

Part 1

Understanding the essay prompt

Section 1

Identifying the requirements

Academic writing is the result of a process involving the research and careful consideration of a topic. The ultimate purpose of this process is for a writer to present a point of view on a topic that readers will accept as true or plausible. Writers must research their topic in order to present a point of view that is supported by logical and objective evidence.

Planning to write academically begins with the genre of the essay because this affects the organization of the essay. Common essay genres include argumentative, compare and contrast, or problem-solution essays (see Appendix A on page 130 for more on essay genres). The genre is often indicated by the words used in the essay prompt.

Therefore, since researching a topic is often guided by the requirements of an instruction, or essay prompt, it is essential that an academic writer considers:

What is the essay prompt asking me to do?

To understand the essay prompt, first identify its two main parts:

1. **the general topic**
2. **requirements for the essay**

Consider this prompt:

Analyze the growth of Apple's market share since the introduction of the iMac.

The general topic is *Apple, Inc.* The requirement for the essay is to *analyze the growth of market share since the introduction of the iMac.*

Requirements for the essay

After identifying the topic, the writer should look for requirements in the essay prompt. These requirements tell the writer what must be included in the essay.

There are four types of requirements in many prompts:

1. **Recall** – show knowledge learned from a reading, lecture, or some other source.

2. **Analysis** – break down a topic into smaller parts and explain the significance of each part.
3. **Synthesis** – use information from two or more sources (lectures, readings, etc.) to show a relationship and possible deeper meaning.
4. **Evaluation** – judge the value of something based on an analysis of information.

These requirements are often indicated by the use of certain instructional words in the essay prompt. Here is a list of common instructional words.

Requirement	Instructional words	Example
Recall	summarize list identify describe illustrate define	<i>Summarize the most significant theories of early twentieth century psychologists and how they revolutionized the field of psychology.</i> <i>Describe the American judicial system and how it is designed to limit wrongful convictions.</i> <i>Define the term “success” using points from the various assigned readings on Buddhism.</i>
Analysis	analyze examine discuss compare contrast determine	<i>Analyze the growth of Apple’s market share since the introduction of the iMac.</i> <i>Discuss some of the advances in twentieth century technology which have helped transform the workplace.</i> <i>Compare the health care systems of France and the United States.</i>
Synthesis	use refer include incorporate	<i>Using points from the various readings assigned this semester, determine the most critical turning points in the evolution of human societies.</i> <i>Watch the film Mulholland Drive and identify its “film noir” characteristics. Refer to the aspects of the classic movies from the 1950s covered in the lecture.</i>
Evaluation	evaluate assess judge argue recommend comment	<i>Evaluate the effectiveness of anti-piracy laws on curbing the illegal downloading of digitalized video, music, and print.</i> <i>Argue for or against the expansion of the school week from five to seven days.</i>

NOTE: The writer is normally expected to express an objective opinion when the essay prompt asks for an evaluation. For other question types, an objective opinion is not normally expected. For example:

Compare the health care systems of France and the United States.

(No opinion asked for – the writer must only provide evidence to support how the two systems differ or are similar.)

Compare the health care systems of France and the United States. Then evaluate the more successful of the two in terms of overall public health.

(Opinion asked for – the writer must both provide evidence to support how the two systems differ or are similar, and express an objective opinion about these differences or similarities.)

Exercise 1

For each example essay prompt in the table on page 3:

- underline the topic.
- circle any instructional words indicating a requirement.

Example:

Analyze the growth of Apple's market share since the introduction of the iMac.

Section 2

Understanding longer essay prompts

Longer essay prompts with more details included are commonly assigned. In a longer essay prompt with multiple requirements, identifying the general topic may be a challenge. For example:

Many governments, for a variety of reasons, are seeking energy sources which can help them curb their reliance on fossil fuels. Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs. Be sure to discuss matters of concern regarding energy use, such as cost and environmental impact, and make comparisons among various energy sources regarding these. Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.

In the prompt above, what is the general topic?

- Fossil fuels
- Nuclear energy
- Various energy sources

The correct answer is **b** – nuclear energy.

Identifying requirements in longer essay prompts

With longer essay prompts, the writer must be very clear about the different requirements. One way to do this is by identifying and circling each instructional word indicating a requirement. For example:

Many governments, for a variety of reasons, are seeking energy sources which can help them curb their reliance on fossil fuels. **Assess** how much countries should rely on **nuclear energy** to help meet this goal and their energy needs. Be sure to **discuss** matters of concern regarding energy use, such as cost and environmental impact, and **make comparisons** among various energy sources regarding these. **Include** statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.

In this essay prompt, there are four clear requirements:

- *Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs.*
- *Discuss matters of concern regarding energy use.*
- *Make comparisons among various energy sources.*
- *Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.*

The main requirement is often the first one; it should be the focus of the entire essay. The other instructional words show sub-requirements (or even sub-sub-requirements) – the different levels of focus which the writer should include at some point in the essay.

