What is one assignment prompt or draft comment you are struggling with?

(Let us know – and find it/take it out so it’s in front of you)
Decoding Expectations: Prompts & Feedback

A Columbia Writing Center Workshop

Maria Baker
CK Kirch
Kirkwood Adams
Today’s Workshop: Decoding Expectations

1. Decoding Prompts
2. Decoding Feedback
Decoding Prompts
Decoding Prompts

1. What is the **central task** of the assignment?

2. What is the prompt asking me to **do**?

3. What other **hints** is the prompt giving me that can help me write my essay?
A word about INSTRUCTIONS

Whether it’s IKEA furniture assembly directions, a delicious cake recipe, or a dense technical manual, all instructions generally have the same goal: **to communicate what to do and how to do it.**

**Writing prompts are the same!**
The TL;DR Problem

Most common problem = not spending enough time with a prompt

[High Stakes Example: Van Halen’s contract requested a bowl of M&Ms with one color candy removed.]
What this means for our approach:

Working with a prompt means close-reading and rereading the prompt at several stages of the writing process.
WHAT IS THE CENTRAL TASK OF THE ASSIGNMENT?
What are the parts of the prompt?

Start by labeling every part of the prompt you can identify.

Some prompt parts you might find:

➔ Title of the assignment
➔ Due date and submission guidelines
➔ Philosophy behind the assignment
➔ Information about materials you can use
➔ Questions you’re supposed to answer
➔ Elements you’re required to include
➔ Word count parameters
➔ Formatting instructions (font, margins, etc.)
➔ Rubric or other evaluation explanations
➔ Others?
What are the parts of the prompt?

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**Assignment One**
*Critical Inquiry*

Pick a single passage from “Thank God for the Atom Bomb,” “The Shatterer of Worlds,” or “Hiroshima” that contains a **problem** you wish to explore (as we will discuss in class, a problem can take the form of a tension, an ambiguity, a complicated idea, or a site of possible misunderstanding). The passage can be as short as a single paragraph and should not be longer than a single page. Make a **claim** about how the writer’s choices of language and form affect the argument. Your analysis should stay close to the text, using the methods and terminology we discuss in class in order to help the reader understand the essay in a deeper way.

The paper should be 1200-1500 words long (include a word count at the end of each draft).

**Goals:**
- Identify a **problem** that is worth addressing, using a passage that will reward close reading.
- Formulate a **claim** that makes a strong argument and is not obvious.
- Establish a **motive** for the essay in your **introduction**. Here you will answer the “So What?” question, suggesting why your essay is important and interesting to an intelligent reader.
- Draw out the implications of the argument in your **conclusion**.
- **Structure** the essay around your central claim, making sure that each paragraph is adding an essential piece to your argument.
- Use **evidence** persuasively, quoting from the text when necessary, summarizing or paraphrasing accurately and responsibly when appropriate. Do not provide evidence from other sources or make general assertions (e.g., claims about “human nature”).
What is the central task of the assignment?

If you’re not sure, skim for the sentences / paragraphs that begin with VERBS.

➔ Now that you’ve labeled the parts of the prompt, you can locate the specific place in the prompt that describes the central task of the assignment.

➔ Sometimes the labeling step makes it immediately obvious which part describes the central task.

➔ But if not, skim the prompt for the sentences and paragraphs that begin with VERBS - these sentences are telling you to DO something.
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WHAT IS THE PROMPT ASKING ME TO DO?
What is the prompt asking me to do?

Starting with the part of the prompt that describes the central task: circle, highlight, or list out all of the verbs you notice.

Examples of prompt verbs:

- Analyze
- Discuss
- Use
- Compare
- Develop
- Examine
- Demonstrate
- Argue
- Describe
- Formulate
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What is the prompt asking me to DO? (Bloom’s Taxonomy)

- **Remember**: Recall facts and basic concepts
  - define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state

- **Understand**: Explain ideas or concepts
  - classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate

- **Apply**: Use information in new situations
  - execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch

- **Analyze**: Draw connections among ideas
  - differentiate, organize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test

- **Evaluate**: Justify a stand or decision
  - appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh

- **Create**: Produce new or original work
  - design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate
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Oh look, verbs!
What is the prompt asking me to DO? (Bloom’s Taxonomy)

1. **remember**
   - Recall facts and basic concepts
     - define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state

2. **understand**
   - Explain ideas or concepts
     - classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate

3. **apply**
   - Use information in new situations
     - execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch

4. **analyze**
   - Draw connections among ideas
     - differentiate, organize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test

5. **evaluate**
   - Justify a stand or decision
     - appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh

6. **create**
   - Produce new or original work
     - Design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate

   - pick, stay close, make, help, identify, formulate, establish, answer, draw out, structure, use evidence

   - make
What is YOUR prompt asking you to do? (Answer in the chat!)

