

Reading an Essay Prompt

There are many different types of essays, some of which are quite similar in nature. Different books give these various essays different names, which can often cause confusion. The most important thing to remember, however, is not the name of the type of essay you are to write, but the *objective of the task you are given by the prompt*.

An essay **prompt** is the task you are given for the focus of your essay. A good prompt gives you clues about how to approach writing your essay.

- ▶ The first and most important key to understanding a prompt is to *fully read the entire prompt*. One mistake that many writers make is reading and responding to only part of the prompt. This immediately puts the writer at a disadvantage, because no matter how beautifully the essay is written, the writer did not fulfill the task given; this could lower his or her score *significantly*.
 - Example: *Compare and contrast the events of the Salem Witch Trials with the McCarthy Trials of the 1950s.*
 - It is important to note that the prompt instructs you to compare AND contrast the events. Just doing one or the other will lower your score.
- ▶ When reading a prompt, look for key words that suggest the type of essay you should be writing. Such words are *analyze, compare, contrast, argue, persuade, describe*, etc.
 - **Analyze**—Explain the *why* and the *how* of a topic
 - *Analyze the literary strategies Steinbeck used in Of Mice and Men to create its realistic setting and plot.*
 - **Compare**—Often used with *contrast*; find and analyze the *similarities* of a topic
 - *In a well-structured essay, compare the characteristics of a Cocker Spaniel with the characteristics of a Poodle.*
 - **Contrast**— Often used with *compare*; find and analyze the *differences* of a topic
 - *Contrast having a dog or a cat for a pet.*
 - **Argue or Persuade**—*Agree or disagree*, then support your opinion with evidence
 - *Many parents try to be their child's best friend, rather than a "parent." Many psychologists feel that children need guidance, rule-setting and rule-enforcement, rather than a friend. Write an essay in which you argue your opinion on the topic.*
 - **Describe**—Present details which will create an *image* in the reader's mind
 - *With details and imagery, describe the worst day you've ever had.*