Identifying the Writing Task

Purpose: Upon completion of this activity, students will understand how to interpret paper prompts and how to look for key words when reading paper prompts. This DLA should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

1. Go to http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/688/01/ and read “Understanding Writing Assignments.”
2. Answer the following questions about the reading on a separate sheet of paper:
   - List the steps you should take when interpreting paper prompts.
   - Why is it important to read the entire prompt?
   - If you are confused about any part of the prompt, what should you do?
   - Why is it important to understand the purpose of a writing assignment?

3. Next, read the attached discussion from George Mason University Writing Center. This article discusses specific key words to look for in essay prompts. You should print those pages only if you feel they will be helpful to you.
4. Finally, look closely at the following essay exam questions. On this handout, underline or circle key words, as described in the two articles you have just read. Then, for each, tell what kind of a paper each prompt expects you to write. You should use the key words and categories discussed in the article “Understanding the Essay Question” from writingcenter.gmu.edu.

   Essay Exam Questions

   - Discuss how a particular work of music, literature, or art has inspired your life.
     Type of essay _____________________________________________________

   - Tell about a situation where you have not been successful and what you have learned from the experience.
     Type of essay _____________________________________________________

   - Anatole France said, "If 50 million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing." On what subject do you disagree with most people, and why?
     Type of essay _____________________________________________________

   - Independent people—those who rely on themselves rather than on others—get what they want through their own efforts. Interdependent people combine their efforts with
the efforts of others to achieve their goals. To be most effective, people need to be interdependent. People who do not think and act interdependently may achieve individual success, but they will not be good leaders or team players. (Adapted from Stephen R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.) Is it necessary for people to combine their efforts with those of others in order to be most effective?

Type of essay __________________________________________________________

- Unexpected challenges in our lives sometimes bring out the best in us. For example, we act heroically or courageously in emergencies, we are charitable when disasters affect our friends, or we are unselfish and patient when misfortune strikes our friends or relatives. Pick an instance in your own life when such a challenge stimulated in you a response that pleased you. Describe the situation, explain how you responded, and tell what you learned about yourself from the experience.

Type of essay __________________________________________________________

- The minimum wage in America has been the subject of debate for many years. Many people argue we should be careful about sharp increases in the minimum wage because of the resulting inflation (higher labor costs equal higher consumer prices) and layoffs. Others believe the minimum wage is too low to support a family and should be raised to keep up with the cost of living. Write an essay analyzing and evaluating these opposing views on the minimum wage. You may include personal experience, knowledge, or observations.

Type of essay _________________________________________________________

5. Before reviewing your answers with an instructor or tutor, use the space below to write any questions you still have:

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

6. Review your answers and any questions you have with an instructor or tutor. When finished, please have that person sign and date this form.

Attach a confirmation sheet or get a signature below:

Instructor Signature: _______________________________ Date: __________________________
Understanding the Essay Question
From writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/handouts/Understanding_the_Essay_Question.pdf

Most essay prompts include key words. Learning to “decode” these key words can clarify your writing aim for any particular assignment. Key words can also suggest the details your essay should include and strategies for how you might organize your paper. Key words can usually be found at the beginning of your assignment prompt/question, but they can also be found in the middle. It would be helpful to read your assignment carefully, underline key words, and refer back to the assignment as you outline, draft, and finish your essay.

**Key Words: Compare, Evaluate Writing Aim:** differences vs. similarities. What does it mean? Look for differences and similarities in your material. Why is each point important to the material?

**Key Word: Contrast Writing Aim:** differences or disparities. What does it mean? This is similar to comparing, except you look ONLY at the differences.

**Key Words: Describe, Explain Writing Aim:** illustrate or tell, give details. What does it mean? Write about the most important aspects of the topic. Give background information, content information, and analysis as necessary. Focus on the “how” and “why” of your subject. Depending on the prompt, you might have to provide information within a specific context (e.g. information about a current event in relation to a historical event).

**Key Words: Discuss Writing Aim:** talk about, look at, observe. What does it mean? Prompts beginning with this key word usually ask you to write about a certain topic within a specific context. Begin by deciding how you will approach the topic, or what exactly you want to say about the topic. Once you have your "angle," focus your argument on validating this angle.

**Key Words: Interpret, Examine Writing Aim:** decode, decipher, figure out. What does it mean? Translate what something means. What do you understand the material’s message to be? What details helped you come to that conclusion?

**Key Word: Argue Writing Aim:** persuade or convince. What does it mean? Take a stand towards an issue and write to convince your audience of your viewpoint.

**Key Word: Analyze Writing Aim:** look at strengths and weaknesses. What does it mean? What are the strengths and weaknesses in the material? Why were those choices made (by the author, participants in a historical event, etc.)?

**Key Word: Reflect Writing Aim:** compare to personal experience. What does it mean? Write about the material and connect it back to a personal experience so that a general audience can relate and understand.
**Example prompts and what they ask you to write about**

Reflect on Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.
What does the speech mean to you? What personal experiences have you had that connect you to the speech?

Analyze the characters of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice in the context of modern feminism.
What are the strengths and weaknesses of the novel in terms of modern feminist ideas? Do the female characters prescribe to those ideas? The male characters?

Describe photosynthesis.
What is photosynthesis? Why is it important? If necessary, describe how the process was discovered (and by whom).

Argue against the recent Supreme Court decision that reversed DC’s ban on handguns.
Why was the Supreme Court wrong in their decision? What evidence – from texts, the Constitution, current events, and prior legal cases – prove that the Court should have made the opposite decision?

Contrast Freud’s views on dreams with Jung’s.
How are Freud’s and Jung’s ideas different?

Interpret J.K. Rowling’s decision to end the Harry Potter series by writing about the characters 19 years into the future.
Why do you think the author ended the series by writing into the future? If she had remained in the present, what effect would that have had on the series? What questions raised by the series are answered by the author’s decision?