

Understanding the Essay Prompt

All APUS essays are written in response to an essay “prompt” so understanding what is being asked is imperative. The first task is to read the entire prompt as written. Do not skim or only read enough to think you know what you are being asked to do. This is especially important if the prompt contains two sentences. The first mistake many students make is reading and answering only part of the prompt.

After reading the entire prompt, circle or underline all verbs.

Given this prompt: “How successful was organized labor in improving the position of workers in the period from 1875 to 1900? Analyze the factors that contributed to the level of success achieved.”

The most important (and guiding) verb is in the second sentence: ANALYZE. Remember, the verb is your command word. Refer to your “Essay Command Words” sheet for information on tasks expected with commonly used verbs.

Once verbs are identified, mark any conjunctions.

For instance “Compare and contrast US foreign policy after the First world War and after the Second World War. Consider the periods 1919-1928 and 1945-1950.

You must compare AND contrast both 1919-1928 AND 1945-1950 to successfully complete the task. Addressing only one will lower your score.

Define any terms in the prompt that need explaining.

A recent prompt asked students to assess the validity of this statement: “Reform movements in the United States sought to expand democratic ideals.”

In this case, the writer should list specific “democratic ideals” and explain how they are democratic.

Clearly understand and address the era/time in the prompt. If the prompt asks for a discussion of reform between 1865 and 1900, the entire period must be addressed. An easy way to insure this is to begin by listing information from the last ten years and then work backward (change over time – how we got there – what led up to the information listed).

Once the task (analyze, evaluate, etc) is clear, create a quick outline laying out the response. This is important to guarantee the entire prompt is addressed. An “outline” in this case can take many forms including webbing, double columns notation, etc.

In short

- read the whole prompt
- identify/mark both verbs and conjunctions in the prompt
- think about the verb – identify what is being asked by that specific verb
- organize your thoughts before beginning to write