Understanding the Prompt

When reviewing a prompt before beginning your writing process, look for keywords that suggest how to frame your argument and organize your paper. In addition to giving you a stronger sense of exactly what the question asks you to achieve, understanding these words will help you know what to include in your answer. Take time to read your assignment prompt carefully, underline and decode the keywords, and refer back to the prompt frequently during each stage of the writing process. Before you start the writing process -- or even the prewriting/brainstorming process -- be sure to ask your professor for clarification if you do not understand the prompt. Bring your prompts with you to the Writing Center, too, for help in understanding the task.

Examples of Keywords

- **Analyze** (examine, think critically): Analysis is discipline specific, and asks that you critically consider the material. You might be asked to offer a very detailed discussion or logically critique material using analysis.
- **Compare** (evaluate, contrast, balance): Look for differences and similarities in your material. Think about what effect each has on the work, how each is used in the work, and why these aspects are important to the work.
- **Contrast** (difference, dissimilarity, distinction, disparity): This is similar to comparing, except you look ONLY at the differences and analyze them according to the above questions.
- **Describe** (explain, illustrate, express, tell): Write about the most important aspects of the topic you are analyzing. Give background information, content information, and analysis as necessary.
- **Discuss** (talk about, argue) or **Examine** (look at, observe): This keyword allows for almost any type of response. Begin by deciding how you will approach the topic, or what exactly you want to say about the topic. Once you have your "angle," focus your argument on validating this angle.
- **Explain** (make clear, give details): Explain asks for the "how" and "why." Give clear and intelligible reasons in your explanations. The question may also require you to account for differences of opinion or bad connections between theory and data.
- **Interpret** (decode, decipher, figure out): Translate what something means. Explain what the author is trying to say: what the text means and how/why you have come to that conclusion.
- **Reflect** (relate and understand): Make connections between readings, data, or other material and your personal experiences or experiential observations. Interpret the meaning of a text through your reflections of what you think it means.
- **Summarize** (describe, explain): Typically, you will not use any analysis in a summary assignment. The purpose instead is to provide an accurate and cogent summary or description/explanation of another's argument or idea. Usually, the main goal is usually to show your understanding of a given work.