

Grab-and-Go Writing Activity: Decoding Writing Prompts

LeAnne Teruya

*Department of Geology
San José State University*

Timeframe: 15 minutes

Materials needed (including preparation):

- Sample writing prompt handout
- Writing prompt for essay assignment handout
- Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt” handout
- PowerPoint slides

Objectives: After the activity, students will be able to

- articulate the objectives and expectations/tasks of the writing assignment.
- identify the rhetorical mode required for the writing assignment (e.g., argumentation, comparison/contrast, cause/effect)

Introduction: [2 minutes]

- Explain the purpose of the activity:
 - learn how to decipher a writing prompt.
 - become aware that writing with a purpose (knowing the writing objective for an assignment) makes it easier to know how to structure an essay and what kinds of details to include.
- Outline steps in the activity: an overview of key words, a sample prompt worked on together as a class, and an actual prompt worked on in groups.
- Explain learning objectives:
 - understand the writing objective of the assignment.
 - recognize which rhetorical mode would best be suited for the essay.

Procedures: [10-11 minutes]

Step 1: Set up [2 minutes]

- Pass out the three handouts.
- Refer to “Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt” and explain that the *key words* and *words that indicate tasks or expectations* will be used to decode (unlock) the purpose for writing in essay prompts.
- Review the key words on the “Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt” handout.

Step 2: Model the activity [3 minutes]

- Project the sample writing prompt for the class to see.
- Ask the class to find key words in a sample writing prompt, using the handout “Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt.”
- Highlight or circle the key words found by the students.
- Ask the class to find words that indicate tasks or expectations, and then underline those words for the students to see.
- Discuss the results and show the class how the marked words indicate the writing objective of the assignment and the rhetorical mode most suited for the purpose of writing.

Step 3: Hands-on Activity [7 minutes]

- Have students will work in groups to decode the actual prompt for the essay assignment.
- Each group should determine the writing objective and rhetorical mode most suited for achieving the purpose for writing.
- Have all groups report back on the objectives of the writing assignment and the rhetorical mode that will be used to write the essay.
- Comment on the reports and summarize the writing objectives and the proper rhetorical mode to use for the essay.

Closure/Evaluation: [2 minutes]

- Refer the students to the writing resources listed at the bottom of the “Decoding a Writing Prompt” handout.
- Answer any questions students may have.

Activity Analysis:

This activity gets students thinking about the purpose and mode of writing before beginning to write. Knowing the objectives (arguing, reporting, explaining, instructing, etc.) of the essay will help students know how to structure their essays and what details to include. This activity scaffolds the process of deciphering a writing prompt by first modeling the process with student input, and then providing practice working in groups, before tasking students to apply these skills individually.

A weakness in this activity is time. Students may be slower at decoding than the time allows, and with the brevity of the activity, students will not get much practice in decoding writing prompts before being asked to decode the writing prompt for actual class essay. It may be helpful to hand out and ask the students to read over the “Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt” prior to the activity. This exercise can be applied to writing prompts in any discipline.

Sample Essay Prompt

Earthquake Analysis

An earthquake has just occurred. Based upon the epicenter and the information provided, build a hypothesis that describes the cause of the earthquake. How would you test this hypothesis? Extrapolate the implications of this earthquake with regard to the seismic hazard in the surrounding region.

Practice Decoding the Prompt:

1. Highlight or circle key *action words*.
2. Underline words that indicate *tasks or expectations*.
3. Decide upon the purpose for writing/writing objective.

4. List the tasks and expectations (“musts” to include in essay).

Clues for Decoding a Writing Prompt

The Goal: Determine the Purpose for Writing: The purpose for writing (writing objective) and the paper topic will determine the organization and structure of your essay. Once you identify the writing objective, the structure and organization will be clear. Some common purposes for writing include

- arguing
- explaining
- instructing
- reporting

1. Locate Key Words: The key to finding the purpose for writing is in the *action verbs*. Look for the following action verbs and phrases that direct you to the purpose for writing.

- *Explain* = expose (tell me what you know--enlighten me)
- *Examine* = explain/expose with a purpose
- *Build a case* = assemble evidence = argumentative/persuasive
- *Take a stand* = argumentative/persuasive
- *Decide* = take a stand = argumentative/persuasive
- *Describe* = expose = enlighten me
- *Discuss the extent* = argumentative/persuasive
- *Discuss whether or not* = argumentative/persuasive
- *Why* = explain (may be argumentative/persuasive)
- *How* = explain how to = expository
- *How* = explain why = argumentative/persuasive
- *Relate* = draw a connection = comparison = apply your knowledge
- *Determine* = make a decision = argumentative/persuasive
- *Trace* = explain from a historical viewpoint

2. Find words that indicate Tasks or Expectations: These words define the types of information or organization that the instructor will be looking for in your essay.

- *Include*
- *Support*
- *Incorporate*
- *Apply*
- *Compare/Contrast*
- *Summarize*
- *Illustrate*
- *Define*
- *Extrapolate* = apply your knowledge
- *Relate* = demonstrate your knowledge through using comparison

For more detailed information on writing objectives and decoding writing assignments, refer to the following websites:

- http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/everydaywriter5e/default.asp#798016_834618
- <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/understanding-assignments/>
- <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/writingresources/onlineresources/>
- <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/argument/>

Geology 2 Essay Assignment



ROCK SOLID CONSULTING

You are a geologist with Rock Solid Consulting. Your job is to investigate and make recommendations to clients needing geological advice. In this particular case, your client is considering the purchase of several properties and needs advice on which properties to buy.

Assignment:

Read the description of each property and assess whether or not the property is worth purchasing. Explain the geological setting of each property. Discuss the **geological** pros and cons of each property and weigh them against any other factors you can think of, such as beauty, convenience, investment value, and sentimental value. State which properties are worth fighting for, and which are not.

Decode this prompt:

1. Highlight or circle key action words.
2. Underline words that indicate tasks or expectations.
3. Decide upon the purpose for writing/writing objective of this assignment based on what you have highlighted, circled, and underlined?

4. List the tasks and expectations (“musts” to include in the essay).



How to Decipher a Writing Prompt

LeAnne Teruya

Find the Purpose for Writing

- o The Writing Objective
- o Key Words
- o Tasks and Expectations



Sample Essay Prompt

Earthquake Analysis

An earthquake has just occurred. Based upon the epicenter and the information provided, build a hypothesis that describes the cause of the earthquake. How would you test this hypothesis? Extrapolate the implications of this earthquake with regard to the seismic hazard in the surrounding region.

Geology 2 Essay Prompt

Context

- o You are a geologist at Rock Solid Consulting.
- o Your job is to investigate and make recommendations to clients needing geological advice.
- o Your current client is considering the purchase of several properties and needs advice on which properties to buy.

Decode the Assignment

Assignment

Read the description of each property and assess whether or not the property is worth purchasing. Explain the geological setting of each property. Discuss the **geological** pros and cons of each property and weigh them against any other factors you can think of, such as beauty, convenience, investment value, and sentimental value. State which properties are worth fighting for, and which are not.

Summary

- o Purpose for Writing?

- o Report

- o Argumentative

- o Tasks and Expectations

- o Explain the geology.

- o Show and assess both sides (pros and cons).

- o Make recommendations.