

LUC WRITING CENTER - “HOW TO UNDERSTAND A PROMPT”

What is a prompt?

A prompt consists of **1-3 sentences raising an issue, or asking a question that you will have to respond to in an essay**. Most prompts are given out by your teacher as part of timed exams or as essay prompts for an assignment. During a timed exam, you will be given a sheet of paper containing a prompt, and must write an essay in response within a certain amount of time. Prompts assigned as take-home or assignment essays should be written and turned in to your teacher by the specified due date.

What is the best strategy for understanding a prompt during a timed exam?

Writing in response to a prompt has the effect of focusing your thoughts on a specific issue that has been chosen for you. **You are expected to express your opinion based on facts or quotes from texts**. It is important to *understand the prompt, think quickly, and formulate an argument* so that you can begin writing the essay as soon as possible.

Note: You don't want to spend an hour trying to understand the prompt and fail the assignment. If this does happen, **turn in your rough essay outline to your teacher**, as this **may save part of your grade**. Also, if you can't finish your essay in the given amount of time, **write a brief summary of what you would have gone on to say and how you would have concluded your paper**.

How do I start engaging with a prompt?

It's a great idea to read the prompt as soon as possible, so that you can start thinking about the subject. **Each prompt contains a question or issue that you must address in an essay**. *Underline the question or issue*, and begin formulating an opinion. If a work of literature or author's opinion needs to be considered, think about **quotes** you remember that agree with or differ from your opinion. This will support your argument.

I've read it. What do I do now?

- **Start asking yourself questions.** Ask: What kind of prompt is this? Does it want me to *compare and contrast two texts or events to find differences or similarities*? Does it want me to *take a stand on an issue*? Does it want me to *answer a question it is asking*?
- **Next, dissect the prompt.** Circle words you think are *significant, problematic*, or that *could be defined multiple ways*. If some words might *have different meanings, you could address this issue*.

Example prompt: Decide if Plato's *Allegory of the Sun* or *Allegory of the Cave* best describes the process of human enlightenment.

- In this example, you should underline the two texts so you know what you are contrasting, and who wrote the texts.
- Ask yourself what phrases like “best describes” could mean.
- What exactly is meant here by “the process of human enlightenment”?

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Now what?

Now you are ready to begin writing! **Outline the question/issue the prompt raises, and then write a one-sentence thesis that sums up your answer.** You could focus on the prompt for hours without coming any closer to formulating an argument.

Begin writing as soon as you've thought about the prompt, since your grade does, after all, depend on your essay. **Start by summing up your argument in the topic paragraph, making points in each paragraph's topic (first) sentence, and then supporting your argument with proof/quotes/facts from the text(s).**

Answer the prompt

Write your essay using the ideas you have developed. Make sure you cite the sources you use, such as philosophers, books, and theorists. **Keep looking at the prompt to guarantee that you are addressing all aspects of the question/issue in your response.**

Last Things to Check For

If you have time after finishing your essay:

- Look back at the prompt to see if you have answered the question/issue it raises.
- Your essay should provide a thoughtful, logical analysis of the specific question/issue.
- Your essay should cite information or use and explain quotations to support your argument.
- Make sure your paper is formatted according to your teacher's guidelines on the prompt, or course syllabus if this is a take-home assignment.
- Hand in or email your paper as your teacher has instructed (See "Turning in an Essay and/or Essay Portfolio").
- Be proud: you answered the question/issue! You RULED THAT PROMPT!