

THIS ASSIGNMENT IS NOT A RIDDLE.

A practical field guide to finding out what the prompt actually asks, what counts as evidence, and what to do first.

FREE · NO PURCHASE REQUIRED



WHAT YOU'LL DO HERE

By the end you will turn one real assignment prompt into a task list, a short list of rules you must meet, and a first move you can make today. Plan on about 20 minutes, a pen, and a printout.

YOU NEED

- One assignment to work on, with its exact prompt text, copied, not summarized
- The rubric or grading section if there is one
- A pen and a printout of this guide. Marking up paper is the point.

YOU'LL LEAVE WITH

- A list of the tasks the prompt gives you
- The rules you must meet, and how much to include
- The vague words that could cost you points
- One question to send before you start



YOUR GUIDES

Mabbitt asks who wrote the rule and what it assumes. She is skeptical of the prompt, never of you.

Whonah doesn't talk. He finds the detail, shows the step, and marks the checkpoint. When he points, look there.



HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS

1. **Mabbitt frames it.** The question behind the prompt.
2. **Whonah shows the move.** The marks to make, in order.
3. **You do it** on your own prompt.
4. **You check your work** against the criteria on page 9.



SOMEBODY WROTE THE RULES



MABBIT'S SECOND LOOK

"Critically analyze." Great. Analyze what, using whose evidence, judged by which rubric?

A prompt is a set of rules written by someone who already knows what a good answer looks like. Your job is to get that out of their head and onto your page.

1. Which words tell me what to *do*, and which only name the topic?
2. What will I be graded on that nobody wrote down?
3. Where is "good" defined? A rubric, an example, the syllabus? Or only in the instructor's head?

WHAT TASK WORDS USUALLY ASK FOR

Starting guesses, not a standard. Instructors use these loosely, so confirm yours.

Common assignment task words and what they usually ask the writer to do

TASK WORD	USUALLY ASKS YOU TO
Describe, summarize	Report accurately what is there. No verdict needed.
Explain	Say how or why something works, with reasons, not just facts.
Analyze	Break something into parts and show what each part does or how they connect.
Compare	Set two or more things against stated criteria, then say what the comparison shows.
Argue, evaluate	Take a position, defend it with evidence, and deal with the strongest objection.
Reflect	Connect the material to your own experience or thinking and say what changed.

MARK IT UP. IN THIS ORDER.



Whonah works the trail one scent at a time. So do you. Four passes, four marks, pen on paper.

Marks: underline, circle, box. The colors are my system (violet, pink, cyan). Use whatever works for you.

1. **Underline every verb.** Analyze, compare, address. These are your tasks.
2. **Circle every number and format rule.** (1,200 words) (four sources) (APA). Length, sources, style, file type, deadline.
3. **Box must, should, and may.** [must] and [should] both mean required. Academics like to be indirect. [may] means optional; ask if it isn't clear.
4. **Find the grading criteria.** Rubric, syllabus section, or an example. Write down where you found it. If you can't find it, that is your first question.

CHECKPOINT

- ☐ I know the **action** I'm being asked to do.
- ☐ I know the **evidence** I have to use, and how much.
- ☐ I know the **format** rules and the **deadline**.
- ☐ I know **where the grading criteria** live, or I know I have to ask.

Whonah's rule: if a word could mean two things, mark it. A marked word is a question you can send. ("Should" is not one of them. It means must.)

THE ASSIGNMENT AUTOPSY

Sample prompt written for this guide. It is not from a real course. Your instructor's wording will differ. *I have seen some seriously vague syllabi.*

Analyze how one policy affected a community you choose. Write a 1,200-word paper using at least four scholarly sources. You should address multiple perspectives. Cite in APA.

underline = task

circle = number or format rule

box = required or vague word

MABBIT READS IT

- **Task:** "analyze" means take the policy apart and show its effect on the community. Naming the policy is not enough. "A community you choose" is a choice you have to make.
- **Evidence:** four sources, and "scholarly" is undefined. Do reports from agencies count? Somebody has that answer.
- **Hidden assumption:** "multiple perspectives" assumes you know whose voices are missing. That is on you to find.

WHONAH'S MARKS

- **Hard rules:** 1,200 words, 4+ sources, APA.
- **Required:** "should address" means address. Not optional.
- **Fog:** "multiple" (is two enough?), "scholarly" (what counts?).
- **Missing:** deadline, rubric, who the audience is.

