

Understanding an assignment

For many college papers, you will be given a written assignment that outlines your instructor's expectations. When you receive an assignment, read through it carefully. Don't assume that all writing assignments are alike — spend some time making sure you understand what is required of you. When in doubt, ask your instructor.

Determining the purpose of the assignment

Instructors assign writing projects for a variety of reasons. You might be expected to summarize information from textbooks, lectures, or research; to analyze ideas and concepts; to take a position on a topic and defend it with evidence; or to create an original argument by combining ideas from different sources. Usually the wording of the assignment will suggest which of these purposes your instructor has in mind.

Understanding how to answer an assignment's question

Many assignments will ask you to answer a *how* or *why* question. Such a question cannot be answered using only facts; you will need to take a position. For example, the question “*What* are the survival rates for leukemia patients?” can be answered by reporting facts. The question “*Why* are the survival rates for leukemia patients in one state lower than in a neighboring state?” must be answered with both facts and interpretation. If a list of prompts appears in the assignment, be careful — instructors rarely expect you to answer all of the questions in order. Look instead for topics, themes, or ideas that will help you ask your own questions.

Recognizing implied questions

When you are asked to *discuss*, *analyze*, *agree or disagree*, or *consider* a topic, your instructor will often expect you to answer a *how* or *why* question. For example, “*Discuss* the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on special education programs” is really another way of saying “*How* has the No Child Left Behind Act affected special education programs?” Similarly, the assignment “*Consider* the recent rise of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnoses” is asking you to answer the question “*Why* are diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder rising?”