

Baruch COLLEGE | WRITING CENTER

INTERPRETING ASSIGNMENTS WORKSHOP

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LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Identify the larger goals of the academy and discipline within which they are writing.
- Identify the specific goals of the classroom, and professor for which they are writing, as revealed by an assignment.
- Generate a list of writing tasks to respond successfully to an assignment, and in particular, be able to respond to the verbs of an assignment with specific, sequenced writing steps

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, students will learn to interpret and respond to an assignment via four primary activities:

- Facilitator leads discussion about unstated expectations that accompany writing in the academy and within specific disciplines.
- Students close read an assignment, and work to identify the specific skills this professor and classroom are valuing.
- Students practice connecting the verbs of an assignment to writing steps and work to generate a list of writing tasks, in order to respond to an assignment.
- Independently, students close read an assignment that they have brought in and work to respond with a list of writing tasks connected to the goals/expectations of their professors.

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

Begin by asking students what they do when first given an assignment. Introduce the idea that **the more clearly they understand what an assignment is asking them to do, the more successful their response to that assignment will be.** Let them know that today we will:

- 1) discuss some of the larger, unstated expectations that accompany writing in the academy, and within specific disciplines;
- 2) practice close reading an assignment to see how a prompt can reveal a professor's values and purpose in giving an assignment;
- 3) practice creating goals and tasks to respond to an assignment in a meaningful way.

Part One: Understanding Unstated Expectations in Academic Writing

1. **Successfully responding to an assignment involves understanding the values and expectations of the classroom you're writing in, and those of your professor, which are often coded in assignments themselves.** But some expectations might not be explicitly stated.
 - Ask, "What are the things that are generally expected of you, and of your writing, when writing for a college class?" Record responses on board. Possible responses may include:
 - To use correct language and appropriate conventions of rhetoric/discourse
 - To demonstrate knowledge of course content
 - To write a clear response that presents clear ideas
 - To make an argument
 - To provide reasons to support claims, and evidence to support these reasons
 - To use appropriate conventions of citation
 - To undertake an approach to inquiry that demonstrates exploration and meaningful engagement of ideas
 - To write a genuine, thoughtful response

Emphasize that whether or not it's explicitly stated in an assignment, professors are almost always looking for the same things that students are looking for from their professors, and from their assignments: **clarity, accessible language, careful explanation, and effort.**

2. **Different disciplines have different expectations and values when it comes to writing.**
 - When professors assign a paper in a course, they are often looking for a particular kind of argument, analysis, or explanation that is rooted in that discipline.
 - Knowing how experts in your field write—how professional literary scholars, historians, or scientists present their ideas—can help you to respond to an assignment.
 - For example, the definitions and forms of "argument" and "summary" can vary among disciplines. In a science or anthropology class, a summary might occur in the form of observation or description. In a lit. class, you might briefly present the plot of a novel.
3. **Ultimately, assignments are documents that contain the values and goals of your professors.**

- When professors give you an assignment, they have a specific purpose in mind—they are trying to help you to understand the course’s material, or to evaluate your understanding, or to teach you specific skills.
 - Assignments can reveal what skills your professors are looking for you to demonstrate—and teach you how to respond accordingly.
4. **Ask, “What is the first thing you do when given an assignment?”**
- *Read it.* Some things to consider as you read:
 - Where does this assignment fall in the spectrum of assignments given to me this semester?
 - What skills does my professor value, as stated in class, on the syllabus, or elsewhere?

Part Two: Reading to Determine the Goal of an Assignment

1. **Distribute Handout 1: “Assignment 1: *How the Mind Works*” and Handout 2: “Reading to Determine the Goal of an Assignment.”**
 - Provide time for students to read the assignment and fill out Handout 2.
 - Encourage them to circle or underline anything that seems important, as they read.
2. **Record on the board as students share out their answers.** End with having students paraphrase the professor’s main goal for the assignment (question #8.) See **Reference Sheet:** Reading to Determine the Goal of an Assignment (*How the Mind Works*).
3. **Briefly go over strategies for obtaining further information.** Who can they ask, if they have questions/need clarification? What kind of help or question is appropriate for each party?
 - **Their professor:** the best and first person to approach when in need of clarification (about questions posed in the assignment, or about the meaning of terms.) Their professor is someone who can provide direction about places to revisit in lecture notes/readings, or feedback about text selection, as they get started.
 - **The Writing Center:** a great resource for when their professor’s clarification has left them with remaining questions. Consultants can help students to understand what is being asked/expected of them, and to start responding (to select texts, determine what types of sources to find, break down verbs into writing steps.)
 - **Classmates:** a good resource for help with questions about mechanics/logistics (due date, page length) or questions about missed class lecture notes. (Often, can provide information delivered in class, that their professors might expect them to already have.)
 - **Reference desk librarians:** a great resource for when they are beginning to look for sources, or for help with how/where to locate good sources.

