

# Designing Writing Prompts

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## Goal

Create writing prompts that provide students with both motivation *and* direction to produce more successful writing. These prompts can be used for short- or long-answer exam items, or for large, long-term assignments.

## Rationale

Designing (or redesigning) the prompts we use to get students to write is just as hard as the work we are asking students to do! Fortunately, there are some useful elements that can help us build more successful prompts.

## Directions

1. Start by collecting material that you could include in your prompt using these elements:
  - Topic: what does the writing need to be *about*?
  - Context: what situation or background should the writing fit *within*?
  - Action: what does the writing need to *do* for readers?
  - Hints, Suggestions, or Stipulations: what parameters or approaches *can*, *should*, or *must* the writing follow?

Here's an example from a history class:

- Topic: results of the French Revolution
  - Context: our reading and discussion of France during the 10 years before, the years of the revolution, and the 10 years immediately after
  - Action: discuss in terms of predictability
  - Hints, Suggestions, or Stipulations: *must* refer to one of the writings we read; *may* want to contrast predictable vs. unpredictable; *could* consider which is more interesting or important
2. Shape the prompt from a reader's perspective, just as you would like to see students shape their responses. Move from general context toward key action—the thing they have to do or they haven't done what they have to do!

Here are a couple of examples, with the elements marked as shown above:

- A. During the last few weeks, you have read about and discussed events taking place during three periods surrounding the French Revolution: 10 years before, during the revolution, and 10 years after. Some of the results of the revolution—including ones that happened immediately—were clearly predictable; but others were not. Making specific reference to one of the writings we have read, discuss both predicted and unpredicted results of the French Revolution.

- B. Which are more historically significant: **predictable results** or unpredictable ones? We have read and discussed a number of writings about the years before, during, and after the **French Revolution**; each of these writings has addressed results of the revolution. Choose *one* of these writings and discuss how predictability affects the weight or historical significance given to one or more results presented in the writing.

## **Results**

Creating writing prompts using this system helps with evaluating the writing produced as well as providing insight into how students analyze and respond to questions.

### ***Evaluation***

You might assign points for how effectively the writer achieves the action, as well as noting how thoughtfully the writer uses the suggestions or context provided, and how completely the writing meets any stipulations.

### ***Insights***

You may find that, across an entire classroom, students interpret a prompt to request a regurgitation of what they read rather than tackling and achieving the required action. So, their writing demonstrates less what they know and can do and more what they are willing to attempt—as well as their failure to accurately analyze the prompt.

## **Alternate Ways to Use These Tools**

1. This set of tools works extremely well to discuss and demonstrate to students how to analyze, plan for, and create a response to a writing prompt—either before a writing situation or as a follow up with a set of evaluations.
2. These tools can also help in “weighting” prompts differently throughout a semester. In the early part of the term, you can provide more hints or suggestions to encourage students and provide more assistance. Later in the term, you might rely solely on stipulations, challenging students to come up with their own angle of approach.
3. Once students learn about these tools, you can assign them to create sample writing prompts for exam preparation—either by making lists of the elements, or by taking your list of elements and creating various prompts using the “pieces” you’ve provided.
4. You can also create several closely related prompts on the same topic by varying the ways you combine, add, and remove elements. So, for instance, if you need a prompt for a “make-up” exam, you can reshape one from the existing exam and still examine the student on the same topic.
5. These tools work really well for analyzing your existing writing prompts to find out what they might be missing—which can go a long way toward figuring out why students have not been successful in responding to them. Sometimes the addition of a clear context, or a specific stipulation, will turn a weak prompt into an excellent one.