

Check Your Assignment Prompt Against This Checklist.

Title — Does the title name the task or its relevance? E.g. “Strategic Recommendation Memo for Advising [Company Name] on [Decision]” rather than “Paper 2.”

Task — Is the verb precise, and does it reflect the exact thinking you want? “Discuss,” “Explore,” and “Reflect on” aren’t specific, actionable tasks. Students are likely to default to summary when the verb is vague, producing an “all about” data-dump. Name the cognitive move you want the student to practice: Argue, analyze, evaluate, compare, recommend, etc. If you’re stuck, ask yourself how experts in your discipline think—how does an accountant reason? A historian? A nurse?

Purpose — Will students know *why* they are writing this? Students need to understand the rationale behind why they are producing a piece of writing to avoid feeling cut off from their discipline/field and producing writing that is reduced to “read the prompt, find sources, respond.” Naming *how* this task does the work reflected in your discipline/field makes it relevant and lets students enter the wider academic discourse rather than writing a task you’ve designed just for yourself.

Audience — Have you named a reader other than yourself? By naming an exact audience, such as a client, a committee, a hiring manager, or a journal’s readership, students become better acquainted with the types of audiences they’ll encounter in their discipline. *Without* a stated audience, students assume they are writing for the professor, which is where inflated, “academic” prose comes from: students struggle with sounding like an ‘expert’ knowing they’re addressing an expert—you.

Genre — Have you named a real form from your field? A memo, an op-ed, a lab report, a grant proposal, a case brief, or job application materials are examples of genre. Avoid assigning a generic “paper.” The genre teaches the discipline’s conventions and makes students more familiar with what they’ll encounter later in their academic career and in the professional field.

Success criteria — Does your prompt say what a strong response *does*? Stating it in one sentence provides a guiding light for the student and also for you, when you grade. The statement could look like: “A strong memo makes a specific, contestable recommendation and anticipates 1-2 likely objections that the reader will make.”

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) alignment — Have you explicitly tied the objectives of your prompt into the larger goals for your course? Check that the task you’re assigning requires the kind of thinking your SLOs promise to build. If the SLOs are focused around using evidence to form an argument, tasking students with summarizing is an adjacent skill.

Scaffolding — If the task is large, have you broken it into dated stages? Asking students for a proposal, an annotated bibliography (to check their sources), and targeted revision alone or via peer review means students develop their thinking over time and you can catch a large project going wrong before the end point.

Evaluation — Is the rubric or grading criteria included? Stating how you’ll grade the work demystifies it for the student and aligns their expectations with yours. It also gives them the criteria to evaluate their own work before they submit (extra useful if they consult the Writing Center).

Logistics — Are the practical details spelled out? These details include length, format, type of sources, citation style, deadline(s).

The Stranger Test — Could someone outside your discipline follow your prompt? Hand it to a friend, colleague, or Writing Center consultant (see *Understanding the Purpose of the Writing Center*).

“Haphazard, slapdash, ill-conceived, or ill-worded assignment invites bad writing, virtually assures capricious grading, and vitiates effective teaching,” while the “well-planned assignment, by contrast, evokes the best from the students” (Throckmorton, 1980, p. 56).