

Writer's workshop

Consultant thoughts on writing prompts

In the spring of 2016, we asked Writer's Workshop consultants some questions about writing prompts. Here are their responses:

What are the most common points of confusion for students in the Workshop as they work with writing assignments?

- Students tell me they are confused about what the professor is asking because they don't understand the goal of the assignment.
- Students ask me to try to help them decode what the professor is *really* asking when there is more than one question, or when the prompt is more than a page long.
- Students don't know what to do when professors say "write about anything" or do not provide a prompt.
- Students struggle when assignments do not provide enough background details. They feel like they can write about anything and therefore feel overwhelmed.
- Students always ask me which citation method to use and if they are allowed to use sources.

What are the characteristics of a clear, easy to comprehend writing assignment?

- I find that clear assignments have the question in bold, define expectations of students, and are less than 1 page long.
- To me, a good assignment links the main ideas of the class to the assignment in simple language.
- The easiest assignments to work with state the genre of the paper (research paper, analysis, reflection, etc.) and whether or not there should be outside sources.
- It's easier to work with a writing assignment that asks a question. The question can be framed with background information—but not information that distracts from the assignment.

What are some things you'd like to see clarified in assignments?

- It's so helpful when a prompt indicates whether or not students should have a thesis.
- If the prompt identifies a particular question that the students should address, we can explore that question in a session.
- If there is more than one question, if you indicate whether or not you want students to address all the questions, we can better help students understand the scope of the assignment.
- Every class is different. If you can provide instructions to help beginning students understand what is expected, we can help them create writing plans that meet those expectations. For example, what do you want to see in an introduction? How should they use evidence? What do you see as the purpose of a conclusion?
- As a student, I have found that I often understand what the professor wanted only *after* receiving a grade. I think it would be helpful to explain what an A paper does, what a B paper does, etc., so that students understand what is expected of them from the beginning.
- Prompts that are more than 1 page are often confusing to work through in a session. Breaking up important parts of the prompt with bullet points, or other formatting (bold, italics), helps us determine what is the most important part of the assignment.
- When there are typos, awkward sentences, or unclear questions in the prompt, it just gets confusing.