

WRITING CENTER TIP SHEET

Paper Writing Strategies

Understanding the Assignment

The key to writing a good paper is thoroughly understanding what it is you're supposed to write about. Paper assignments contain a wealth of information that will help you narrow your focus and economize your time.

Plan on spending at least 20 minutes examining your assignment before you begin any work on your paper.

1. Between the lines. Read the assignment carefully. Ask your instructor about any words or phrases that are unfamiliar to you. Make sure to make note of all parts of the assignment. Mark up the assignment sheet.

2. Word search. Look for the assignment's directive words. These tell you how to structure your paper and what type of material you'll need. Some examples:

Describe: To give an account of in speech or writing

Explain: To define; expound

Compare: To examine in order to note the similarities or differences of

Contrast: To set in opposition in order to show or emphasize differences

Illustrate: To clarify, as by use of examples or comparisons

Argue: To persuade or influence (another), as by presenting reasons:

Explore: To investigate systematically; examine

Consider: To form an opinion about; judge; To look at thoughtfully

3. Choose wisely. If you have the option to choose your own topic, make sure to pick one that you're interested in, otherwise you'll lose steam halfway through the paper. Be sure that the topic is narrow enough to realistically explore it in the paper (for example, if your assignment is 5 pages long, and you want to examine the History of Painting in Europe, it'll never happen). Unsure if your topic is too broad or too narrow? Ask for help in the Writing Center.

4. Break it down. Break the assignment down into realistic chunks to prevent procrastination. Figure out your best work habits: do you prefer to work on things a little at a time, or are you better with carving out large blocks of time for a project? Plan accordingly, then stick to your schedule.

5. Get help. If you're stuck on how to do research, what your introduction should be, how to organize, etc—don't wait—get help! Talk to your instructor or sign up for a Writing Center appointment. I guarantee you that 30 minutes in the Writing Center will save you up to two hours of time struggling with a paper!