

Understanding Your Professor's Expectations

If you find yourself uncertain what your professor's expectations are, there are several things you can do to get the clarity you need:

Tips for outside the classroom:

- Analyze the prompt and/or rubric.** Read through your prompt carefully. Underline or highlight any words that strike you as particularly important. Make yourself check lists of tasks the assignment is asking you to complete.
- Analyze the syllabus.** Look through your syllabus for any relevant information. Underline or highlight anything that helps clarify your task at hand.
- Check blackboard.** Sometimes professors post relevant information online. Check the website for any instructions, power point slides, links, etc. that might clarify your assignment.
- Analyze other relevant course materials.** If you have any handouts, notes, or even sections of your text that might relate to the assignment, read through them carefully. Underline or highlight any sections that are particularly helpful.
- Email your professor.** Send a polite email to your professor asking him/her to clarify. Be as specific as you can in your email. Clearly state what it is that you DO understand and why (i.e. "It states in the prompt that we're supposed to write a clear argumentative thesis."). This shows your professor that you've put an effort into understanding the assignment on your own. Then identify the confusion (i.e. "I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be an open or a closed thesis.")
 - *See the back of this handout for a template and sample email.*
- Go see your professor during office hours.** If you feel like you function better in a live conversation rather than in written text, go see your professor during his or her office hours. Bring a paper and pen or a laptop/tablet so you can take notes. If you're not available during your professor's office hours, send him or her a quick email with your availability and ask if you could arrange a time to meet.

Tips for in the classroom:

- Take notes.** Often professor give lots of instructions and guidance orally in class. Take notes while they are talking. This gives you an extra resource to refer to and analyze (even highlight and underline) when you're trying to sort out confusing elements later.
- Ask questions.** If you find yourself confused in class, don't be afraid to raise your hand and ask for clarification. Especially if your teacher asks if everything is clear or if you have any questions. Speak up.
- Talk to the professor after class.** If your question is one that only applies to you, or if you feel uncomfortable asking questions in class, then stay at the end of class to ask the professor in person. As always, be as specific as you can in asking your question.

Template for an Email to Your Professor

1. Give your professor an appropriate salutation (Dear Professor -----,)
2. Identify your confusion very generally. Tell your professor what concept or assignment you're seeking clarification on.
3. Tell your professor what you do know. To avoid wasting his/her time in clarifying things you already know, briefly mention the related concepts or instructions that are clear to you.
4. Tell your professor why. Briefly cite your sources informally. Explain that this information was clear to you from their lecture on a particular day, the syllabus, a specific handout etc.
5. Ask them to clarify the point(s) in question.
6. Specify why you're confused. If there are contradictions you see between various documents, point them out. If there's a lack of information that led to your confusion, tell your professor where you looked to find the information.
7. Politely thank your professor for his/her time.
8. Sign your email.

Sample Email

Dear Professor Jones,

I'm writing because I'm not sure what you want our thesis to look like in our upcoming comparison essay. I know that you want a closed thesis, as you stated in the Comparison Essay assignment prompt, but I wasn't sure how many points you wanted. You mentioned in your lecture on Thursday that the thesis should have 3 points, but then I was looking through the sample essay you gave us, and the thesis only has 2 points ("*The Secret Life of Bees* is a much darker version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* because (1) it has a darker tone and (2) few redeeming characters.") Could you please clarify how many points we should have in our theses?

Thanks for taking the time to help me with this.

Sincerely,

Jasmine Miller