



# Understanding an Essay Prompt

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*The MWC is a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative serving Northwest Vista College students, faculty, and the community through tutoring in writing skills, critical thinking, and building writing pedagogy. Effective writing is a cornerstone of education.*

The Center is located in Mountain Laurel Hall (MLH) 232  
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## What's the Point of an Essay?

Essays ask you to show mastery of **content (information)** and **communication**. An essay requires you to choose and assess sources, use them well, explain your understanding or argument, and clearly convey facts and critical thinking.

Essays allow you to show mastery of **content** and **communication** by:

- addressing the prompt
- answering all its questions
- using reputable sources, and
- making clear, thoughtful connections.

You show you know your facts and can explain arguments and concepts to others. Think of the assignment as a chance to teach a concept to another person.

## How do I Know the Specific Purpose of an Essay Assignment?

The purpose of a particular essay is found in the prompt – the assignment instructions. Some essays seem very broad, while others are very specific. The key is to know what the prompt *really* wants from you.

From a basic standpoint, you want to know whether the essay prompt wants you to research an event, person, or concept, to argue a point, or evaluate information. You may know these types of essays as **report, argument, or evaluation**.

***\*Your instructor may have different preferences or instructions in their essay prompts.  
Always follow your specific assignment instructions\****

## The Report or Research Essay

A **report, or research**, essay is a research-driven, explanatory assignment. You are finding and interpreting information in a structured and systematic manner.

This assignment requires you to categorize information in clear groupings that show you understand how the pieces of information relate to one another and can re-interpret the information for your reader.

A pure **report or research** essay requires you critically assess and analyze your information to properly categorize and explain it.

Examples of a **report or research** essay are:

- A prompt that requires an analysis of a primary research article, or of several primary research articles. This essay will typically ask you to find the articles, and describe them in a systematic way according to specific requirements. You may find this type of essay in a Psychology class.
- A prompt that requires a “deep-dive” on a topic, such as an essay for Biology that asks you to research the topic of vertebrate life forms.
- A prompt that requires a description of a process or topic, such as an essay for Chemistry that asks you to explain chemical iterations and experiments, or a Government essay that asks you to summarize the Bill of Rights of the Constitution.

***Words to look for: Explain, Categorize, Synthesize, Report, Research, Present***

### **The Argument Essay**

An argument essay is a critical analysis-driven, evidence and argument-based assignment. You are to adopt and defend an opinion or side of an argument. It likely requires the skills needed for the report or research essay, with the added requirement of proving a point using your categorized and interpreted information.

This type of assignment requires you to categorize, assess, and interpret information, and then use that information to support your argument on the issue presented in the prompt. You state a position, and defend that argument by explaining the “how” and “why” of your analysis.

Examples of an **argument** essay are:

- A prompt that requires you to argue one side or the other. You may find this assignment in a History class that may ask you to argue the major cause of the Civil War, or whether Progressive Era policies were effective.
- A prompt that requires you to make a choice or decision. You may find this assignment in a Government/Political Science class that asks you to make a policy choice on an issue, without comparing or contrasting the choices.

***Words to look for: Argue, Decide, Choose***

## **The Evaluation Essay**

An **evaluation** essay is a more complex critical analysis-driven, evidence and argument-based assignment. It requires you intertwine multiple points of contention that may appear to contradict. You are likely finding information, categorizing it, interpreting it, and evaluating (assessing) said information to argue a complex point. An **evaluation** essay takes the requirements of the **report or research** essay, and the **argumentative** essay, and uses them to integrate issues that are more complex in either concept (idea) or number.

Examples of an **evaluation** essay are:

- A prompt that requires you to argue the most important aspects of a topic. You may find this assignment in a Government class that may ask you to argue the most important or influential parts of the Constitution, or to analyze the question(s) of federal vs state authority.
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- A prompt that requires an analysis of a primary research article, or of several primary research articles, *and* an assessment of them for rigor, quality, or other points required by the instructions. You may find this assignment in many classes, such as Psychology, Biology, Government, or History.
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- A prompt that requires you evaluate a topic, concept, event, or person, or piece of writing and argue an assessment of that issue or work. You may find this assignment in a number of classes, such as a History, Government, Music, or Philosophy course. Expect to compare, contrast, and integrate multiple options or perspectives.

***Words to Look for: Consider, Evaluate, Explain, Assess***

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**Knowing an essay's purpose or objective is the foundational step to a successful assignment. Now that you know the major types, you can move forward with your writing.**

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