- **create**
  - Produce new or original work
    - Design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate

- **evaluate**
  - Justify a stand or decision
    - Appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh

- **analyze**
  - Draw connections among ideas
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- **apply**
  - Use information in new situations
    - Execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch

- **understand**
  - Explain ideas or concepts
    - Classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate

- **remember**
  - Recall facts and basic concepts
    - Define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state
WHAT OTHER HINTS
IS THE PROMPT GIVING ME
THAT CAN HELP ME WRITE MY ESSAY?
Close-read all parts of the prompt

Go back to your labels & inspect all prompt parts to extract helpful info about what is expected of you

- Title of assignment
  - What does this tell me about the goals or essence of this assignment?

- Intro paragraph
  - What role is this playing in the prompt? (quote, excerpt, analogy, abstract)
  - What does this tell me about what’s important for this assignment?

- Series of questions, lists, or other bullet points
  - Is this a checklist? An outline?
  - Nouns can also serve these functions! (Are there opposites?)

- What is emphasized by formatting? (e.g. **bold**, *underline*, CAPITALS, “Please,” etc.)
  - What does this highlight as important?
  - How does this connect to class content?
Assignment One
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Recap: Decoding Prompts

➔ Label parts of the prompt
➔ Locate the central task of the assignment
➔ Circle/highlight/list all the verbs
➔ Use the verbs to determine what type of task you’re being asked to do
➔ Close-read all parts of the prompt to find more info to help you write the essay
Interpreting Feedback
“Needs restructuring” → I guess I’ll change the structure? Although I have no idea what the new one will be...

“Great observation” → Awesome, I won’t change anything about this.

“Consider rewording” → I’ll grab my thesaurus... Not sure what words will be better, though.

“Nice summary but needs analysis” → Dang, I thought I was doing analysis! What do I do now??

“Vague” → Well, so is this comment!
Types of Reader Feedback

**Evaluative:**
Reader says whether or not they liked it
- “Good/Bad”
- “I liked it/I didn’t like it”

**Prescriptive:**
Reader suggests changes for the writer to make
- “Restructure your essay”
- “Expand on this”

**Descriptive:**
Reader describes their experience of the piece
- “I was confused here”
- “This surprised me”
The problem with feedback:

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- “I was confused here”
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➔ Doesn’t help us figure out what to revise (because we don’t know their criteria, nor do we know how they understand our project!)

➔ Doesn’t take into account our intended project (so the suggestions might not actually make sense for what we’re trying to do!)

➔ Useful! We can compare their experience with our intentions to determine how to revise (but the problem is we don’t always get this kind of feedback!)
The problem with feedback:

We can’t always control what kind of feedback we receive

Soliciting descriptive feedback: ask about the reader’s experience – questions whose answers will help you make revision decisions, e.g.:

- *Is my argument clear?* → “Can you summarize my argument?”
- *Is there information missing?* → “Were there any places you got confused while reading?”
- *Do I need to restructure?* → “What did you see as the logical connection between these ideas?”

But sometimes we can’t control what kind of feedback we receive!

- Instructor comments
- Some peer review assignments

How do I turn evaluative/prescriptive feedback into descriptive feedback?
What experience did this reader have that led them to make this comment?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMENT</th>
<th>POSSIBLE READER EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Needs restructuring”</td>
<td>The reader probably didn’t understand the logical connection between my ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Great observation”</td>
<td>I pointed out something the reader might not have realized before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Consider rewording”</td>
<td>How the reader understood this sentence may not have matched their expectations for what I was going to say here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nice summary but needs analysis”</td>
<td>My close-reading came across to this reader as summary rather than analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Vague”</td>
<td>The reader may not be certain how to apply this idea to the specific context here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REVISION

How can I make connections clearer? (Change order? Add missing pieces? Both?)

Am I using this surprising moment in the most advantageous way?

What did they think I was trying to say? Why did they think that? (Issue with wording or with setting expectations?)

How can I bring out my analysis more so it’s clear I’m saying something new?

How can I ensure my explanations draw clear connections between general ideas and this specific context?
Decoding Feedback Recap:

- Getting reader feedback is super important for the revision process!
- Some kinds of feedback are more useful than others (descriptive is best!) but we can’t always control what kind of feedback we get.
- What experience did the reader have that led them to make this comment?
Based on what we discussed today, **rewrite** your assignment prompt OR instructor feedback in your own words!
With images & content from...

- Bloom’s Taxonomy image from Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching
- Sample prompt from University Writing, Columbia University Core Curriculum
- Instruction illustrations by IKEA
Writing Resources

What are you working on?

- Transitioning to University Writing
- Essay Exam Preparation
- Decoding Assignment Prompts
- Reading Strategically
- Specifying Research Questions
- Creating Conversation/Using Evidence
- Developing Claims
- Revising for Clarity & Style
- Getting Writing Done

Check out our schedule of upcoming workshops and events here.

Workshop Recordings & Materials

Transitioning into UW

How to apply what you already know about writing to the context of University Writing

https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center/writing-resources