Part Three: Responding to an Assignment

1. **Emphasize that the verbs in an assignment can guide students in how to respond.**
 - Say, “Let’s look back at the verb the professor uses in the assignment we just read.” *Explain what you consider.*

- Ask students how this helps them to understand the specific task required of them. What must they know, or know how to do, to “explain?” (*Explain: to clarify by giving a detailed account of how/why something occurs.*)
 - Using students’ responses as a starting point, work to generate a complete, sequenced list of writing tasks to address the goals of this particular assignment. See **Reference Sheet: Writing Steps for *How the Mind Works***.
2. **Ask, “What other verbs do your professors commonly use in assignments, including the ones you brought in?”**
- Record responses. Ask students to verbally run through steps required to “analyze” and/or “summarize.”
 - **Pass out Handout 3: “Verbs + Associated Writing Tasks.”**
 - Point out to them that the verbs of any assignment can be connected to specific, sequenced writing tasks.
 - Give students time to peruse list. Walk them through the relationship between summary, analysis, and argument. Answer questions as they arise.
3. **Explain that in addition to academic verbs, other language commonly appears in assignments that has special meaning.**
- **Pass out Handout 4: “Understanding Assignment Instructions.”**
 - Explain that we will look at sample language in assignment prompts and identify the goals associated with each kind of assignment instruction.
 - As you walk students through the handout, help students notice and understand language that is framed more implicitly such as “I’m interested in seeing you think on the page” and “You might begin by...”
4. **Emphasize that as a last pre-writing step, students should always formulate their own writing goals** (which will help to make their responses thoughtful and focused.)
- (Sample goal for Pinker: to illustrate how his argument about how the mind is like a computer can help us to understand how Alzheimer’s affects our minds.)
 - Often a student’s writing goal will clarify which part of a text is most interesting to them and why.
5. **Have students take out an assignment they have brought in.**
- **Pass out Handout 5: “Assignment 2: *Psycho*”** to students who don’t have an assignment.
 - Give them time to independently examine this assignment. Encourage them to determine the goal of the assignment, and to respond with specific writing steps.
 - Make yourself available, as questions arise. See **Reference Sheet: Reading to Determine the Goal of an Assignment (*Psycho*)** and **Reference Sheet: Writing Steps for *Psycho***.
 - Wrap up.

ASSIGNMENT 1: HOW THE MIND WORKS

In the last weeks, we have read Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* and examined his ideas about how our mind and mental abilities have evolved. In four pages, explain what you consider to be the most important argument in Pinker's book, with examples and quotations that support your interpretation. There are several themes you might reasonably choose to emphasize. I want to know which one you consider the most important, and how well you can make your case. I am interested in seeing you think on the page—in your ability to support an argument with textual evidence and analysis. Make sure to define any key terms/concepts you introduce from Pinker's text, before making your case. The first draft will be due in class on February 10th.

Portions of this text adapted from Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, p. 34

READING TO DETERMINE THE GOAL OF AN ASSIGNMENT

1. What is the main task of this assignment?
2. Does the professor provide any background, definitions, or context for the assignment? If so, what?
3. What verbs does the professor use?
4. Are there specifications about which texts can be used?
5. Are there specifications about organization, structure, or sequencing of information/paragraphs?
6. Are there mechanics directives? (page length, font, etc.)
7. When is this assignment due?
8. **What is this professor's goal in giving this assignment? What are the specific skills this professor is valuing/asking students to demonstrate? What does s/he want to find out?**

VERBS + ASSOCIATED WRITING TASKS

When a professor asks you to _____, they are asking you to:

<p>When a professor asks you to summarize, they are asking you to provide a brief, condensed explanation of a text’s main ideas, usually in order to answer a ‘what’ question (what is the plot of <i>The Great Gatsby</i>?) Summary is often not an end in and of itself, but a necessary step and precursor to argument (though not always explicitly stated as such in prompts.) <i>Writing steps:</i> Read. Work to present the ideas of your text in a condensed form, providing your reader only with information that will be necessary to understand your argument.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to analyze, they are asking you to break down the text or issue that you are examining into parts, usually in order to answer a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question about these specific parts (why does Fitzgerald use images of time so frequently in <i>The Great Gatsby</i>?) <i>Writing steps:</i> Read. Pay close attention to noticeable, intriguing, or puzzling patterns in the text. Select and summarize a pattern that seems significant, and pose ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions about it, which you will go on to answer in the form of an argument.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to argue, they are asking you to take a stance on a certain issue and to explain why this is your stance (often in the form of a thesis.) Unless explicitly stated otherwise, most assignments are asking you to construct some form of argument, after having considered a text/issue/point of view. <i>Writing steps:</i> Read, summarize, and analyze the issue. Take a stance and write a claim that explains your stance, the significance of your stance, and answers a how/why question. Back up this claim with the analysis of evidence.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to discuss, they are asking you to consider something specific, often another’s point of view or opinion, and explain whether you agree or disagree with this point of view and to give context for/explain why. Your task is to orchestrate a conversation—to present the ideas or points of view of others—and contribute to this discussion in a meaningful way. <i>Writing steps:</i> Read, summarize the different points of view you are examining. Explain with whom you agree or disagree and make sure to explain why.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to compare/contrast, they are asking you to identify the significant similarities, and/or differences, between two items/texts. <i>Writing steps:</i> choose a theme to focus on and make a list of appearances of that theme in two texts. Circle similarities in both lists (or alternatively, differences.) Decide which similarities are significant/most interesting to you, and develop a thesis to explain this significance. Support this thesis with the presentation and analysis of evidence from each text.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to describe, they are asking you to provide a detailed explanation about how/why something happened.</p>
<p>When a professor asks you to explain, they are asking you to clarify a topic by giving a detailed account of how and/or why it occurs.</p>

