



The Writing Center

DECODING ASSIGNMENTS



There is so much to think about when working on a writing assignment or project for a college class that many students overlook a valuable resource—the assignment sheet handed out by their professor. In these assignment sheets, instructors include important tips on how to do the assignment and what they are looking for. But sometimes the language and organization of the assignment sheets can be difficult to follow. Completing the 5 simple steps on this handout will help you unlock all the secrets your assignment sheets hold.

Step 1: Read It

Though some assignment sheets may be long, it's important to be aware of the guidelines and where they are located so you can double check them as you work. As you read, be sure to have a highlighter in hand and highlight sparingly—only mark key words, phrases, and requirements. If you're not sure what to highlight at this point, step two will help you identify the most important elements of your assignment.

Step 2: Identify the Parts

Usually an instructor will include any (or all) of the following sections in an assignment sheet. Locating these parts can help you figure out what sections to focus on at each stage of your assignment.

- **An overview of some kind**
This could be background on the topic, or reminders discussions/ issues from class.
- **The *main task* of the assignment**
This is the most important part of your assignment sheet. Typically, assignment sheets will have 1-2 sentences that tell you *what you need to do when you write the paper*. It is very important that your thesis statement and your paper address this main task in order to stay on topic.
- **Additional material to help you plan or brainstorm**
Here you might find some questions or ideas you could use as a starting point as you begin thinking about the assignment. Sometimes this section seems like it's the main task; it might also present questions or instructions related to the topic. However, this section will typically have more specific suggestions or questions that are developing the main task, and they could be loosely or closely related to each other.
- **Requirements and Style tips**
This is where your instructor might comment on his or her expectations for you writing or presentation.
- **Technical details.**

Step 3: Verbs as Clues

These words tell you what you need to do as you complete your assignment. Often verbs can help guide you're thinking about the topic and the formats. Below are some common verbs to watch out for.

- **Information Verbs** ask you to *show what you know* about the subject. Some common information verbs include: *define, explain, summarize, research, and illustrate*.
- **Relation Verbs** ask you to *explain how things are connected*. Some common relation verbs include: *compare, contrast, apply, relate*.
- **Interpretation Verbs** ask you to *defend your own ideas about the subject*. This is **not** just your opinion, but your opinion supported by concrete evidence such as specific examples, personal experiences, and outside research. Some common interpretation verbs include: *assess, prove, justify, evaluate, support, analyze, argue*.

**If you come across unfamiliar words, always look them up. One word might reveal a lot about what you have to do in your assignment.

Step 4: Ask Questions

That's what your professors and classmates are there for! And if you have a question, someone else probably does too. Never hesitate to get more clarification!

Step 5: Explain It

You can explain it to yourself out loud or in writing. You can explain it to a classmate, friend, family member, tutor in the writing center, or even your professor. Whatever you choose, explaining your assignment will allow you to make sure you understand it. If you have trouble explaining your task, you may have a few more questions to ask classmates or your professor.

Sample Assignment Sheet

Check out the following assignment sheet to see how you might appropriately take notes on your own assignment.

Where's the Beef? Paper Four: Analysis of a Media-Based Argument

According to the Nielsen group, the body that measures television viewing, by the end of a high school student's education they will have spent over 18,000 hours watching television. By contrast, the same student will have spent a mere 10,800 hours in school. Those twelve years are arguably the most impressionable in a young person's life; in this same time a person will be bombarded with some 3,000 advertisements per day ("The Merchants of Cool"). These ads, both obvious and hidden, during those 18,000 hours must have some real, measurable effects.

And that's just the measurement of TV watching. This does not include radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines, internet pop-ups, google and Gmail ads, flyers, pre-show ads for films, movie trailers, t-shirts, telemarketers, etc. Ads are everywhere, and their persuasive skills are unmatched. **It is a major goal of this assignment for you to analyze the language and images of an advertisement in order to understand how these elements are used to put forth an implicit argument.** You will likely need some background information to provide a context for your analysis-- this could be for either your ad or a technique it utilizes. **For this reason, you are required to incorporate two sources other than your ad for this essay.**

Main task

For this paper you are to find an advertisement and analyze its argument. While you are not restricted in the form of advertisement, your choice should be complex enough so as to have something to analyze. You may find that political ads and fast-food commercials are equally dissectible, whereas a local auto dealer commercial may lack serious rhetorical motivations. Consider the following questions:

- What is the ad explicitly selling? Implicitly? To whom?
- Is there a specific setting, location or time, utilized?
- Are there slogans, mascots, or recognizable people in the ad? What effect do they have?
- Is the ad part of an overall campaign? Does this affect your advertisement?
- Who is the audience? Is it different than the demographic aimed at by the company?
- What rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) are present?
- Are there logical fallacies present? Are they convincing despite themselves?
- Would the advertisement work in another form of media?

Brainstorming questions

These questions should be a reference point to being from, not the sole route to a quality paper, if only because answering just these questions would lead to a chaotic essay. **Focus on claims, evidence, rhetorical appeals, and fallacies in your analysis of the advertisement and its argument.** Some of these concepts might be foreign to you; we will discuss them in class. Furthermore, **this essay should not be about whether you like the ad or not, as this is largely irrelevant;** it may be a wiser choice to pick an ad you do not like so a critical eye may be maintained.

Style Task

You must choose five words from the "GRE" list and five words from the "Etc." list and use them in your paper. These words should appear in bold within your text. Additionally, you are not allowed to use any of the words from the "Banned" list. This is not an optional, extra credit portion of the assignment.

This essay should be 1500 words in length, typed, and in proper MLA format. In addition to these standards, each paper should follow the additional guidelines presented on this assignment sheet. The rough drafts are due November 20th for peer review. The evaluation draft (turned in with the rough draft) is due November 29th.

As always, if you have questions or concerns, do not hesitate to ask them either in class or by contacting me during office hours or via e-mail.

**This handout was adapted from: "Reading Assignments" by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.

Important requirement

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Technical details

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