



# Decoding Assignment Guidelines

The first step in successfully completing a writing assignment is to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. These “decoding” strategies will help make sense of your assignment sheet and prepare a writing strategy.

## GETTING STARTED

1. Read the guidelines as soon as you receive your assignment. Highlight specific requirements and make note of any questions you have.
2. Create a checklist of the assignment’s required components considering:
  - \* What is the purpose of the assignment? \*Why are you writing? \*Who is your audience?
  - \* What do you need to know before you begin writing a draft? \*What kind of evidence is required?
  - \* What are your source requirements? \*What are the length, style/documentation, and formatting requirements? \*Make a note of due dates (including drafts, peer review, etc.)
3. Begin to brainstorm ideas and conduct any required research early so you can seek help.
4. Return to your checklist throughout the process of writing your paper to make sure you're on track.

## Identify Your Purpose

Look for keywords, especially verbs, to clarify your task/purpose. Use the chart below as a guide for what action these keywords are directing you to take in your writing. Remember that most academic writing requires you to present and support an argument of some kind.

### Interpretive

Use evidence to support thinking

assess  
evaluate  
analyze  
support  
argue  
consider

### Informative

Present facts. Demonstrate knowledge

describe  
demonstrate  
illustrate  
define  
explain  
summarize

### Relational

Find connections. Explain relationships.

compare  
distinguish  
use  
contrast  
apply  
employ

## Identify Your Audience

Your instructor will be part of your audience, but some assignments specify other audiences. Will the audience already be familiar with your subject? With your sources? With your terminology?

Use a tone appropriate for your audience and purpose. Consider how you would address such an audience if you were speaking face-to-face.