

Steps for interpreting and breaking down university assignments:

(1a) Try to determine the assignment's goals and purpose. Are these stated on the syllabus?

Is the assignment part of a sequence of assignments that work together to achieve the course's learning objectives?

(1b) Often a course's objectives include not only that students will demonstrate comprehension of course content, but also that they will develop or improve specific skills. **Carefully read the assignment (as well as the syllabus), adding annotations to highlight the skills the assignment requires you to develop and demonstrate.** If a grading rubric or checklist is provided, such guides may indicate the expected skills.

(2) Along with specific skills, assignments often ask or assume that students will display the ability to apply course methods, concepts, and/or theories to specific problems or tasks. **Study the assignment to discover what course methods/concepts/theories should or could be applied in completing the required writing.**

(3) Further analyze the assignment, circling key terms. What words indicate skills or activities required? Here are some examples of typical key words: *present, summarize, persuasively argue, critically analyze, demonstrate critical thinking, reconcile or synthesize, compare, evaluate, integrate research/sources into your argument, do close reading, use primary (or secondary) sources, use peer-reviewed articles, adhere to standards of academic integrity.* If you're not totally sure of what any of the key terms mean, or what skills/activities they indicate, see step 7. Keep in mind that many instructors see adherence to word limits as an important skill often required in professional and academic life beyond the undergraduate degree.

(4) Break down the assignment further by highlighting and numbering the parts and/or steps that will be necessary to complete it, along with the deadline(s). Is the written assignment explicit about those parts and/or steps (i.e., can you number them?)? If the parts and stages of the assignment are not fully stated, try using the online Assignment Calculator (see The Writing Centre: <http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/>).

(5) Determine what types of reading/research the assignment requires, along with any instructions about how to approach this aspect of the work. Does the assignment sheet recommend or require use of particular materials available in the UTSC Library or accessible online (through the UTSC Library catalogue/databases or at other websites)? If the course has a webpage or is supported by Blackboard, are library resources or instruction offered on those sites? Does the course have a LibGuide (see the UTSC Library's homepage: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utsc/>)?

(6) Annotate parts of the assignment that indicate conventions of academic writing that must be followed. Are there any indications of format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)? How much emphasis is placed on specific formatting, including use of a title page (or not), title, subheadings, and so on? Are there indicators of the type of style expected (e.g., language, use of "I" or passive voice, stress on conciseness)?

(7) After carefully analyzing and annotating the assignment, list the questions you have concerning any aspect of the assignment. Decide whether your questions can best be answered by your TA (if any), your instructor, or someone from The Writing Centre or the Library, and then make an appointment as soon as possible. The time you put into understanding your assignments—reading, annotating, and then formulating questions—will demonstrate your seriousness and motivation.

1. What is the assignment's purpose? How does it fit within course objectives and/or a sequence of assignments? What skills does the assignment require students to develop and demonstrate?

2. What course methods/concepts/theories should or could be applied in completing the assignment?

3. What are the assignment's key terms, indicating skills and activities required? Any word or page limits?

4. What are the assignment's parts, or what steps will be involved in completing the work? Can you number them? Would the online Assignment Calculator help? (Find it at The Writing Centre: <http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/>.)

5. What types of reading/research are required by this assignment? Are there specific instructions or research guides for this assignment or course (e.g., on Blackboard, the syllabus, a LibGuide, etc.)?

6. What conventions of academic writing must be followed in the final, submitted version of the written work? Does the assignment (or course syllabus) specify the type of style or format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)?

7. What remaining questions do you have that you'll need to discuss with your TA, your instructor, or someone from The Writing Centre or the Library?