Say What? Decoding your Instructor’s Assignment Sheet
by Shannon M. Dougherty

Understanding your instructor’s expectations is an important aspect of your college career and beyond. After all, no matter how hard we work on an assignment, failing to meet our instructor’s criteria usually results in a low grade.

Many students I meet in the Writing Center underestimate the importance of their instructor’s assignment sheet. I think it’s really important for students to realize that your instructor designs her own assignments – there isn’t a gigantic website of preformatted writing projects for your instructor to choose from! That means there’s a reason why your instructor wrote her directions as she did. Figure out that reason and you are well on your way to success.

The best time to begin decoding your professor’s priorities is during class. Often your instructor will share helpful tips or reminders when passing out the assignment sheet, so don’t stuff the assignment sheet in your backpack and wait for class to be dismissed. Instead, be sure to note any information your instructor emphasizes when they discuss the assignment. Don’t rely on your memory! When you get home, it may all be a blur.

Be sure to review the instructions the same day you receive them, even if you don’t have time to start the assignment right away. If anything is unclear, it’s best to discover that early so you have plenty of time to talk to your teacher.

Now, let’s look for clues in that assignment sheet. Think of yourself as an anthropologist or a detective, constantly asking yourself, “Why?” Why did your instructor use the verb “analyze” instead of “summarize”? What’s the difference between comparing ideas versus reflecting on them?

Verbs are, in fact, a very important clue in deciphering your assignment sheet. Let’s look at some common verbs you may see and what they mean. When in doubt, use your dictionary to get more insight as to what your instructor’s verb choices mean.

Analyze
According to www.dictionary.com, to analyze is “to examine methodically by separating into parts and studying their interrelations.” The #1 mistake students make with this type of assignment is summarizing, rather than analyzing, an assigned topic (like a movie or book). To avoid that mistake, make sure you are looking carefully at the relationship between the parts of a topic, not just writing about the topic itself.

Conjecture
Your job is to make a tentative judgment based on partial evidence. Basically, you’ll be stating your opinion and providing some backup from an information source to support your opinion.

Compare
This is often shorthand for “compare and contrast,” an assignment that expects you to show both similarities and differences between two entities. The Writing Center has a handout that gives more information about this type of essay.

Discuss
A quick visit to www.dictionary.com tells us that the second meaning of this word is “to examine or consider (a subject) in speech or writing.” Notice
Stump the Grammar Goddess

Dear Grammar Goddess ~

I thought it was an absolute no-no to begin a sentence with the conjunctions “and” or “but,” at least in professional writing. When I open the newspaper, though, or read a magazine article, I see this all the time! So what’s the scoop? Are we allowed to do this or not?

-- Curious in Chandler

Dear Curious,

This is a funny issue. Almost everyone can recall being taught not to start a sentence with a conjunction, but try to track the rule down in writing and it’s a different story.

The fact is, according to our friends at The Maven’s Word of the Day, “sentences beginning with ‘and’ or ‘but’ are found in English as early as the ninth century, in the Old English Chronicle, and such sentences can also be found in Shakespeare, the King James Bible, John Locke, Edmund Burke, Lord Macaulay, Charles Dickens, and others.” So relax — there aren’t any hard and fast rules about this practice.

But what you DO have to consider is whether beginning with a conjunction is the best choice. Watch out for incomplete sentences such as, “I have a cat. And a dog.” Make sure your sentence is complete and that beginning with a conjunction truly makes sense for what you are trying to convey.

Grammatically yours,

GG
Meet the Tutors!

Please join us in welcoming three new, talented tutors to the Writing Center:

Mike Callaway

My name is Micheal Callaway. You can call me Mike if you have the pleasure of crossing my path in the writing center. I am currently working on a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition/Linguistics (RCL) at ASU Main, where I teach ENG 101 and 102. If you don’t know what RCL is, don’t worry about it; I really don’t either. All I know is that they say I won’t make any money. I look forward to working with you.

Lisa Martin

I began teaching composition in 1998 while still working on my MA at California State University Hayward. After I graduated, I moved on to teach at Los Medanos Community College in the San Francisco, CA area. Last year, my husband and I moved to Arizona, and I started teaching here at CGCC in the fall of 2004. My experience at CGCC as a teacher led me to the writing center where I now have the opportunity to work individually with students from all disciplines. My work at the writing center thus far has been incredibly rewarding, and I look forward to seeing more students as the semester progresses.

Kate Weinkauf

I was born on a cold day in December… just kidding. I am originally from Wisconsin (and yes, I love cheese) where I was born and raised and earned my Bachelors degree in English. From there, I moved to Tempe to attend Arizona State University for my Masters degree in Ethnic American Literature. After I graduated from ASU, I headed out for Osaka, Japan where I lived and taught English for six months – it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I am currently teaching at ASU and SCC and enjoying my job as a tutor at the CGCC Writing Center. When I don’t have my nose buried in a book, I can be found in a Yoga class or cooking Thai food in my very messy kitchen. I look forward to meeting the students and faculty of CGCC, so come on down to the Writing Center and say hello!

