



“I wrote clear instructions, so why did half the class turn in the wrong thing?”

Reframe your thinking: A prompt is a specification. Most of what tells a student how to succeed lives silently in your head—the kind of thinking you want, who they’re writing for, what a strong version of the assignment looks like—and you know it so well you forget it isn’t explicitly there on the page. When students “misread” an assignment, it *can* be comprehension issues, and it can also be because they’re guessing at everything you left unsaid. Writing a good prompt is mostly the work of moving those tacit expectations into visible text and clearly presenting your expectations for a successful performance. Ideally, the assignment prompt will also state the purpose of the assignment in terms of the student learning objectives (SLOs), explain audience, genre, and purpose, and provide a rubric.

John Bean and Dan Melzer are pioneers in this thinking, and this guide is adapted from their Engaging Ideas 3rd edition (2021); direct quotations are cited by page. We highly recommend reading this text!

Check that the task is aligned with the SLOs and the kind of thinking you want students to develop.

What skills are you trying to develop within each module? If you’re stuck, name the thinking your discipline demands. How does a historian reason? An accountant? A nurse? Pick a precise task verb that forces this thinking. Analyze, argue, evaluate, and summarize demand different thinking—name the one you actually want. Give your students a real problem to solve—a contestable thesis or an interesting data set—not a topic to report on. Problem-focused prompts prevent the unfocused ‘all about’ data-dump.

Name the purpose, genre, and audience (‘the rhetorical context’). Connect the assignment to something students care about. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2016) found that writing felt meaningful when it linked to students’ interests and futures and had a purpose beyond simply pleasing the professor. Assign a real genre from your field—a memo, an op-ed, a scientific report, a grant proposal—instead of a generic ‘paper.’ The genre teaches the discipline’s conventions. To students, college writing assignments often appear to be an isolated transaction between student and teacher, and the ‘strange conventions’ they encounter reflect the idiosyncrasies of the instructor rather than the conventions of a larger community. There is an opportunity to make this explicit through your assignments and have students understand they’re entering the discourse community even at this pre-professional level.

Naming the audience is also essential—name a *real* audience, someone who could genuinely interact with the assignment product (i.e. a grant proposal pitched for the actual committee, a policy brief addressed to a senator, a conference presentation for an undergraduate research conference). Fix inflated ‘academic’ tone in one line: tell students to write as the expert, addressing a newcomer. ‘Bad tone’ or ‘overwritten prose’ can be a side-effect of *not* stating the intended audience: the student tries to impress the professor with writing that they believe sounds ‘academic’. The professor occupies the innate position as ‘expert’ so students struggle with acting as another ‘expert’ in their ideas when they know they’re a relative newcomer to the discipline.

Show them what success looks like. Assignment instructions should be given in class to allow plenty of time for students to ask questions. As Bean astutely observes, “No matter how clearly you think you have explained the assignment, students will ferret out ambiguities’ (74)”. Show a sample response in class, then have students grade it themselves in an in-class collaborative session (see the guide to peer review in this CxC library). They often grade harder than you would, and they learn the criteria by applying them. For multi-part assignments like lab reports or proposals, hand out a marked-up annotated model so students can see how much space each section takes and how to approach them. In English 1010, the capstone assignment is an argumentative, thesis-driven paper. To demonstrate good paragraph structure, instructors use a student example, highlighting the topic sentence, evidence, and analysis in different colors to allow students to understand flow and that a topic sentence can’t come at the end of a paragraph when it’s the driving argumentative force. Lastly, spell out the logistics you think are obvious—length, format, sources, deadline. Every detail you leave out is a detail ten students will email you about.

Scaffold anything large into smaller tasks over time to ease student stress and check

comprehension. A big final paper assumes a stack of skills students may never have been taught. When a major assignment produces ‘all about’ reports and a jumble of paraphrased sources, it’s usually because students were asked to perform research skills they were never given a chance to practice. Bean and Melzer identify the underlying skills students need before they can tackle disciplinary research writing. Build a short assignment around each one earlier in the semester, and the final paper stops being a daunting cliff and becomes a summit they’ve been naturally climbing toward.

- ***How to ask discipline-appropriate research questions.*** Students are trained to answer *your* questions, not generate their own, but a research paper requires them to find a question worth asking. *Try this:* give students a data set, a primary source, or a current controversy in your field and have them write three questions it raises, then workshop which ones are actually answerable and worth pursuing. Asking a good question is a skill, so assign it before you assign the paper.
- ***How to establish a rhetorical context (purpose, genre, audience).*** Students flounder when they don’t know whether they’re informing or persuading, or whether they’re writing to you or to someone else. *Try this:* hand out two short pieces of writing on the same topic in different genres (e.g. a news article and a journal abstract) and have students identify the purpose, audience, and conventions of each. Once they can see rhetorical context, they can build it into their own work.
- ***How to find sources.*** The generic database searching students learned in English 1010 won’t get them to the specialized literature of your discipline. *Try this:* co-teach a single session with a reference librarian, built around your actual assignment, so students learn where your field’s knowledge lives. One session saves you a stack of papers citing the wrong kinds of sources.
- ***Why we use sources.*** Students often think sources exist to prove they did the reading. They don’t. In disciplinary writing, sources exist to enter an ongoing scholarly conversation (to support a claim, complicate a position, or provide evidence for the writer’s own argument.) *Try this:* show students two paragraphs, one where a source is dropped in to pad the paragraph and one where it’s used to advance a claim. Ask them to name the difference.
- ***The mechanical skills of incorporating sources.*** When students copy a source and change a few words, it usually isn’t dishonesty; it’s what happens when they don’t know how to quote and integrate. *Try this:* give a short low-stakes exercise practicing quotation marks, ellipses, brackets, attributive tags (“According to X...”), and a signal-phrase-plus-quotation-plus-analysis pattern.
- ***How to take notes.*** The critical thinking in research happens during notetaking, when students decide what matters, summarize an argument in their own words, and record their own reactions. Students who highlight passively arrive at the draft with no thinking done. *Try this:* assign a structured reading log where students summarize each source’s argument in two sentences and add one sentence of their own response.
- ***How to cite and document sources.*** Citation and works-cited pages are anxiety-inducing, and students might hide from sources rather than face the formatting. *Try this:* give them a citation guide and a low-stakes assignment that asks for just three correctly formatted citations. This allows students to master the mechanical skill before the high-stakes assignment.

Run the stranger test by submitting it to a Writing Center consultant. Before you post the assignment prompt, ask yourself: could a colleague outside your discipline understand what to do from the words alone? If not, the prompt is relying on knowledge that’s in your head but not on the page. Everything you’d explain out loud in class needs to be written down, because the night before the deadline, when the student is returning to review the prompt, they’re all alone.

The fastest way to run this test is to hand the prompt to a Writing Center consultant. The consultants at the University of Wyoming Writing Center work with faculty to fine-tune assignment prompts, and because they see prompts from every discipline, they know exactly where students get lost trying to work out what an instructor wants. Worried yours is too discipline-specific to hand over? That’s the point of this test—a consultant doesn’t need to know your field to flag the sentence that your students could misread. If it’s clear to them, it will be clear to your students.