

## Twenty Questions About Writing Assignments

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At the end of English Composition, I ask students how what they've just learned in my class might be useful in their other classes. They're often bemused and surprised to learn that professors in other courses care about their writing. To encourage them to take responsibility for succeeding in their future writing assignments, I hand out a list of 20 Questions: ones they might ask to better understand "what the professor wants," and thus continue to apply what we've been practicing.

I'm sharing this list with you, in the hopes that it will help you help students transfer good writing skills from English Composition to your class. By answering these questions about your own writing assignments, you may cue students to write better by building on some learning principles common to first-year composition classes. We don't want to "write students' essays for them," true. But taking some time to talk about writing, rather than making assumptions about what the students know or think you expect, may help students remember their good writing practices as they start—and may save you hours of teeth-grinding when they're finished.

### **Questions students could ask a professor about getting started with a writing assignment:**

1. If I have my own idea for a *topic or angle* that's interesting to me, can I use it, or do I need to complete the assignment exactly the way it is described?

2. Is there an *assignment model*, a sample essay, or a kind of published writing that I could look at to help me better see how to do this assignment?
3. If I write an *essay draft* early, can I come see you to talk about it, or email you to ask a few questions?

**Questions about the assignment's main purpose:**

4. Why do people in this field write or read a text like this? What's the *main goal* for this kind of writing?
5. Should I mostly *review* the similarities, differences, events, theories, or key features, or should I *make arguments*, draw conclusions, or give my interpretations about these ideas? Do I need to answer the question, "so, what?"
6. Should I broadly *survey* the field or issue, or should I narrow my focus and "go deep" with my analysis?

**Questions about the assignment's target audience:**

7. Should I write for a *knowledgeable audience* that has read (or studied) what I have read (or studied), or do I need to give additional background or summary?
8. Should I try to write for a *resistant audience* that will need a lot of evidence, or should I write for an audience that generally agrees with my point? Should I address and refute counterarguments?

9. What kind of *evidence* will be most convincing in this field (or to this audience): numbers, descriptions, direct quotations, logical reasoning, examples, case studies, expert testimony?
10. Will I need to consult *outside sources*, and if I do, what kind of sources are appropriate for this field, audience, or genre?

**Questions about style and format that differ among disciplines:**

11. Is it preferred that I use the *scholarly language or format* of this discipline or genre, or should I use standard paragraphs and plain, direct language accessible to a range of readers?
12. Are lively, graceful introductions and extended *paragraphs* expected by readers in this field (or for this assignment), or will short, informative paragraphs be sufficient?
13. Is it important to readers in this field that I write smooth, *stylistic sentences*, or is a straightforward "just the facts, ma'am" style enough?
14. What *citation format* should I use for outside sources?

**Questions about style and format that differ based on the assignment, context, or professorial preference:**

15. Is it okay to use *first person* ("I") or second person ("you")? Is it okay to use specific, relevant examples from my own life or experience?
16. Should I try to avoid *passive voice* ("to be" verbs)? Does it matter whether I use present tense or past tense verbs (as long as I'm consistent)?

17. Is the *page-length* specification an absolute requirement, or is it more of a guide to how much information I should plan to include in order to satisfy the audience's needs?
18. Can I include relevant *visual or other non-text information* (pictures, charts, diagrams, sound or video clips), or should I include only text?

**Questions to gauge individual professors' goals and concerns:**

19. What do you think is the *most difficult part* of this assignment? What are the most common mistakes students make with this assignment?
20. What is the *most important aspect* of this assignment? What should I spend most of my time and energy on as I write and edit?

One final, crucial thing you can do that will help students to draw on what they've learned in classes like mine is to get them working on the assignment before it's due. Require them to write *something*—a proposal, a thesis statement, an introductory paragraph, a rant, an outline, a bibliography—at least a week or two before the due date. Even if you provide no in-depth feedback at that point, you've indicated that you know the fundamental principle of good writing, in English classes and beyond: that it requires good revising, and thus takes more time and attention than we first think it will.

If you'd like to duplicate this set of questions and share them with your students, you're welcome to do so. This way we work together to send the message that the good writing skills learned in English apply in every course.