, to craft prompts carefully not only facilitates stronger student outcomes, but also makes grading much easier, as the papers you receive will better represent your class's true abilities.

Some strategies for designing effective writing prompts:

When assessing the clarity of a prompt, ensure students will be able to describe the rhetorical context of the assignment, including all the elements below.

- **Subject.** *What, precisely, am I writing about? How much freedom do I have to define my topic?*
- **Audience.** *For whom am I writing? What does that readership expect?*
- **Purpose.** *What is the purpose of this assignment in the context of the course?*
- **Form.** *What should this writing look like? What is its genre? What are the hallmarks of that genre?*

Even students who largely understand the assignment will benefit from your precise articulation of what their writing should *do*—not just what it should include.

- **Focus on the verbs.** Pay particular attention to the actions you direct students to take, making purposeful verb choices. (“Discuss” is an especially ambiguous directive; be sure students know what you mean by it if you choose to use it. It might be more precise and therefore productive, for example, to direct students to “paraphrase and then compare.”) Bloom’s Taxonomy is an especially useful resource for prompt design.
- **Prioritize the moves.** While you may want to see students practicing a number of skills or “moves”—such as presentation of and response to sources, articulation of a problem, or clear argumentation—think about which are most important and foreground them.
- **Consider disciplinary differences.** Student writers may know what it means to “analyze” in, say, literary studies, but still need your support to understand what counts as analysis in management or the natural sciences.

We often add suggestions to a prompt intending to be helpful only for students to treat them as prescriptions. Be alert, then, to common misinterpretations of intent.

- “Might” in a prompt will often be read as “should.”
- Examples, especially lone examples, can be seen as the only acceptable approach.
- Novice writers will use a series of questions, unless explicitly told otherwise, as an outline or sequence for drafting.

References

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. New York: Bedford St. Martin’s, 2004.

See also

Establishing Learning Goals
High-stakes and Low-stakes Assignments
Scaffolding Student Learning