To distinguish main from sub- and sub-sub-requirements, create an outline of the essay prompt, formatted as follows:

Main requirement

- Sub-requirement 1
 - Sub-sub-requirement
- Sub-requirement 2
 - Etc.

For example, an outline of the requirements from the essay prompt on nuclear energy could be:

Main requirement: *Assess how much countries should rely on nuclear energy to help meet this goal and their energy needs.*

Sub-requirement 1: *Discuss matters of concern regarding energy use.*

Sub-sub-requirement: *Make comparisons among various energy sources.*

Sub-requirement 2: *Include statistics from a variety of sources to help support your position.*

Exercise 2

Look at the essay prompts on the next page and:

- a. underline the general topic.
- b. circle any instructional words indicating a requirement.
- c. outline the requirements to show the main from sub- and sub-sub-requirements.

1. Select several of Picasso's paintings representing both his pre- and post-war periods. Compare aspects of both periods. Explain the transformations which occurred in his art, making sure to refer to color, images, and expressions.

2. The lectures in this course have thus far focused on the 30 articles in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the historical basis for each. Select one of the Declaration's member countries and describe the challenges it faces in trying to uphold the human rights standards outlined in the articles. Determine how close the country is to being a model human rights state.

3. In the class, examples were given of how socio-cultural factors affect the perception of certain issues which often lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in diplomatic negotiations, protests, and even armed conflicts. Select a particular issue which eventually led to an armed conflict. Contrast how this issue may have been perceived on both sides of the conflict, making sure to include points on differing values, beliefs, behavior, and laws.

4. Analyze a contemporary novel with a female protagonist and compare and contrast it with classic works where women were traditionally portrayed as the villain or victim, such as in the works analyzed in the course (e.g., *Macbeth*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Washington Square*). Be sure to a) comment on whether or not women still come across as being the "weaker sex" in more modern literature, and b) identify where symbolism and allegory are used in defining the woman's character.

Part 2

Taking a position

Section 1

Choosing a position

For every essay prompt, the writer must take a position. This position is what the writer claims to be true about the topic. The entire essay should be focused on supporting this position. Therefore, a clear position helps ensure that the essay is coherent and organized.

The position a writer could take depends on the essay prompt. For example:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Globalization has had a positive influence on Asia"?

The topic is globalization. The position a writer could take on the topic seems to be limited to two options:

- It has had a positive influence on Asia.

OR

- It has not had a positive influence on Asia.

However, in an academic subject, it is rare that something is completely right or wrong, positive or negative, best or worst. Therefore, other positions on the topic of the essay prompt above could be:

- It has had a mostly positive influence on Asia.
- It has had a somewhat negative influence on Asia.
- It has had a positive influence in some sectors of societies in Asia but negative in others.
- Certain countries in Asia have benefitted more from globalization than others.

Other types of essay prompts do not ask for agreement or disagreement. For example:

When did the process of globalization start?

The topic again is globalization. Possible positions on the topic could be:

- It truly began with the advent of information technology.
- It is not a recent phenomenon but has a long history spanning millennia.
- It is impossible to determine when exactly it began, but it has certainly intensified over the last few decades.
- During the European era of exploration and conquest during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is when the world truly started to become globalized.

The following essay prompt is even more open:

Define globalization.

This kind of prompt asks the writer to use a particular approach in responding to the prompt. The approach taken is the writer's position. Different positions to the above essay prompt could be:

- Globalization is a set of processes that have made the world seem smaller.
- Globalization has increased the economic, cultural, and political links among countries.
- Globalization is a process that has increased the importance of a global shared culture and at the same time the importance of local cultures.
- Cultural, economic, and political connections have increased to such an extent that borders and differences among countries, cultures, and people have no meaning.

To summarize, for most essay prompts there is a variety of positions. The writer is free to choose any position as long as it:

- responds directly to the essay prompt.
- can be supported well, normally with research.

Exercise 1

Look at the essay prompts below. For each, list at least three possible positions a writer could take.

Essay prompt	Possible positions
1. Discuss some of the technological advances in the twentieth century which have helped transform the workplace.	
2. Compare the health care systems of France and the United States.	
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of anti-piracy laws on curbing the illegal downloading of digitalized video, music, and print.	
4. Argue for or against the expansion of the school week from five to seven days.	
5. Summarize the most significant developments in social networking and describe their impact on the lives of internet users today.	
6. Examine some of the most popular shows currently on TV and offer insights into why they are popular. Make comments on how the popularity of these shows may reflect certain characteristics of society.	

NOTE: The initial position a writer takes may change, especially if research shows that another position is more valid.