

Addressing the Prompt

One of the most essential steps of writing is ensuring that you fully understand what you are being asked to write about.

Verbs

The verb used in the prompt is an important signal to you. It will tell you how you need to write your essay. If you think carefully about the meaning of the verb, it will help you decide on an organizational structure.

Verbs Often Used in Writing Prompts

- Describe a technological advancement that has changed the world.
 - The verb describe indicates that you will need to use details to help your reader understand your topic. Sometimes it is helpful to write as if your reader has never heard of your topic before.
 - Remember to use many adjectives in your response.
 - **Example:** you might describe
 - 1. The cellphone (useful apps, communication, and easy internet access).
 - 2. The modern-day automobile (speed of travel, comfort, capacity).
- Compare and contrast the technology that your parents had when they were your age and the technology that you have today.
 - The verbs compare and contrast tell you that you will need to explain the similarities and differences between two things. Choose two things that will be easy to find similarities between.
 - **Example:** You might compare
 - 1. The ways your parents communicated with friends (email, pagers, telephones) versus the way that you communicate with friends now (cell phone, text message, social media).
 - 2. The kinds of technology that your parents used in school (computers, overhead projectors, chalkboards) versus the technology that you use in school (laptops, smartboards, ipads).
- Summarize the speaker's thoughts about cell phones.
 - The verb summarize tells you that you will not be writing your own opinion. Instead, you will read or listen to something written by someone else. Put the most important details of what you read or hear into your writing.
- In the United States, many children own cell phones. They use these cell phones for a variety of purposes, including contacting their parents and friends, playing games, and doing school work. However, many people think that cell phones are harmful to young children. Should children own cell phones? Support your position on this issue with reasons and examples.
 - The verb support tells you that you will need to add many examples and outside sources to supplement your opinion. You should find sources that will convince the reader that your opinion is correct.

Content

Next, you will need to know what content you are expected to include. In some cases, you will only be able to write about a limited number of things because the prompt may be very narrow. In other cases, the prompt may be very general and allow you space to make personal decisions about which supporting ideas to include as you write.

Always remember to review the prompt throughout the writing process to make sure that the focus of your essay matches the same scope as the prompt.

Example Content

- Describe a technological advancement that has changed the world.
 - This topic is more general. You could approach it by describing a modern-day invention, a historical invention, or even a theory. If you have the opportunity, it would be wise to ask your teacher if there is a more specific requirement as to what kind of technology you should write about.
- Compare and contrast the technology that your parents had when they were your age and the technology that you have today.
 - You need to explain similarities and differences. You must include both in order to completely respond to the prompt. This requires you to do a little more than describe the types of technology; you also need to make some judgments about them.
- Summarize the speaker's opinion about Provo, UT.
 - In this response, your supporting ideas should be limited to the content in the original source. You should not have any of your own opinions mixed into this answer. Your response should be limited to the speaker's opinion about cellphones, and not other types of technology.
- In the United States, many children own cell phones. They use these cell phones for a variety of purposes, including contacting their parents and friends, playing games, and doing school work. However, many people think that cell phones are harmful to young children. Should children own cell phones? Support your position on this issue with reasons and examples.
 - This question is about more than your opinion. The idea of supporting your ideas implies that you need to bring in additional sources to add strength to your argument. If the prompt is timed, you will need to focus your support on general knowledge or personal experience. Give reasons and examples.

Constraints

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

- time limits
- 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 [TOEFL Writing practice items from ETS](#).
2. Identify the prompt for each writing task.
3. Discuss what the prompt verb requires the writer to do. How would a successful response be organized?

Excercise 2: Writing Prompts

1. Choose a topic for your partner to write about.
2. 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.
3. Write a prompt and exchange it with a partner.
4. Analyze your partner's prompt for the task and content that the writer should target.



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