

Decoding the Writing Task

Upon beginning a writing assignment, it is important to read the question very carefully. You should determine what the writing task is. To illustrate the importance of this, consider the following situation:

Your mother/spouse tells you to remove a food stain from the carpet. She instructs you to use a special chemical called “Stain Be Gone.” You go into the laundry room and instead of getting “Stain Be Gone”, you get a chemical called “Chlorox,” a type of bleach. You begin to clean the carpet with the chemical and what happens? The brown carpet begins to turn an awful shade of yellow! Even though you had good intentions and you worked very hard to clean the carpet, you did not get the results you or your mother/spouse expected because you used the wrong chemical; consequently, you bleached out the carpet.

The same applies to a writing assignment. If you do not follow the instructions the prompt gives you, no matter how hard you work the end result will not be what the reader expected. As a result, you will not receive the score you deserve. Consider the following three kinds of in-class essay examinations:

1. Some people say that it is best to be loyal and to work for one company during one’s life. Others take the opposite view and say it is better to change jobs frequently in one’s life. Discuss these positions, using specific examples of both. Then tell which one you agree with and explain why.
2. In addition to their specialized classes in their major, students should also be required to take general education classes in a university. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons to support your opinion.
3. The automobile and the airplane are important inventions of the 20th century. Both of these inventions have had an important effect on our lives. Choose another invention that you think is important. Give specific reasons for your choice.

Do these three prompts look the same to you? Do they have the same requirements? If you answered no, you are already on your way to being able to write a successful essay.

The first prompt can be broken into four tasks: The essay asks you to discuss both positions, which means (1) you must write about why some people say that it is best to be loyal to work for one company during one’s life; (2) you must write about why others say it is better to change jobs frequently in one’s life; (3) you must tell which of the positions you agree with; and (4) you should explain why (i.e., give reasons). Remaining neutral until near the end, you do not state your position first in this type of essay.

The second prompt can be broken into two argumentative tasks– (1) that of choosing whether you agree or disagree with the statement: “In addition to their specialized classes in their major, students

should also be required to take general education classes in a university.”

(2) You should also give reasons to support your opinion. Stating your argument in the introduction in this type of essay, you assert which view you support. Then in the remainder of the essay, you defend why you support that view.

In the third writing prompt, yet another type of argumentative essay, the task is simple– (1)that of choosing another invention that you think is important. (2) You should give specific reasons for your choice. The word “another” means other than the automobile or the airplane. Consequently, if you write about the airplane or the automobile, you have not followed the instructions for this writing prompt.

The concept is simple: think before you write. Make sure you understand what the writing task is.