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Give 'Em What They Asked For

HOW TO READ A PROMPT

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We've all been there.

The professor hands out a prompt at the beginning of class, gives everyone a moment to read over it, and you look up to a room full of stares as blank as your own. You didn't understand much besides the word count, and it doesn't look like anyone else did either. Perhaps someone is bold enough to ask for elaboration, but the professor seems, at least to you, to just talk around the question or refer you back to the assignment or syllabus. No one else speaks up to challenge them, so you leave class an hour later with a confusing sheet of paper and a knot in your gut.

Bad memory, right? **Let's delve into some ways to find out what that prompt is really after.**

Give Yourself, and Your Classmates, Some Credit

I've spent untold amounts of time looking alone at a poorly worded prompt, sinking into despair. That's why it can be helpful to recall that you're not the only one who's confused about the assignment. Remember: everyone else had the same blank stare on their face—they probably have the same questions you do. But that shouldn't stop you from getting together with your peers! If you talk over the prompt outside class, there's a good chance you'll reach some conclusions you might otherwise have missed. This kind of collaboration will not only encourage you but give everyone else a boost as well.

Why *This* Assignment?

Most teachers aren't assigning you something just because they love reading papers. *All assignments are measuring something.* Think about it this way: if you were the instructor, what would *you* be trying to measure? Here are a few common metrics sometimes stated—or often just implied—in an assignment:

- **Knowledge of Course Objectives.** If your teacher mostly wants to see if you know the course material, they're probably not looking for a magnum opus of originality. What core ideas or lessons have been stressed in class? Sometimes smartly reproducing them onto the page, explaining them in your own words or adding practical examples to demonstrate your understanding, can go a long way.
- **Ability to Think Creatively.** It's possible your assignment barely requires any expertise and instead prioritizes creativity. You might just need to spend some time in your own head (or consult some other sources for inspiration) in order to get some promising ideas down.
- **'Writing' Skills.** Let's be honest: writing involves a whole lot more than style and mechanics alone. But if you see signs of a metric like this one, there's a good chance your teacher will be looking for clear, precise wording and sentences that convey your message elegantly and accurately. In these cases, it pays to proofread multiple times and to engage a peer for help if this isn't your strong suit.

The bottom line: approaching the assignment with its key metrics in mind will help you to attack it the way your professor expects.

What's up with my Army Instructor?

If you're at West Point, it's possible that your professor is also an Army officer. This might influence how they design prompts; it definitely influences what they expect from you. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Words Have Meanings.** Watch out for tactical mission tasks or other verbs in their place. These are likely the key words in the assignment; they communicate the actions you need to take. Highlight them. Reflect on their implications. Often you'll find them next to more common Army phrases, such as 'in order to.'
- **It Might Be a Memo.** Sometimes, Army officers are more comfortable formatting prompts like memoranda. Usually, the most important information is at the top: for example, look for a 'Purpose' heading.
- **We're Training Leaders.** Teachers often come to West Point shortly after company command and might be just as interested in teaching you about Army leadership as they are in the course. If a prompt feels like an order, that could be intentional. Simply identify the critical task and treat it as you would a regular prompt.

The first piece of information we get is page count: that signals that this part of the assignment is likely delivering key points or parameters.

Identify words like 'must' and 'may'. 'Must' means that this is something you absolutely have to address. 'May' signals the teacher is letting you decide. It's still probably worth asking them for their recommendation, though...

"Successful paper" means pay really close attention to what follows. By reusing the words "significant claim" from earlier, the prompt is stressing that your *thesis* should examine some core purpose of the play.

Let's check out this excerpt from a sample assignment for an introductory literature class to decode what we're looking for!

In three full pages but no more than four, write a thesis-driven analysis of a theme, concept, relationship, adaptation, idea, etc. in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. You must make a **significant and arguable claim**. You may write outside of the specific prompts below: **You are NOT limited to them!** But if you desire additional guidance, write to one of them.

Historical Context Prompt: How does the play compare to the real historical context of Elizabethan England in a specific area (for example, marriage practices)? What is significant about the similarities and/or differences?

A successful paper of this kind will make a significant claim about the effect or purpose of the play given its relationship to the historical context. Is the play providing a model society to follow? Is it trying to subvert or mock some aspect of society? Is it doing some or both of these things?

For a yes/no question like this, ask yourself, "If yes, what is it doing?" Your answer is the beginning of your thesis!

Bam! Here's our job: we're *analyzing* the play and need to be sure to build a strong thesis to guide the paper. The following sentences list some of the features your thesis must have.

Open-ended questions are great: this one is virtually *feeding* you your structure. For this, a kind of compare/contrast approach might work.

How NOT to Read a Prompt: Bad Habits To Avoid

- **Don't try to read the teacher's mind:** Take the prompt at face value. If you suspect an ulterior meaning, seek clarification in class or in a meeting with your instructor. Remember, someone else probably has the same question.
- **Don't game the grade turnaround:** It can be tempting to submit low quality work if the assignment must be graded within a small window. However, overthinking the deadline is counterproductive. Your time is better spent doing just what the prompt says.