UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Student Success Centre

Reading Your Assignment Sheet

Before beginning any assignment, you need to ensure that you understand the topic and task. Therefore, it is important to carefully read your assignment sheet to make sure that your project will address everything being asked of you. This handout will provide strategies for reading and understanding assignment instructions.

Creating an assignment checklist

Before beginning an assignment, you many want to develop an assignment checklist. An assignment checklist provides you with a tool to check that you have addressed all assignment requirements. The checklist will also help you to determine any questions or confusions you have, so that you can approach your instructor or TA for clarification before continuing with the project.

The following procedure provides stages of approaching your assignment sheet, along with questions to answer in order to address elements you may want to include in your assignment checklist. Also feel free to add additional elements and questions, in accordance to your needs and preferences.

Step 1: Preview your assignment

Perform an initial read-through of the assignment. In your first read-through, identify the key elements and requirements of the assignment. Ensure that you can answer the following questions:

- What are the main ideas and questions?
- What are the key requirements of this assignment?

Step 2: Read the assignment instruction sheet thoroughly

Once you have completed the initial read-through, read your assignment sheet a second time. On the second read-through read the sheet thoroughly looking for any additional details and requirements that are important for completing the assignment. Ensure that you can answer the following questions:

- What are the formatting requirements?
- What are the deadlines associated with the assignment?
- What are the assessment criteria?
- Are there any other guidelines or restrictions?

Step 3: Highlight key words

When reading the assignment sheet, highlight any key words to help you to identify and understand key elements and requirements. To identify key words and ensure that you understand requirements ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any recurring verbs or nouns?
- Are there any words you need to define more clearly and in more depth before starting the assignment?

Step 4: Identify required sources

When reading your assignment sheet, pay particular attention to any sources required for the completion of the assignment. Ensure that you can answer the following questions:

- Are you required to use primary sources?
  - Are you familiar with this source?
- Do you need secondary sources?
  - Do you know where and how to look for these sources?
- What is the citation style required?
  - Review the style guidelines, so you can take notes as you research.

Step 4: Identify any areas of confusion

When preparing to begin an assignment it is especially important to ensure that you fully understand all requirements. Never make any assumptions if you are unsure of assignment requirements and criteria. If you are in doubt regarding any element of the assignment, seek clarification from your instructor. Each course and instructor has a different set of expectations and guidelines (even within the same discipline or program). Do not transfer the standards of one course or instructor to another. Do not rely on advice from friends or social media postings to provide information. Always reach out to your course instructor or teaching assistant with any questions you have about an assignment. To identify any areas that may require further clarification, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you understand the meaning of all key words?
- Do you understand all instructions?
- Are any words/instructions unclear to you?

Understanding key words

Even if assignment instructions seem clear, it is important to ensure that you understand what instructors mean in their use of key words. The following list comprises common assignment key-words, along with typical meanings. If it seems as though a key word is being used in a different way on a particular assignment sheet, be sure to ask your instructor for clarification.

Common key words

Analyze, Discuss, and Explore

These are terms that are typically related to concepts, ideas, and arguments. These terms are asking you to engage with source material to clarify why something is the way it is or how something is done. When being asked to analyze source material, you may want to address both compositional elements and the merits and shortcomings of the authors' arguments.

Argue

This is a term that typically relates to positions and thesis statements. If an assignment is instructing you to make an argument, it is asking you to present a contestable position (thesis) on a particular issue or topic and to support your thesis using evidence and analysis.

Consider

This is a term that typically relates to positions, theories, and methodologies. If you are asked to consider a position, theory, or methodology, you should provide explanation of the features of the position/theory/methodology and describe how it operates.

Synthesize

This is a term that typically refers to sources. When asked to synthesize you should compare sources and discuss how the ideas in the sources relate to one another.

Compare

This is a term that asks you to look for similarities and differences, with an emphasis on similarities.

Contrast

This is a term that asks you to look for similarities and differences, with an emphasis on differences.

Define

This is a term that asks you to explain what something means.

Evaluate

This is a term that asks you to make a judgement about something by using specific criteria.

Exercise

The following is a sample assignment. Practice your assignment reading skills by identifying key requirements and key words and phrases in the assignment. Make sure you understand what each word means in the context of the assignment.

Sample assignment

"Research Paper Proposal"

(10%, due Thus., Feb. 14) (+ 5% for APA citation & reference list)

Length: 600 to 1,000 words (not counting the reference list), double -spaced

This proposal for research for your final paper should include [the following]:

- an informative title and your name at the top of page 1. (Do not include a title page)
- section headings (as in the Module 2 examples)
- the research question for your final research paper
- a tentative answer to your research question in a 1- to 3-sentence thesis statement
- a 1- or 2-paragraph overview of your topic, putting it into context, establishing its importance, defining key terms as needed, and using and citing at least three sources in proper APA citation format. Material taken word for word from a source must be in quotation marks. (Note: Your APA-style in-text citations and reference list will be marked separately, out of 5%
- a brief paragraph describing your proposed research method and strategies, indicating the kinds of sources you will search for and what search tools and search terms you will use. (Write this section in the future tense, even if you have already done your research.) NOTE: any proposed research involving interviews or surveys must be pre-approved by the instructor at least one week before the submission of the proposal
- an APA-style reference list (double-spaced in hanging indent format) including entries for all sources cited in the proposal as well as entries for any other sources you expect to use in completing your final paper. Put an asterisk(*) before any entries you plan to use in your final paper but have not cited in your proposal.
- Note: The proposal should be for a paper based on new original work; please do not reuse topics from other courses (e.g., PHIL 249, 259, 313, or 347, or KNES 260)."

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Sample assignment key

The following is the key to the sample assignment. Key words and phrases are in italics. Lists of key requirements, and key words and phrases are also printed at the end of the key.

"Research Paper Proposal"

(10%, due Thurs., Feb. 14) (+ 5% for APA citation & reference list)

Length: 600 to 1,000 words (not counting the reference list), double -spaced

This proposal for research for your final paper should include [the following]:

- an *informative title* and your name at the top of page 1. (Do not include a title page)
- section headings (as in the Module 2 examples)
- the *research question* for your final research paper
- a tentative answer to your research question in a *1- to 3-sentence thesis statement*
- a 1- or 2-paragraph *overview* of your topic, putting it into *context*, establishing its importance, *defining key terms* as needed, and using and *citing at least three sources in proper APA citation format*. Material taken word for word from a source must be in quotation marks. (Note: Your APA-style in-text citations and reference list will be marked separately, out of 5%
- a brief paragraph describing your proposed *research method and strategies*, indicating the kinds of sources you will search for and what search tools and search terms you will use. (Write this section in the future tense, even if you have already done your research.) NOTE: any proposed research involving interviews or surveys must be pre-approved by the instructor at least one week before the submission of the proposal
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- Note: The proposal should be for a paper based on new *original work*; please do not reuse topics from other courses (e.g., PHIL 249, 259, 313, or 347, or KNES 260)."

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Key words and phrases:

informative title; research question; 1- to 3-sentence thesis statement; overview; context; defining key terms; citing at least three sources in proper APA citation format; research method and strategies; APA-style reference list; original work.