What am I Supposed to Write About: Deciphering and Understanding Essay Prompts

**Essay Prompt Verbs**

**analyse** - Break an issue down into its component parts, study in depth, identifying, describing, and criticising in detail the main characteristics and how they interrelate.

**argue** - Make a case, based on appropriate evidence and logically structured for and/or against some point of view.

**assess** - Closely examine in a balanced way the value or importance of something, paying attention to positive, negative and disputable aspects or weaknesses, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own. State your own judgement clearly in the conclusion.

**clarify** - Simplify and make clear.

**comment on** - State clearly and in moderate fashion your opinions on the material in question. Support your views with reference to suitable evidence or explanations. Means more than "describe" or "summarize" and more likely implies "analyze" or "assess".

**compare** - Identify and discuss the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (and probably pointing out their differences as well).

**consider** - Express your thoughts and observations about something.

**contrast** - Point out and discuss the differences between two things (but probably identifying their similarities as well).

**criticize** - Give your judgement about a statement or a body of work as to the value or truth of something; explore its implications, discussing all the evidence which is available. Be specific in your examination and indicate the criteria on which you base your judgement, citing specific instances and arguments as to how the criteria apply in this case.

**define** - Set down the precise meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail to allow it to be distinguished from other similar things. Take note of multiple meanings if they exist.

**demonstrate** - Show how, and prove by giving examples.

**describe** - Give a detailed and comprehensive account of an idea or topic, or the sequence in which a series of things happened.

**develop** - Expand on something, taking it further.

**discuss** - Probably the most common term to appear in essay titles, usually requiring analysis and evaluation of evidence as well as weighing up arguments and drawing conclusions. Explore the implications and the advantages or disadvantages. Debate the case and possibly consider any alternatives. You are invited to say something interesting in response to the topic in question and can usually choose your own approach.

**distinguish** - Explain the differences between.

**elaborate** - Add further details to something.

**evaluate** - Emphasise the views of authorities as well as your personal estimation. Consider the value and importance of something and weigh up its different aspects, citing evidence and argument in support of your case.

**examine** - Enquire into, attempt to discover, investigate, look closely into something.

**expand** - Go into more detail.

**explain** - Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to describe and to analyze.

**explore** - Approach in a questioning manner, and consider from a variety of viewpoints.

**give an account of** - Describe in some detail, and explain fully.

**identify** - Pick out what you regard as the key features or important issues of something.

**illustrate** - Make clear and explicit by the discussion of specific examples or statistics to support your case.

**interpret** - Explain the meaning of something, make clear and explicit. Use your own judgement, experience, or opinion, perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing, or explaining a particular way of looking at it.

**justify** - Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion. Answer or refute the main objections likely to be made against them, probably including the need to argue a case.

**prove** - Demonstrate how something is true or false by presenting evidence.

**relate** - Show how things are connected, and how they possibly affect, cause, or resemble each other.

**state** - Present the main points in brief, clear form.
**Essay Types**

**The Expository Essay** - The main function of the expository essay is to explain, or to acquaint your reader with something; it can be used to describe, explain or present some information. In an expository essay, the writer explains or defines a topic, using facts, statistics, and examples. Because expository essays are based on facts and not personal feelings, writers don’t reveal their emotions or write in the first person. In order to write an expository essay, preparation and background research will be required. This will arm you with facts and information that will be subsequently conveyed to your reader. Expository writing will also require you to show understanding of the chosen topic — this is why many professors and tutors choose this essay type to check how well a student has mastered a given topic. In their most common form, expository essays will take about 5 paragraphs; however, classes and instructors may require them to be larger in size. No matter the size, an essay should at all times include an introduction and a conclusion — the body length may vary.

**Review/Evaluation** - A review may be either formal or informal, depending on the context. Its goal is to evaluate a specific piece, perhaps a novel or movie. This implies that the reviewer's personal opinion plays a significant role in the process. Despite a degree of subjectivity, a certain objective standard needs to be maintained and, as in a persuasive essay, your assertions need to be proved.

**The Research Essay** - The research essay leads you into the works of others and asks you to compare their thoughts with your own. Writing a research paper involves going to source material and synthesizing what you learned from it with your own ideas. You must find texts on the subject and use them to support the topic you have been given to explore. Since it is easy to become lost in a wilderness of outside material, you must take particular care in narrowing your topic.

**The Comparison and Contrast Essays** - The main purpose and function of compare and contrast essays is obvious — to find similarities and dissimilarities between two or more objects or things. This kind of writing requires the writer to be an observer; in most cases it doesn’t require scholarly research or any specific referencing. Such essays are mostly subjective in nature, and writers are required to come up with differences or similarities they are able to point out and analyze.

**Narrative Essays: Telling a Story** - In a narrative essay, the writer tells a story about a real-life experience. The narrative essay challenges students to think and write about themselves. When writing a narrative essay, writers should try to involve the reader by making the story as vivid as possible. The fact that narrative essays are usually written in the first person helps engage the reader. “I” sentences give readers a feeling of being part of the story. A well-crafted narrative essay will also build towards drawing a conclusion or making a personal statement.

**Descriptive Essays: Painting a Picture** - A cousin of the narrative essay, a descriptive essay paints a picture with words. A writer might describe a person, place, object, or even memory of special significance. However, this type of essay is not description for description’s sake. The descriptive essay strives to communicate a deeper meaning through the description. In a descriptive essay, the writer should show, not tell, through the use of colorful words and sensory details. The best descriptive essays appeal to the reader’s emotions, with a result that is highly evocative.

**Argumentative/Persuasive Essay** - The goal of the persuasive essay is to convince the reader to accept the writer’s point of view or recommendation. The writer must build a case using facts and logic, as well as examples, expert opinion, and sound reasoning. The writer should present all sides of the argument, but must be able to communicate clearly and without equivocation why a certain position is correct. When you pick a topic, you should avoid writing about issues that cannot be won, no matter how strongly you might feel about them. The five hottest topics of our time seem to be gun control, abortion, capital punishment, freedom of speech, and probably the most recent, euthanasia, or the right to die. If possible, avoid writing about these topics because they are either impossible to “win,” or because your instructor is probably sick of reading about them and knows all the pros and cons by heart (this could put you at a serious disadvantage).

**Rhetorical Analysis Essay** - A rhetorical analysis should explore the rhetorician’s goals, the techniques (or tools) used, examples of those techniques, and the effectiveness of those techniques. When writing a rhetorical analysis, you are NOT saying whether or not you agree with the argument. Instead, you’re discussing how the rhetorician makes that argument and whether or not the approach used is successful.

**Cause and Effect Essay** - The cause and effect essay explains the reasons of the event or interprets the consequences of the event. They are concerned with why things happen (causes) and what happens as a result (effects). It is a common method of organizing and discussing ideas.

**Classification Essay** - Classification essays rank the groups of objects according to a common standard. In this, a writer organizes, or sorts, things into categories. Classification is a convenient method of arranging data and simplifying complex notions.