

## Crafting a Good Prompt

Writing a good prompt for a writing assignment is a difficult task. Too often, professors write prompts for writing assignments knowing exactly what sorts of essays they want their students to produce, only to get papers that miss the mark. How can you produce writing assignments that clearly convey the tasks and questions you want your students to undertake?

Before writing your prompts, you will want to consider a few matters.

- Consider what you want the assignment to require the students to do, in relation to the course outcomes. What outcomes are most important at this point in your course? How can the assignment move students closer to achieving these outcomes?
- Consider what you want the assignment to do, in terms of the larger questions of your course. What questions, in particular, do you want your students to consider? Are these questions related closely or peripherally to topics you've been discussing in class?
- Consider what kinds of thinking you want students to do. Do you want your students to define, illustrate, compare, analyze, or evaluate? You will want to come up with prompts that clearly direct students as to the kind of thinking they will have to do.
- Consider your students' writing processes. Are you focusing on teaching students to place their arguments within a larger conversation or context? If so, your prompt should address the importance of context and suggest things that you want students to consider as they write. Are you hoping to get your students to understand the mechanics of the paragraph? Your prompt might ask students to write paragraphs that summarize, then analyze, then synthesize, so that they can see how different tasks require different paragraph development.
- If the paper involves research, consider outlining your research requirements in a way that educates students about the research process. You may want to require students to use a variety of sources, or to use certain sources that you've either put on reserve or listed in the course syllabus. Understand that students may need help with finding sources, evaluating them, and incorporating them successfully into their arguments. Craft your prompt accordingly.

Once you've determined the outcomes for your writing assignment, you're ready to craft the prompt. Here are some things to consider:

- Break the assignment down into specific tasks. If, for example, you want students to compare the effectiveness of two political movements, you might first ask students to define the goals of each movement; then to consider the history of each movement; then to discuss how the history of the movement affected the creation of its goals; and finally, to consider how history influenced the movement's ultimate success (or failure).

- Break the assignment down into specific questions. For example, if you want students to discuss the formal elements of a particular painting, you might, as Art Historian Joy Kenseth does, ask the students: What is the focus of the painting? How does the artist treat such things as light and shadow, line, space, and composition? How does this treatment communicate the painting's ideas? If you don't want students to answer all of the questions you put to them, but want them simply to consider these questions before writing their responses, make that clear.
- Provide context. A writing prompt that asks students to discuss whether or not the films of Leni Riefenstahl are propagandistic does not point students to the interesting controversy surrounding Riefenstahl's work. Nor does it indicate whether they should limit themselves to discussing the formal elements of Riefenstahl's films, or whether they should include biographical detail. The more contextual information you give your students, the more precise their responses will be.
- Craft each sentence carefully. You will want to be sure that there is no room for misunderstanding the assignment. If you ask students to analyze how a myth informed paintings and sculptors during the first century of the Renaissance, do you want students to examine the works themselves or the artists that produced them? Sometimes a slip in word choice or the careless placement of a modifier can leave students confused as to what, precisely, you are asking them to do.
- Be clear about what you don't want. If you don't want students to discuss Virginia Woolf's personal experiences as they relate to *A Room of One's Own*, then be sure to instruct them not to include biographical references. In addition, explaining why such information should be excluded will help students to understand better the questions and the desired response.
- Be clear about the paper requirements. Have you indicated the paper's due date? How many pages you require? How many sources you require? What special criteria (if any) you will use when grading this paper? If your requirements are rigid, say so. If you're flexible, let the students know. This may be the aspect of the prompt that students are most anxious about, so offer as much detail as you think is necessary.
- Try to write (or at least to outline) the assignment yourself. If you have trouble outlining a paper based on this prompt, your students will, too. You will want to think about ways of revising the assignment to make it clearer and more manageable.

Discuss the assignment with the class. When you distribute the assignment to the class, take time to go over it. Ask for their questions. Make notes as to where their understanding of the assignment differs from yours so that you can improve the prompt the next time you use it.

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