UNDERSTANDING ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

Instruction	Example Assignment Language	Implied Assignment Goals
<p>Base your paper on readings, lectures, or discussions</p>	<p>Drawing on ideas in Steven Pinker’s <i>How the Mind Works</i>, examine how our mind and mental abilities have evolved.</p> <p>Based on our readings, class lectures, and discussions on B.F. Skinner, how would you explain . . .</p>	<p>These instructions help you find a <i>context</i> for your writing. They draw on your prior knowledge from the course, and ask you to demonstrate knowledge of the key concepts you’ve learned.</p> <p>Though you’re responding to other sources, you will likely still need to make your own argument/thesis!</p>
<p>Make an original argument or thesis</p>	<p>In your paper, you should be engaged in original analysis, rather than a summary of our class discussions.</p> <p>I am interested in seeing you think on the page.</p> <p>Propose an original hypothesis in the area of psychology.</p>	<p>While your essay can build on arguments by other authors, it should ultimately diverge in some way from what others have said. Your professor values how <i>you</i> think about the subject and what new ideas <i>you</i> bring to the discussion.</p>
<p>Support your argument by analyzing specific techniques, devices (literary, cinematic etc.), factors, or effects</p>	<p>In the film <i>Citizen Kane</i>, analyze how settings, sound, framing, camera angles, and other technical devices emphasize Kane’s isolation.</p> <p>Your project will address racism and its legacy in the U.S. You may want to consider economic implications, social or psychological implications, political implications etc.</p>	<p>The professor’s list includes <i>some</i>, but not all, of the possibilities for your writing. With “other technical devices,” she would ideally like you to brainstorm other areas not mentioned here, and then narrow your focus from among the choices. As you write, focus on <i>how</i> questions rather than <i>what</i>.</p>
<p>Define</p>	<p>Make sure to define any key terms/concepts you introduce from Pinker’s text, before making your case.</p> <p>You might begin by coming up with a definition of adulthood based on Critical Reading Question 2 on pg. 198.</p>	<p>Your professor will look for your ability to <i>connect</i> key terms to the larger discussion that will follow in your paper, in addition to clarifying relevant definitions.</p>

ASSIGNMENT 2: *PSYCHO*

Choose one of the following scenes from *Psycho* to analyze in detail. In a 5-paragraph essay, consider the way the various aspects of the scene (cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, soundtrack, etc.) contribute to its overall effect. Make sure to define any technical terms you use. Your essay should be no longer than 3 pages and is due in class next week.

The real estate scene

Marion driving her car

The shower sequence (including Norman “cleaning up”)

Lila exploring the Bates house

The psychiatrist’s “explanation”

Portions of this text adapted from Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004, p. 42.

REFERENCE SHEET
READING TO DETERMINE THE GOAL OF AN ASSIGNMENT (HOW THE MIND WORKS)

In the last weeks, we have read Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* and examined his ideas about how our mind and mental abilities have evolved. In four pages, **explain what you consider** to be the most important argument in Pinker's book, with examples and quotations that support your interpretation. There are several themes you might reasonably choose to emphasize. I want to know which one you consider the most important, and how well you can make your case. I am interested in seeing you think on the page—in your ability to support an argument with textual evidence and analysis. Make sure to define any key terms/concepts you introduce from Pinker's text, before making your case. The first draft will be due in class on February 10th.

