

Essay Planning: How to Read a Prompt

The first step of the pre-writing process involves understanding the essay prompt. An essay prompt provides the writer with a clear understanding of what is expected of him or her. Not only will the prompt provide the writer with the required information, but it may also give recommendations on main points, supporting details, and concluding options. Furthermore, an essay prompt states the type of essay that the writer is being asked to construct. By understanding what an essay prompt is asking, one can write a more coherent, unified, and organized essay.

To write an essay, one must consider the essay type, essay goal, supporting details, form of the conclusion, and appropriate conclusion information. The essay prompt can provide the reader with this information and may use keywords to identify these recommendations.

Essay Types

There are many different essay types. The essay prompt identifies what kind of essay is expected.

- Explanatory
- Analytical
- Summary
- Compare/contrast
- Argumentative

Essay Goals

Each essay hopes to accomplish a different goal. The essay prompt identifies what the goal of the essay should be.

- Support/critique
- Agree/disagree
- Critically analyze
- Summarize
- Explain
- Find a solution...
- In your own words, describe...

Supporting Details

Supporting details may vary, depending on the essay type and the essay goal. The essay prompt shows places from which one may choose these details. Look for certain phrases.

- Use examples from
 - your own life,
 - the text,
 - readings,
 - other sources.
- Use the given passage(s).
- Use your research.

Conclusion Recommendations

Each essay type requires different structuring of the conclusion. The essay prompt provides suggestions for a way to construct the conclusion and for information to use in the conclusion.

- Look for indicative words:
 - finally,
 - last,
 - overall.
- Look for certain phrases:
 - leave the audience with,
 - in the conclusion,
 - in the final paragraph.

Answering the Questions

Be sure to answer all of the questions listed in the prompt.

- Provide the detail recommended within the prompt.
- Do not stray by trying to answer questions that are not in the prompt *unless expressly told to do so*.
- Create a checklist of all the requirements of the prompt. A checklist creates a detailed and organized sheet to refer to when planning your essay.

Sample Prompt Breakdown

Here is a sample prompt. Let's break it down together.

"Referring to textual specifics, write a well-developed essay in which you critically analyze the poem above. In your essay, you will (1) summarize or paraphrase the main theme of the poem and (2) discuss how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, poetic form, rhetorical devices, and other formal elements to contribute to the expression of that theme. Conclude by stating whether you agree or disagree with the theme of the poem."

Essay Type

"Write a well-developed essay in which you critically analyze the poem above."

This prompt is asking for a critical analysis of the poem. A critical analysis will break the poem into pieces and examine them separately. This allows the writer of the analysis to come to better conclusions than if the work were examined as a whole.

Essay Goals

"You will (1) summarize or paraphrase the main theme of the poem and (2) discuss how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, poetic form, rhetorical devices, and other formal elements to contribute to the expression of that theme."

This prompt is asking the writer to accomplish two things:

(1) Summarize the main theme of the poem. Explain the content of the poem, the message that it conveys, and the ways in which it conveys this message.

(2) Discuss how the various aspects contribute to the expression of the theme. Examine how the poem uses images, diction, metaphors, and other formal elements that contribute to the expression of the theme. Use specific examples that relate it to the theme.

Supporting Details

“Referring to textual specifics . . .”

This prompt is asking for specific examples from the text. Specific examples may be presented by paraphrasing, using direct quotations, or referencing specific lines or pages.

Conclusion Recommendation

“Conclude by stating whether you agree or disagree with the theme of the poem.”

This prompt is asking for a concluding paragraph that states your opinion about the theme of this poem. Because you have just analyzed the theme of the poem, you should have a thorough understanding of its purpose and components.

Activity

Now it's your turn: Identify the essay type, essay goals, supporting details, and conclusion recommendation in the following prompt.

"After considering the following passage, write a persuasive essay that supports the author's claims. Support your logic and reasoning by using examples from your own life, the text, and your readings. Finally, provide a suggestion for how to prevent problems like this from happening in the future."

1) What is the essay type?

2) What is/are the essay goal(s)?

3) What can you use for supporting details?

4) What is the conclusion recommendation?

Answer Key for Activity

- 1) persuasive essay
- 2) to support the author's claims
- 3) your own life experiences, the text, your readings
- 4) offer a solution to the problem