



Understanding Your Assignment

Some instructors give long, detailed written instructions every time they assign writing. Others simply refer you to the syllabus, as in “*Reflection Paper Two Due October 27.*” If you’re afraid you don’t know exactly what the instructor wants, it’s best to figure that out before you’ve put too much time into writing the paper.

Query the instructor—Your instructor would probably rather have a question from you now than have to give you a low grade or ask you to rewrite and resubmit the paper. Often the same term means different things to different instructors. “Reflection” may mean a quick, unedited response to some instructors, while others will expect a carefully organized paper with accurate citations. So if you’re not sure, raise your hand and ask for more explanation.

Look over the assignment with a tutor in the Writing Center—Writing tutors will usually ask you to show them the assignment before you go over the paper. They know that a well-written paper on the wrong topic or in the wrong format will get rejected. Tutors have seen many, many assignments and may be able to give a quick answer to something that’s troubling you. If in doubt, the tutor will refer you to the instructor.

Ask for sample papers—Sometimes the assignment instructions won’t be clear to you if you’ve never written this type of paper before. Many instructors will post model papers on their course web sites, or can make a sample paper available to you if you ask. The Writing Center also has sample papers for some classes. Many people will get a better grasp of the writing assignment from seeing a finished paper than by having detailed instructions.

For more information, visit the Writing Center in DeRicci 206.

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