

Addressing the Prompt

The first step to effective academic writing is ensuring that you fully understand what you are being asked to write about and who your audience will be.

Verbs

First, look carefully at the verb used in the prompt. This is a signal to you on how you write your essay. If you think carefully about the meaning of the verb, it will help you decide on your organization, and you can use it to check that you included all of the necessary information.

Example Prompt Verbs

- Describe the process of cooking your favorite meal.
 - This topic is more general. You will need to create a picture in the reader's mind of the steps, but there are many different ways you could do this. It does not narrow down what to describe like a more specific variation (ex *Describe the process of baking a carrot cake.*)
- Compare and contrast two parks in your city.
 - You need to explain similarities and differences. You must include both in order to completely respond to the prompt.
- Summarize the writer's thoughts about learning a second language.
 - In this response, your supporting ideas should be limited to the content in the original source. You should not have any of your own ideas mixed into this answer.

Content

Next, think about what supporting ideas you would need to include. The prompt may be very narrow because the topic is very specific.

- Ex. Do you think the ELC classes should be shorter? Why or why not?

In other cases, the prompt may be very general and allow you space to make personal decisions about what supporting ideas to include.

- Ex. What quality do you think is most important for being a good student?

Always remember to review the prompt throughout the writing process. Rereading the prompt often will help you check that you have included all the necessary information. It will also help your brain generate new ideas when you are stuck.

Example Content Breakdowns

- Describe the process of cooking your favorite meal.
 - This topic is more general. You could answer it by describing how to choose the ingredients and how to prepare them before cooking. You can include information about why the process needs to be in this order. However, it should all be focused on the process, not on the cultural importance of the meal.
- Compare and contrast two parks in your city.
 - Again, this topic can include a lot of different information. You know you need to talk about what is the same or different, but it could be about many different characteristics. You could talk about activities, physical descriptions, size, location, maintenance, etc.
- Summarize the writer's thoughts about learning a second language.
 - In this response, your supporting ideas should be limited to the content in the original source. You should not have any of your own ideas mixed into this answer. It also needs to only focus on the writer's thoughts about learning a second language, even if the reading includes thoughts about math or science as well. You should not be describing or defining second language learning, just focus on what the writer says about this topic.

Constraints

Finally, you should also look at any limitations included in the prompt. Constraints could include

- limits of time
- characters (letters, punctuation, and spaces)
- words
- revision tools (dictionaries, thesaurus, spell check)
- sources (required or no access)
- teacher, tutor, or peer review (required or no access)

Exercises

Exercise 1: Prompt Analysis

1. Take a look at these [New York Times Writing Prompts](#)
2. Identify the prompt for three writing tasks.
3. Discuss what the prompt verb would require the writer to do? How would a successful response be organized?

Exercise 2: Writing Prompts

Choose a topic (content) for your partner to write about. Choose a verb that identifies a specific task. You can use this resource ([UARK Verb chart](#)) to help select an appropriate verb for your prompt. Write a prompt and exchange it with a partner. Analyze your partner's prompt for the task and content that the writer should target.



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https://open.byu.edu/academic_a_writing/addressing_the_prompt.

