

Understanding your assignment

Before you leave class:

In many cases, your instructor will go over the assignment guidelines with you in class. Make sure to take notes and mark any particular points your instructor emphasizes. Ultimately, your instructor is your best source for fully understanding a particular writing assignment. Here are some points to clarify with your instructor any time you are given a writing assignment:

- Who is my audience? For example, is your primary audience your instructor? Or are you writing toward a wider audience, like the UTC campus community or a particular subset of your academic discipline? Knowing your audience can help you make decisions like what level of vocabulary to use or what terms need to be defined.
- How will the assignment be graded? Is there a rubric? What differentiates an A paper from a B paper and so on?
- What is the most common issue or challenge students tend to have with this assignment?
- Are outside sources required? How many? What type? What citation style is expected?
- What degree of formality is expected? For example, in many kinds of academic writing, the use of personal pronouns like “I” is discouraged; however, in a reaction paper or personal narrative, using “I” might be perfectly appropriate.

If you have other questions or don’t understand something, ask right away. For a short question, you may want to ask in class, but for a longer discussion, it may be best to make an appointment to visit your instructor during office hours.

Other tips:

Look at the specific verbs being used on the assignment sheet; this can help you determine what type of writing will be expected of you.

- **summarize, explain, describe**
 - these words mean that you are being asked to illustrate your knowledge and understanding of information that you learned, either in class or in readings that you have done.
- **respond, evaluate, analyze**
 - these words mean that you are being asked to develop an argument or interpretation of your own.
- **compare, contrast, relate**
 - these words mean that you are being asked to make and illustrate connections between ideas or concepts

Consider your instructor’s purpose in giving you this assignment. In some cases, your instructor may even include a description of purpose on the assignment sheet, but if not, consider how the assignment fits into the content and progression of the course. For example, if your class is reading a book together, an early assignment might ask students to summarize key points from the book to make sure that everyone understands it; however, a later assignment might ask students to analyze why the author used a particular writing technique. Try to keep this purpose in mind as you plan and begin to write your paper.