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DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL WRITING PROMPTS

HEURISTIC FOR THE WRITER OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

From Erika Lindemann, *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (pages 220-221)

- **Task Definition, Meaning, and Sequencing.** What do I want the students to do? Is it worth doing? Why? Is it interesting and appropriate? What will it teach the students specifically? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? What can students do before they undertake the assignment, and where do I expect them to be after completing it? What will the assignment tell me? What is being assessed? Does the task have meaning outside as well as inside the class setting? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these goals?
- **Writing Process.** How do I want the students to do the assignment? Are the students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice prewriting, writing, and revising? Have I given enough information about what I want so that students can make effective choices about subject, purpose, form, mode, and tone? Have I given enough information about required length and about the use of sources? Have I prepared and distributed a written assignment with clear directions? Are good examples appropriate? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these procedures?
- **Audience.** For whom are the students writing? If the audience is the teacher, do the students really know who the teacher is and what can be assumed? Are there ways and reasons to expand the audience beyond the teacher? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the audience?
- **Schedule.** When will students do the assignment? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? Is the assignment sequenced to give enough time for prewriting, writing, revision, and editing? How much time inside and outside of class will students need? To what extent will I guide and grade the students' work? What deadlines (and penalties) do I want to set for collecting papers for various stages of the writing project? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the writing process?
- **Assessment.** What will I do with the assignment? How will I evaluate the work? What constitutes a successful response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper? Does the grading system encourage revision? Have I attempted to write the paper myself? What problems did I encounter? How can the assignment be clarified or otherwise improved? Have I discussed evaluation criteria with the students before they began work, and will I discuss what I expect again as the due date approaches?

KEY TERMS: DEFINING THOSE ACTIVE VERBS (FOR YOUR MIDSHIPMEN!)

Provided by Bethany Besteman, USNA Writing Center Tutor

Here are definitions of key terms commonly found in prompts. Understanding these terms will help you assess what a prompt is asking of you and will direct how you research and organize your argument, and even the kind of argument you make.

Information words: ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject, such as who, what, when, where, how, and why.

- **define**—give the subject’s meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject’s meaning
- **describe**—provide details about the subject by answering questions words (such as who, what, when, where, how, and why); you might also give details related to the five senses (what you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell)
- **explain**—give reasons why or examples of how something happened
- **illustrate**—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject
- **summarize**—briefly list the important ideas you learned about the subject
- **trace**—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form
- **research**—gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you have found

Relation words: ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- **compare**—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different)
- **contrast**—show how two or more things are dissimilar
- **apply**—use details that you’ve been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation
- **cause**—show how one event or series of events made something else happen
- **relate**—show or describe the connections between things

Interpretation words: ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject. Do not see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by concrete evidence. Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation.

- **assess**—summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **prove, justify**—give reasons (arguments and/or examples) to demonstrate how or why something is the truth
- **evaluate, respond**—state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with reasons for your response
- **support**—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe)
- **synthesize** —put two or more things together that have not been put together in class or in your readings before; do not just summarize one and then the other and say that they are similar or different—*you must provide a reason for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper*
- **analyze**—determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, figure out how something works, what it might mean, or why it is important. This involves breaking down a claim or an argument into its parts, as you might break down an engine to see how it works.
- **argue**—take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side

SUGGESTED READING

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, And Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011.

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