Assert your right to make a few mistakes. If people can’t accept your imperfections, that’s their fault.
-- Dr. David M. Burns

The Archives

For more great information and handy writing tips, check out earlier editions of Writing Right @ CGCC, available at: http://www.cgc.maricopa.edu/learning/center/newsletter.shtml

Taking the Mystery Out of Citing Sources
(April/May 2005)

Organization… not just for closets!
(February 2005)

Getting Started
(October 2004)

Concluding Thoughts
(May 2004)

You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression
(April 2004)

Why Can’t We All Just Get Along? The Art of Argumentation
(February/March 2004)

Inaugural Issue
(December 2003)
The Writing Process: What’s Right For You?

Would you rather have a root canal than write a paper? If so, there’s a good chance that your writing process doesn’t match your learning style. Find the right process for you and you just might find writing papers to be easier and (dare we say it?) even enjoyable.

As you may (or may not) know, not all students learn the same way. Some are visual learners and can learn by watching. Auditory learners do best when given verbal instructions. And kinesthetic learners learn the most by doing, not watching or listening. While most of us can use all three learning styles to gain knowledge, we usually have a dominant style that’s best for us.

Here’s a few tips on how to adjust your writing process to your learning style. If you’d like to know more, check out the helpful handout “Learning Styles and the Writing Process” created by the University of Arizona’s Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center ~ www.salt.arizona.edu/proserv/writing/NGSTYLESPROCESS.doc

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<th>Visual Learners</th>
<th>Auditory Learners</th>
<th>Kinesthetic Learners</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Look at model papers</td>
<td>• Color-code information</td>
<td>• Read assignment aloud</td>
<td>• Use note cards, post-it notes and sheets of notes that can be moved around</td>
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<td>• Form a “mental picture”</td>
<td>• Talk about the assignment with other students, tutors, etc.</td>
<td>• Use audio information when possible</td>
<td>• Write down ideas and information</td>
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<td>• Organize physical activities around your project (like walking while brainstorming)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Organizing Information</th>
<th>Visual Learners</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Keep lists &amp; keep them visible</td>
<td>• Use patterns, colors and white space to organize information</td>
<td>• Have organized discussions</td>
<td>• Organize information in piles or columns</td>
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<td>• Use outlining &amp; listing features on your computer</td>
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<td>• Ask yourself questions</td>
<td>• Make a three dimensional representation of your paper</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Write down a thesis statement and topic sentence for each paragraph</td>
<td>• Change your physical location as you work on different sections of your paper</td>
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<tr>
<th>Drafting</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Use computer to keep your draft visually organized and neat</td>
<td>• Keep example of required citation method handy</td>
<td>• When in doubt, talk it out.</td>
<td>• Use a computer to create your draft.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Focus on one section or paragraph at a time as you draft</td>
<td>• Focus on one section or paragraph at a time as you draft</td>
<td>• Make your paper “sound clear” at first. Make it “sound academic” later.</td>
<td>• Take frequent breaks &amp; plan physical activity.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Read your topic sentences out loud.</td>
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<th>Revising</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Re-read your assignment</td>
<td>• Give your eyes a break between drafting and revision</td>
<td>• Have someone read your paper out loud.</td>
<td>• Outline a completed draft.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Outline your completed draft</td>
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<td>• Use a tape recorder or tutor to help you remember what you say.</td>
<td>• Take breaks.</td>
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<td>• Listen for transitions.</td>
<td>Look at different versions of your paper side-by-side.</td>
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Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

-- William Butler Yeats

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Did You Know?

Writing Centers in the News

As part of its America’s Best Colleges 2006 series, US News & World Report (USNews.com) included an article praising the role of writing centers in helping student writers make the transition from high school to college writing assignments.

Many students who are successful high school writers are baffled when their essays and writing projects earn less than stellar grades in college. Felicia Cote, a Stanford University freshman, had the same experience and decided to utilize the college’s writing center. “What they told me right off the bat was I had a problem with putting in superfluous evidence to prove my point,” Cote recalled in the article.

Cote continued using the writing center throughout the semester and found her writing and grades improved. She now visits a tutor two weeks before every paper’s due date. “If I don’t see how people are [responding to] my papers, then I’m not going to improve.”

Contrary to some students’ perceptions, writing centers offer far more than remedial coaching. At the CGCC Writing Center, students meet one-on-one with tutors to discuss any stage of the writing process. From brainstorming to refining outlines or smoothing rough drafts, tutors help students understand and navigate their teacher’s expectations.

But here’s a tip: don’t wait until the last minute. “You might receive some splendid advice,” says Lester Faigley, director of the writing center at the University of Texas-Austin. “But you won’t have time to act on it.”

Remember, good writing is revising and we can help. Having a good tutor who will respond to your writing can make writing easier and more effective. So come early and come often!