Understanding and Interpreting an Assignment

When you receive a written copy of an essay assignment, look it over carefully and read it through several times. As you read, ask yourself the following questions.

✓ What am I being asked to do in this assignment? What is my overall goal?

✓ What is my instructor’s overall goal for the assignment? How does this assignment relate to what we have covered in class and/or to what I have read? What points has my instructor emphasized?

✓ What sort of topic should I select in order to meet the requirements of the assignment?

✓ What types of writing styles, techniques, or skills am I being asked to use in this assignment?

Examples:
- Comparison/contrast
- Cause/effect
- Definition
- First person point-of-view
- Dialogue
- Imagery
- Active voice
- Varied sentence structures

✓ Who is my audience? What do they need to know?

✓ What are the technical requirements for the assignment (i.e. length, spacing, margins, font, sources, documentation style)?

As you ask yourself these questions, you might utilize the following techniques to aid in your interpretation of the assignment.

✓ Rephrase, in your own words, what is being asked and consider how you might respond.

✓ Highlight/underline/circle key verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.

✓ Refer to your assignment sheet continually as you draft your paper, making sure that what you are writing matches what has been requested.

✓ Most importantly—ask your instructor for clarification if you do not understand the assignment. Instructors welcome questions and have designated office hours for you to stop by and discuss assignments, essays, etc.

Another handout you may be interested in...

Effective Sentence Structure