1. **What is the main task of this assignment?**
 To explain what the most important argument in Pinker's *How the Mind Works* is and to support this claim with examples and quotations.
2. **Does the professor provide any background, definitions, or context for the assignment? If so, what?**
 The professor contextualizes Pinker's book. It's a book about how our minds have evolved.
3. **What verbs does the professor use?**
To explain what you consider to be the most important argument.
4. **Are there specifications about which texts can be used?**
 Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*
5. **Are there specifications about organization, structure, or sequencing of information/paragraphs?**
 Define key terms/concepts before presenting my argument.
6. **Are there mechanics directives? (page length, font, etc.)**
 4 pages
7. **When is this assignment due?**
 The first draft is due February 10th
8. **What is this professor's goal in giving this assignment? What are the specific skills this professor is valuing/asking students to demonstrate? What does s/he want to find out?**
 This professor wants to see her students think on the page, and to back up an argument with quotations and textual evidence. To choose 1 argument from Pinker's book and explain/make a case for *why* it's the most important. To see that that her students have read Pinker, understood and considered his different arguments, and can make a case for which argument they think is the best and why.

REFERENCE SHEET
WRITING STEPS FOR *HOW THE MIND WORKS*

Main task + Verb: **Explain what you consider** to be Pinker's most important argument.

Explain: to clarify a topic by giving a detailed account of how and/or why it occurs.

To do this, I have to first understand the different arguments that Pinker makes, then choose one, and make a case for why it's important. I have to *explain*: to give a detailed account for why I think this argument is important, and find evidence to back up my claim.

Pre-writing steps

1. Reread passages from Pinker's *How the Mind Works* and identify 2-3 of the most important arguments that he makes, thereby addressing the assignment's goal.
2. Select 1 argument that I think is the *most* important, and answer the question of 'why' I think it's the most important (addressing my own writing goal.)
3. Turn this answer into a thesis statement. "I think this argument is important because _____."
4. Underline any passages/quotes/evidence that are connected to this argument that Pinker makes and that help me to further **explain** or give a detailed account of why I think it's important.

Writing steps

5. As I begin to write, briefly summarize/contextualize Pinker's text, and define key terms from Pinker's text so that the reader understands his argument.
6. Devote each body paragraph to **explaining** one main reason *why* I think this argument is important.
7. Support each body-paragraph's main claim with reasons and evidence from Pinker's text, and in this way *explain* (giving a detailed account of why this argument is important).

REFERENCE SHEET
READING TO DETERMINE THE GOAL OF AN ASSIGNMENT (*PSYCHO*)

Choose one of the following scenes from *Psycho* to analyze in detail. In a 5-paragraph essay, consider the way the various aspects of the scene (cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, soundtrack, etc.) contribute to its overall effect. Make sure to define any technical terms you use. Your essay should be no longer than 3 pages and is due in class next week.

- The real estate scene
- Marion driving her cars
- The shower sequence (including Norman “cleaning up”)
- Lila exploring the Bates house
- The psychiatrist’s “explanation”

1. **What is the main task of this assignment?**
 To watch *Psycho*, choose a scene, and analyze the various aspects of the scene to make an argument about how these aspects contribute to the scene’s overall effect.
2. **Does the professor provide any background, definitions, or context for the assignment? If so, what?**
 The professor gives examples of “aspects” of a scene
3. **What verbs does the professor use?**
 Analyze—I will have to choose something specific to analyze (in this case, a scene from *Psycho*) and have to examine in detail the aspects of this scene.
4. **Are there specifications about which texts can be used?**
 The movie *Psycho*.
5. **Are there specifications about organization, structure, or sequencing of information/paragraphs?**
 5 paragraphs. I have to define technical terms (cinematography, mise-en-scene, etc.) before applying them.
6. **Are there mechanics directives? (page length, font, etc.)**
 3 pages
7. **When is this assignment due?**
 In class next week
8. **What is this professor’s goal in giving this assignment? What are the specific skills this professor is valuing/asking students to demonstrate? What does s/he want to find out?**
 My professor wants to see me analyze a scene from a film in order to make an argument about how the various aspects contribute to the scene’s overall effect.

REFERENCE SHEET WRITING STEPS FOR *PSYCHO*

Main Task + Verb: **Analyze** the various aspects of a scene in *Psycho* to make an argument about how these aspects contribute to the scene's overall effect.

Analyze: break down the text or issue that you are examining into parts, usually in order to answer a 'how' or 'why' question about these specific parts.

Pre-writing steps

1. Watch *Psycho* and identify the five scenes this professor lists as options to analyze, thereby addressing the assignment's goal.
2. Choose 1 scene, and rewatch it several times, taking notes and paying attention to details about cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, and the soundtrack.
3. Formulate a how/why question (ex: how do the editing and soundtrack contribute to the suspenseful feeling of the shower scene?) thereby addressing my own writing goal.
4. Draft a thesis statement about how these aspects contribute to this suspenseful effect.

Writing steps

5. Begin to write. In each body paragraph, make a claim about the effect of one of these aspects on the viewer.
6. Anytime I introduce an aspect, define this term (and apply it in the way a film critic would.)
7. Support each body-paragraph claim with reasons and evidence from *Psycho* and in this way, answer the question of how Hitchcock creates suspense.