

Understanding the Assignment

When you are constructing a college writing assignment, it is important to know what your instructor expects. Did your instructor assign the topic or are you free to choose your own? Unless specifically stated, your instructor is unlikely to simply require a summary of the course readings. Most will want you to go further and use your understanding of the readings for an analysis and thoughtful reflection of the material.

Start by reading the assignment carefully, then look for key words like "explain", "define", "apply", "analyze", "argue", "compare", "evaluate", "research", etc. These words direct you to think about your topic in a certain way and reveal the planning that is required for the assignment. For example, "argue" means you would take a side and defend it with evidence to support your argument. Or "research" would require you to gather material from outside sources about a subject and analyze what you have found.

If you have read the assignment carefully and are still confused by it, ask your instructor for clarification or contact a tutor at the Online Writing Community (the OWC). Professional tutors at the OWC have a wealth of experience with research and writing assignments from different departments. Ask for help when you need it.