



UNIVERSITY OF  
Global Health  
EQUITY

Writing  
Center



## Understanding Your Instructor's Prompt

Most essay prompts include key words. Learning to “decode” these key words can clarify your writing goals for any particular assignment. Key words can also suggest the details your essay should include and strategies for how you might organize your paper.

It is helpful to read your assignment prompt carefully, underline key words, and refer back to the assignment prompt as you outline, draft, and finish your essay to keep yourself on track. Finally, before turning in your assignment, be sure to check that your assignment is fulfilling all of the prompt’s requirements.

**Note:** After you have read your prompt carefully, underlining key words, if you still feel uncertain or have questions be sure to have a conversation with your professor to clarify.

Keyword	Writing Goal	What does it mean?
Similarities, Differences	Compare and/or contrast	Look for similar and dissimilar ideas in your material. Why is each point important? What do these similarities and differences tell you about the subject’s ideas?
Evaluate	Rate or make a judgment	Use evidence and logic to prove whether your subject or material is strong or weak, valuable or invaluable, significant or insignificant. How does this evaluation change one’s understanding?
Summarize	Describe, Explain	Write about the most important aspects of the topic. Optional: give background information, content information, and analysis as necessary.

Discuss	Provide an extended description, explanation or analysis, including illustrations or details	Your prompt is asking you to observe, unpack, and talk about a certain topic or aspect of the topic. Begin by deciding how you will approach the topic, or what exactly you want to say about the topic. Once you have your "angle," focus your argument on validating this angle while still keeping other opinions in the mix as counterarguments.
Interpret	Decode, decipher, convey the meaning of	Translate what something means. What do you understand the material's message to be? What details helped you come to that conclusion? Why is it important to understand it in that way?
Argue	Persuade, convince	Take a stance towards an issue and write to convince your audience of your viewpoint.
Analyze*  <i>*What you will need to do for analysis depends on the discipline</i>	Examine, Think critically	Critically consider the material by looking closely at all elements of the text you are writing about. Provide a detailed discussion of the material. This might be where a professional and logical critique comes into your writing.
Reflect	Connect to personal experience	Write about the material and connect it back to a personal experience so that a general audience can relate and understand.

### Example prompts and explanations

**Reflect** on Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech.

- What does the speech mean to you? What personal experiences have you had that connect you to the speech?

**Analyze** the characters of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the context of modern feminism.

- How do the characters represent the different ideals of modern feminism? How does that relate to the male characters? What evidence from the text leads you to these conclusions?

**Describe** photosynthesis.

- What is photosynthesis? Why is it important? If necessary, describe how the process was discovered (and by whom).

**Argue** against the recent Supreme Court decision that reversed DC's ban on handguns.

- Why was the Supreme Court wrong in their decision? What evidence – from texts, the Constitution, current events, and prior legal cases – prove that the Court should have made the opposite decision?

**Contrast** Freud's views on dreams with Jung's.

- How are Freud's and Jung's ideas different?

**Interpret** J.K. Rowling's decision to end the Harry Potter series by writing about the characters 19 years into the future.

- Why do you think the author ended the series by writing into the future? If she had remained in the present, what effect would that have had on the series? What questions raised by the series are answered by the author's decision?