

Deconstructing a Prompt

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Marking the Text, Graphic Organizer, Word Map, Think-Pair-Share

Writing prompts often contain many details but little direction. It is easy to get caught up in the details and forget the main task. You may write an excellent response with flawless syntax, but if you do not respond to the prompt, you will not receive a high score. This activity offers guidance in deconstructing—or reading, analyzing, and understanding—writing prompts.

When considering any prompt, look for five basic parts. Most if not all the parts will be present. Finding as many as you can will help you figure out what you need to do and how to respond to the prompt correctly.

Five Parts to Look for in a Writing Prompt

1. **Subject:** What is the subject you need to write about? A well-written prompt will identify the subject, but it may be vague. For example, a prompt might tell you to think of a childhood experience. What common themes or ideas (either implicit or explicit) are associated with the subject?
2. **Speaker:** Who is writing the answer? (You are, but are you writing it as a student, a citizen, an authority?) The prompt should tell you who you are as the writer.
3. **Type of Essay:** What kind of response are you writing—expository, persuasive, **synthesis**, personal narrative? An effective prompt must tell you the type of writing you need to do. It may give you a choice. Choose wisely.
4. **Task:** What is the prompt asking you to do? For example, your task may be to take a stand on an issue and write a five-paragraph persuasive essay. Read the details carefully to identify exactly what you need to do.
5. **Hints:** Does the prompt give you suggestions to get started? The prompt may suggest ideas to think about or literary devices to identify and analyze.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Synthesis is the act of combining ideas from different sources to create, express, or support a new idea.

Identify all the parts in the four prompts below. You may use different colored markers to highlight different parts in each prompt. The first prompt may be done together as a class. Afterward, complete the remaining prompts.

Prompt 1: Think of something at your school that you would like to change in order to create a more positive learning environment. The change could affect anything from a policy or procedure to an attitude or tradition. In a well-organized persuasive letter, write to an adult at your school presenting the problem, your solution to that problem, and why the environment would change.

Subject:

Speaker:

Type of Essay:

Task:

Hints:

Prompt 2: Contemporary life is marked by controversy. Choose a controversial local, national, or global issue with which you are familiar. Then, using appropriate evidence, write an essay that carefully considers opposing positions on this issue and proposes a solution or compromise.

Prompt 3: The following is a mock press release from *The Onion*, a publication devoted to humor and satire. Read the article carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the strategies used in the article to satirize how products are marketed to consumers.

Prompt 4: Choose a character from a text you have read (not necessarily the **protagonist**) whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions by two compelling desires, ambitions, obligations, or influences. Then, in a well-organized essay, identify each side of the conflict and examine the reasons for the conflict, the conflict's resolution, and how this conflict illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole.



WORD CONNECTIONS

Synthesis contains the root *-thes-*, from the Greek word *thesis* meaning “put, place, or set.” This root also appears in *hypothesis*, *photosynthesis*, and *antithesis*. *Syn-* is a prefix, meaning “with or together.”

LITERARY TERM

A **protagonist** is the main character of a fictional story.