FIRST MOVE

"Do government reports count as scholarly sources, and is two perspectives enough? Is there a rubric I can see before I start?"

One message, two specific questions, sent before the work starts.

Before you can send it: if you don't have your instructor's email saved, now is the time.



WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY KNOW?

Before you decide how you'll be graded, sort what you've heard from what you can trace.



Three claims about grading, the evidence behind each, and what is missing

CLAIM	EVIDENCE	NOT SHOWN
"The rubric says critical thinking is 30%."	A label and a percentage, on the page.	What critical thinking looks like in this course.
"The instructor likes a strong voice."	One classmate's impression.	Anything from the instructor or the rubric.
"Late work loses 10% a day."	The syllabus, quoted exactly.	Whether there is an exception process.

MABBIT'S SECOND LOOK

Missing data doesn't prove someone is hiding something. It proves the page can't answer your question. So ask the person who can.

YOUR TURN: SORT THREE THINGS YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THIS ASSIGNMENT

Heard nothing yet? Write "nothing yet" and use the gaps in the prompt, syllabus and rubric as your "still need" column.

WHAT I HEARD	WHERE IT COMES FROM	WHAT I STILL NEED

NOW DO IT TO YOURS



Pick one assignment. Use its real prompt, on this page or on the original. Whonah's four passes, in order. Don't paraphrase. The fog lives in the exact wording.

PASTE OR WRITE YOUR PROMPT EXACTLY

PASS 1 · TASKS (VERBS)

PASS 2 · NUMBERS AND FORMAT RULES

PASS 3 · MUST / SHOULD / MAY

PASS 4 · WHERE GRADING CRITERIA LIVE

TURN MARKS INTO QUESTIONS



A vague word is a question with its coat on. Pull out the ones that could cost you, then turn each into one specific question.

MABBIT'S SECOND LOOK

If nobody wrote down what "good" means, who gets to decide after you've turned it in?

FOG WORDS I FOUND

VAGUE WORD OR MISSING DETAIL	WHAT IT COULD COST ME	THE SPECIFIC QUESTION

DRAFT THE MESSAGE

Two questions at most. Specific, boring, easy to answer. Send it before you start.

MY FIRST MOVE TODAY

Examples: pick the assignment due soonest, send the message, or find where the rubric lives.
Small enough to finish today.

DID IT WORK?



Whonah always reminds me of the details. What did you forget to check? Try this list. If an answer is no, go back to that pass.

CRITERIA

- ☐ Every line of the prompt has a mark, or I can say why it's only topic.
- ☐ My task list uses the prompt's own verbs, not my paraphrase.
- ☐ I found at least one vague word, or I asked what "done" looks like.
- ☐ Each question I wrote can be answered in one or two sentences.
- ☐ Someone else could start the assignment from my list.

COMMON PITFALLS

Marking only the topic.	"Policy" and "community" are topic words. The verbs tell you what to do with them. Go back to Pass 1.
Reading "should" as optional.	"Should" is never optional. Academics like to be indirect, so read it as "must." Be specific about what you will do.
Asking a huge question.	"What do you want?" is hard to answer. "Does a government report count as scholarly?" is not.
Waiting to ask.	A question sent before the work starts costs less than a rewrite after you've turned it in. Most of the time rewrites aren't an option, and grades are lasting.

MODEL ANSWER FOR THE SAMPLE PROMPT

Tasks: analyze effects; address multiple perspectives. **Rules:** 1,200 words, four or more scholarly sources, APA. **Required:** address perspectives (it says "should"). **Fog:** multiple, scholarly. **Question:** "Do agency reports count as scholarly, and is two perspectives enough?" Yours won't match word for word. It should match in kind.

WHAT WE COVERED

FINDING

THE PROMPT IS A RULEBOOK. READ IT LIKE ONE.

Verbs are tasks. Numbers are rules. "Should" means must. "Multiple" and "scholarly" are questions waiting for the person who wrote them.

WHAT THIS CAN'T TELL YOU

- How your instructor will grade. Only they, or the rubric, can say.
- Whether a task word means what the table says in your course.
- What a strong answer looks like. Ask for an example.

DO NEXT

- ☐ Send your message.
- ☐ Save the answer where you can find it.
- ☐ Check the rest of the course rules with *Read the Fine Print*.

REFLECT

Which word in my prompt was doing the most work without being defined?

SOURCES

This guide cites no outside sources. The sample prompt and the grading claims are invented for teaching and are not from real courses. The task-word table is a general guide, not a standard.



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