Understanding an Assignment

Do you ever receive written directions for an assignment and have difficulty understanding the requirements? Professors have different ways of communicating their assignment guidelines and this can sometimes confuse students.

Before you talk to your professor about your confusion, try using these guidelines.

1. Completely read through the assignment guidelines. This will help you to grasp what the assignment entails and what you will need to do.

2. Highlight important information included in the guidelines, such as the due date, the page length, any research you may have to do, required aspects (ex: number or types of sources), and the format it should be written in (such as APA, MLA, or Chicago Style).

3. Decide how you will address the assignment. Your professor may provide you with points that should be addressed or questions that should be answered within the assignment. Determine the information that will be necessary to fulfill these requirements and answer the questions.

4. Rank the information from step three in order from most important to least important. This will help you to decide what information is most vital to the assignment or where you might need more information.

5. If you have any important questions concerning the assignment, ask your professor.

Once you understand the requirements and are ready to begin the assignment, ask yourself these questions:

1. *What is purpose of the assignment?* In other words, what is your professor asking you to do? Are you writing a summary, a reaction paper, an analysis, comparing two works, or researching a particular topic? Look for key verbs to help you determine this purpose. Examples of key verbs include: summarize, analyze, compare, research, examine, and describe.

2. *Who is your audience?* Will your readers be familiar with the topic you will be writing about or will it be new information for them? What age level are your readers? Will your writing be published for a professional audience?

3. *What resources are necessary to complete the assignment?* Will you need to use your textbook or do outside research? Can you use online sources? Will you need to conduct your own research, such as observations?

4. ***Who else can help me with this assignment?*** If you would like outside help, besides your professor, make an appointment at the Saint Rose Writing Center! Or ask a friend, classmate, roommate, or family member to help you understand the assignment, offer suggestions, or proofread!

Professors do not always provide a specific topic for class assignments. If you are having trouble coming up with a topic, ask yourself these questions:

1. Why have you chosen to take this particular course in the first place? What about the course topic interests you?

2. Is there any information in your class notes that stands out as interesting or puzzling to you? What about this information can you explore further?

3. Has your professor ever mentioned topics about which there is little research or needs more study in the future?

4. Do you feel any personal connection to any of the course material?

5. Look through your textbook. Is there any information that will not be addressed in the course, but interests you and that you would like to learn more about?

6. Have you tried talking to your professor about possible topics?

7. For more help on coming up with a topic, see the Writing Center's handout on Brainstorming at www.strose.edu/writingcenter.

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The following resources were consulted in the design of this handout:

"Understanding Writing Assignments." Purdue University: The Writing Lab & The OWL at Purdue, 1995-2009. 15 January 2009. http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/688/01/.

"Understanding Writing Assignments." Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT Online Writing and Communication Center, 2001. 15 January 2009. http://web.mit.edu/writing/Writing_Process/assignment.html.

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