

Planning Your Essay:

Understanding the Essay Prompt



The first step of preparing to write an academic essay is to understand the essay prompt. The essay prompt provides you with a clear understanding of what is expected in the essay. Not only does it provide the required information, but it can also provide recommendations regarding the main ideas, supporting details, and ways to conclude the essay. In addition, the prompt gives the type of essay that you are being asked to write. Therefore, once you understand what an essay prompt is asking, you can write a more coherent, unified, and organized essay.

To write an essay, one must consider the essay type, essay goal, supporting details, form of the conclusion, and appropriate conclusion information. The essay prompt can provide the reader with this information and may use keywords to identify these recommendations.

Essay Types

There are many essay types. The prompt tells you what kind of essay is expected.

- Explanatory
- Analytical
- Summary
- Compare/Contrast
- Argumentative/Persuasive

Essay Goals

Each essay accomplishes a different goal. The prompt tells you the goal of the essay.

- Support/Critique
- Agree/Disagree
- Critically Analyze
- Summarize
- Explain/Describe
- Find a Solution

Supporting Details

Supporting details may vary, depending on the essay type and the essay goal. The prompt shows places from which one may choose these details. Look for certain phrases.

- Use examples from
 - Your own life
 - The text itself
 - Readings
 - Other sources (Internet, etc.)
 - Your own research

Conclusion Recommendations

Depending on the essay type, the structure of the conclusion may be different. The essay prompt should provide suggestions or hints about how to best construct the conclusion paragraph and what kind of information to use.

- Look for indicative words:
 - Finally, ...
 - Lastly, ...
- Look for certain phrases:
 - In the conclusion, ...
 - In the final paragraph, ...

Answering the Questions

If the prompt contains any questions to be answered, be sure to answer all of them in your essay.

- Provide the detail(s) included within the prompt
- Do not answer questions that are not in the prompt, unless asked to do so
- If the prompt has many requirements, make a checklist to stay organized

Sample Prompt Breakdown

Here is a sample prompt. Let's examine it closely.

"Referring to textual specifics, write a well-developed essay in which you critically analyze the poem above. In your essay, you will (1) summarize or paraphrase the main theme of the poem and (2) discuss how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, poetic form, rhetorical devices, and other formal elements to contribute to the expression of that theme. Conclude by stating whether you agree or disagree with the theme of the poem."

Essay Type

"Write a well-developed essay in which you critically analyze the poem above."

This prompt is asking for a **critical analysis** of the poem. A critical analysis will break the poem into pieces and examine them separately. This allows the writer of the analysis to come to better conclusions than if the work were examined as a whole.

Essay Goals

"You will (1) summarize or paraphrase the main theme of the poem and (2) discuss how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, poetic form, rhetorical devices, and other formal elements to contribute to the expression of that theme."

This prompt is asking the writer to accomplish two things:

(1) **Summarize** the main theme of the poem. Explain the content of the poem, the message that it conveys, and the ways in which it conveys this message.

(2) **Discuss** how the various aspects contribute to the expression of the theme. Examine how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, and other formal elements that contribute to the expression of the theme. Use specific examples that relate it to the theme.

Supporting Details

"Referring to textual specifics . . ."

This prompt is asking for specific examples from the text. Specific examples may be presented by paraphrasing, using direct quotations, or referencing specific lines.

Conclusion Recommendation

"Conclude by stating whether you agree or disagree with the theme of the poem."

This prompt is asking for a concluding paragraph that states your opinion about the theme of this poem. Because you have just analyzed the theme of the poem, you should have a thorough understanding of its purpose and components.

Activity

Now it's your turn: Identify the **essay type**, **essay goals**, **supporting details**, and **conclusion recommendation** in the following prompt.

"After considering the following passage, write a persuasive essay that supports the author's claims. Support your logic and reasoning by using examples from your own life, the text, and your readings. Finally, provide a suggestion for how to prevent problems like this from happening in the future."

- 1) What is the essay type?
- 2) What is/are the essay goal(s)?
- 3) What can you use for supporting details?
- 4) What is the conclusion recommendation?