

## **Identifying the Essay Prompt**

Read the prompt completely. Identify the important phrases that help you understand the assignment, as well as, those phrases that you find confusing. Be sure to ask your teacher for clarification on anything you do not understand.

You should also keep in mind that, in most cases of academic writing, you are being asked to make an argument. Even when you are being asked to analyze, discuss, or define, you are usually also being asked to take a position on the topic. For example, if you have been asked to analyze the use of symbolism in a novel, you should go beyond describing how the symbolism was constructed and also take a position on the topic that you can support with evidence.

### **Questions to consider while examining the prompt:**

What is the purpose of the assignment? Beyond the task of the assignment, what is your instructor hoping you will accomplish?

How will you support the ideas in your essay? Will you be using course material or do you need to conduct research for outside sources?

### **Important Words Found in Essay Prompts:**

**Analyze:** Discuss the whole in terms of its parts. Involves characterizing the whole, identifying the parts, and showing how the parts relate to each other to make the whole.

**Compare/Contrast:** Discuss the similarities and differences between two items. Involves stating the purpose of the process and identifying the points of comparison.

**Define:** Give the special characteristics by which a concept, thing, event, can be recognized.

**Discuss:** Examine, analyze carefully, and present opposing or different views.

**Evaluate:** Reach a judgment about the significance, value, or importance of a thing, idea, or statement.

**Explain:** Make clear the reason for, or basic principles of, something; make intelligible. May involve relating the unfamiliar to the more familiar.

**Identify:** Briefly answer, as relevant, the questions who, what, why, where, when, and how.

**Summarize:** Give the main points or essential facts in condensed form.

## Writing a “Hook” Statement

An essay hook is the first one or two sentences of your essay. It serves as an introduction and works to grab the reader's attention.

### **Question Hook**

A question hook is when you ask the reader something that they can visualize and try to think of in their own minds. Then, the writer answers the question.

#### Example:

*Have you ever watched the high-flying, jump shooting, slam-dunking players that play in the NBA? Every time I catch a game on television and I witness the thrill of the game, I cannot help but watch another one.*

### **Quotation Hook**

A quotation hook is when a quote is used and explained that has relevance to the topic at hand. Make sure this quote comes from a credible source.

#### Example:

*“Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen” said Michael Jordan, arguably the best player to ever play in the NBA.*

### **Statistic Hook**

A statistic hook can be used for more informational pieces of writing. The writer uses a quote from a source that relates to the main idea of the paper, but the quote must have some type of statistics, such as numbers, decimals, or and/or percentages. The meaning and relationship of the quote to the paper needs to be explained afterwards just in case the reader does not quite understand.

#### Example:

*“Just 0.00545 percent of the 550,000 boys playing high school basketball each year in the United States become a first-round draft pick — 1 in 18,333” stated Jeff Rabjohns, a writer for The Indianapolis Star, in an article titled “Prep players face long odds of making it to NBA.”*

### **Anecdotal Hook**

When a writer uses a short story to relate to the topic and gain the reader's attention, they are using an anecdote. This story can be a short, personal story or one that is a figment of your imagination. Make sure that it relates to the main idea of the paper.

#### Example:

*When I was in high school, I remember playing in an AAU basketball league. Each and every time we had basketball practice (which was at 8 a.m.), there was a boy around my age in the gym by the time we arrived. He was always covered in sweat, throwing up shots, practicing his layups, practicing his dribbling, and running laps around the gym. One day, I mustered up the courage to ask about his ambitions, and he told me that he gets up at 5:30 a.m. to go to the gym and practice hard until my team comes in for practice. A few years later, this guy was entering the NBA draft from high school. When I saw him get drafted by the Philadelphia 76ers, I knew all that hard work had paid off for him. This is the hard work ethics and mindset that everyone that wants to make it to the NBA should have.*

## Writing a Thesis Statement

### **What is a thesis statement?**

- It directly answers the question asked of you.
- It makes a claim.
- It is usually a single sentence near the beginning of your paper (most often, at the end of the first paragraph) that presents your argument to the reader.

### **How do I create a thesis?**

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis” that presents a basic or main idea and an argument that you think you can support with evidence.

### **How do I know if my thesis is strong?**

When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

- Do I answer the question?
- Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?
- Is my thesis statement specific enough?
- Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?

### **Examples:**

Suppose you are taking a course on US History, and the teacher hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

This **weak** thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. It does not tell the reader where you are heading. Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life.

*While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*

Now you have a working thesis. Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

*While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*

## **Writing a Body Paragraph**

A body paragraph is a group of related sentences about a particular topic or idea directly relating to the thesis. The term body paragraph refers to any paragraph that follows the introduction and comes before the conclusion. The majority of any essay consists of multiple body paragraphs, and it is in these paragraphs where the main information is presented.

The following are important aspects of all body paragraphs:

- A clear topic sentence
- Specific evidence or supporting detail
- Examples (usually three)
- Transitions between sentences and paragraphs
- A concluding sentence that ties the evidence or details back to the main point and brings the paragraph to a close

A topic sentence generally appears early in a body paragraph (often the 1st or 2nd sentence) and controls the paragraph. A topic sentence is like a mini thesis sentence for each paragraph and serves to unify the contents of the paragraph. Everything that follows in the paragraph needs to relate to the topic sentence.

No matter what type of essay is being written, all body paragraphs need to be fully developed and provide supporting detail. This detail can come in the form of personal examples, statistics, and/or quotes from an expert. When writing an essay that requires the use of research and outside sources, this information should be used to support the topic sentence.

## Writing a Conclusion

Just as your introduction acts as a bridge that transports your readers from their own lives into the “place” of your analysis, your conclusion can provide a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives. Such a conclusion will help them see why all your analysis and information should matter to them after they put the paper down.

Your conclusion is your chance to have the last word on the subject. The conclusion allows you to have the final say on the issues you have raised in your paper, to synthesize your thoughts, to demonstrate the importance of your ideas, and to propel your reader to a new view of the subject.

Your conclusion should make your readers glad they read your paper. Your conclusion gives your reader something to take away, the “clincher”, that will help them see things differently or appreciate your topic in personally relevant ways.

One or more of the following strategies may help you write an effective conclusion:

- **Return to the theme or themes in the introduction.** This strategy brings the reader full circle. For example, if you begin by describing a scenario, you can end with the same scenario as proof that your essay is helpful in creating a new understanding.
- **Synthesize, don't summarize.** Include a brief summary of the paper's main points, but don't simply repeat things that were in your paper. Instead, show your reader how the points you made and the support and examples you used fit together. Pull it all together.
- **Include a provocative insight or quotation from the research or reading you did for your paper (similar to a hook statement).**

### **Strategies to avoid:**

- Beginning with an unnecessary, overused phrase such as “in conclusion,” “in summary,” or “in closing.”
- Stating the thesis for the very first time in the conclusion.
- Introducing a new idea or subtopic in your conclusion.
- Ending with a rephrased thesis statement without any substantive changes.
- Making sentimental, emotional appeals that are out of character with the rest of an analytical paper.
- Including evidence (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should all be in the body of the paper.