

## Teaching Tips:

# 20 Questions About Writing Assignments

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Students can ask these questions about assignments they receive—and we can ensure that our own assignment prompts and explanations give students these key pieces of information.

## Questions about getting started

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1. If I have my own idea for a **topic or angle** that's interesting to me, can I use it, or do I need to complete the assignment exactly the way it is described?
2. Is there an **assignment model**, a sample essay, or a kind of published writing that I could look at to help me better see how to do this assignment?
3. If I write an **essay draft** early, can I come see you [the professor] to talk about it, or email you to ask a few questions?

## Questions about the assignment's main purpose:

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4. Why do people in this field write or read a text like this? What's the **main goal** for this kind of writing?
5. Should I mostly **review** the similarities, differences, events, theories, or key features, or should I **make arguments**, draw conclusions, or give my interpretations about these ideas? Do I need to answer the question, “so, what?”
6. Should I broadly **survey** the field or issue, or should I narrow my focus and “go deep” with my analysis?

## Questions about the assignment's target audience:

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7. Should I write for a **knowledgeable audience** that has read (or studied) what I have read (or studied), or do I need to give additional background or summary?
8. Should I try to write for a **resistant audience** that will need a lot of evidence, or should I write for an audience that generally agrees with my point? Should I address and refute counterarguments?
9. What kind of **evidence** will be most convincing in this field (or to this audience): numbers, descriptions, direct quotations, logical reasoning, examples, case studies, expert testimony?
10. Will I need to consult **outside sources**, and if I do, what kind of sources are appropriate for this field, audience, or genre?

## Questions about style and format that differ among disciplines:

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11. Is it preferred that I use the **scholarly language or format** of this discipline or genre, or should I use standard paragraphs and plain, direct language accessible to a range of readers?
12. Are lively, graceful introductions and extended **paragraphs** expected by readers in this field (or for this assignment), or will short, informative paragraphs be sufficient?
13. Is it important to readers in this field that I write smooth, **stylistic sentences**, or is a straightforward “just the facts, ma'am” style enough?
14. What **citation format** should I use for outside sources?

## Questions about the context or specific assignment:

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15. Is it okay to use **first person** (“I”) or second person (“you”)? Is it okay to use specific, relevant examples from my own life or experience?
16. Should I try to avoid **passive voice** (“to be” verbs)? Does it matter whether I use present tense or past tense verbs (as long as I'm consistent)?
17. Is the **page-length** specification an absolute requirement, or is it more of a guide to how much information I should plan to include in order to satisfy the audience's needs?
18. Can I include relevant **visual or other non-text information** (pictures, charts, diagrams, sound or video clips), or should I include only text?

## Questions to gauge individual professors' goals and concerns:

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19. What do you think is the **most difficult part** of this assignment? What are the most common mistakes students make with this assignment?
20. What is the **most important aspect** of this assignment? What should I spend most of my time and energy on as I write and edit?