

Assessment Tools
Center for Effective Teaching and Learning

Writing a prompt for a long essay or research paper

1. **Keep course goals in mind.** All assignment prompts should encourage the types of knowledge students need to know and practice for the course. How does your writing prompt reflect course and disciplinary outcomes? Are you requiring using a specific writing convention or genre (science, humanities)?

2. **There are several types of writing prompts which feature unique criteria.** Depending upon the type of writing, rubrics can be adjusted to accommodate these.

- **Persuasive writing** argues a point and reflects a reasoned opinion.

Example: *Do you feel that a college education is a right or a privilege? Use specific reasons and examples, including federal data, to explain your answer.*

Consider evaluating this type of paper based upon strength of argumentation and precise use of evidence and examples.

- **Expository writing** is an *unbiased* written explanation of a subject and is based upon the close reading of a text, including primary documents. It models the formal characteristics of a paper in that it has a hypothesis, develops an idea and uses evidence. Expository writing is useful for building writing skill.

Example: *Explore how declining college-going rates for American males may affect the nation's culture and economy.*

Consider evaluating this type of paper based upon the strength of the thesis and following argument, use of text, analysis and thematic development.

- **Research writing** refers to research for professional purposes. Research writing may be a representation of an actual research project (i.e. a case study) where something is measured. For undergraduates, this form usually represents a heavily researched (library) paper that requires multiple secondary sources from journals in databases. Research writing typically is discipline-specific.

Your writing prompt should be thorough as this is a high-stakes assignment: it should ask students to state a focused research question, conduct primary research (if a primary research paper), to do secondary (library) research such as a literature review, to develop a coherent argument and, if a primary research paper, to develop a hypothesis, methods and discussion sections. Research generates conclusions based on the analysis of evidence that is measurable.

Example: *Does ethnic identity change among minority students depending upon college attendance?*

Consider evaluating this type of paper based upon a variety of criteria: the strength of the thesis, use of supporting sources, use of language including paraphrasing and citation formatting, organization, clarity, and acknowledgement of particular writing conventions particular to a discipline. If a primary research paper, then the strength of the methods and discussion argument assume critical importance.

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- **Narrative writing** tells a story by asking a student to relate a personal experience. This less formal writing response is a good way to build low-stakes writing into the curriculum.
Example: *Sometimes we meet someone who, unknown to us, will become to us later in our lives. Describe the time you first met someone who later became very important to you—and how that person figured so largely later on.*

Consider evaluating this type of paper based upon creativity, originality, thematic development, use of voice, tone, and language.

- **Literary response** is a written response to a work of literature using literary methods. You might evaluate this type of prompt based upon development, organization and use of language.
Example: *In some works of literature, a character who appears briefly, or does not appear at all, is a significant presence. Choose a literary work and write an essay in which you show how such a character affects action, theme, or the development of other characters. Avoid plot summary.*
3. **Send the right message.** Students will perform to the rubric. If you value organization of ideas and writing development over citation styling and mechanics, factor this into your scoring.
 4. **Allow students to grade themselves.** Before handing in an assignment, consider having students grade their own work. This may save you time grading.
 5. **Practice and revise prompts.** Following an assignment take a look at your course grades and note the common mistakes that students made. Consider adjusting your rubric to reflect that criterion. This helps your future students and you.