

BREAKING DOWN PROMPTS IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

What is a prompt? It could be an essay question in an English class, a word problem in Math, or the instructions on and method of writing a Science lab. This worksheet is designed to walk you step-by-step through the break down process using purpose based prompts, hopefully so you can understand and answer any prompt you come across. *The sample prompts used in this handout can be found in the River Reader 12th ed.*

Purpose Based Prompts focus on narration and description, and may ask you to identify moments in the text where important details were introduced **or** explained. Their secondary purpose is to highlight and support analysis or argument. When reading and responding to purpose based prompts, consider the following steps: Rereading, Identifying Key Terms, Asking Information, Telling Information, Using the (Con)Text.

#1

Step One is **rereading**, meaning you should *read the prompt multiple times*, at least twice, **before** responding to the question. Each time you re-read the prompt, you will come away with information you potentially missed the first time.

#2

Step Two is **identifying key terms**. As you read through the prompt underline the key terms, as well as any terms you don't know. Define the terms you don't know, and research the key terms in the class assigned text (article/poem/story). If you don't have access to a dictionary, define the words using context in the prompt and class assigned text.

#3

Step Three, **“asking” information** is information that is primary to the prompt and the text, meaning it is the *main information*. In prompts, this type of information asks a question or makes a statement. Some prompts ask multiple questions, or rhetorical questions, to encourage deep thought in the reader, each of which leads to the central question. When breaking down a prompt, determine which information is **central** to the text/question.

Dictionary.com defines keywords as “significant or memorable word(s) or term(s) in the title, abstract, or text of a document.” They can be found in the textbook, article, poem, or short story and are usually at the top of the page, section, or are bolded within a paragraph.

But beware, that is NOT always the case; one of the keywords in Dictionary.com's definition is **memorable**, meaning these terms can appear **anywhere** and are often catchy. Keywords can signal the reader to other material in the text or prompt.

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#4

Step Four, “telling” information is considered secondary information because it supports the primary information. In a prompt, the secondary information may hint at where to find the correct evidence in the text, and can also be in the form of those multiple questions which encourage deep thought in you, the reader.

#5

Step Five is using the (con)text, or reading for context. Think of “frame of reference,” aka the assumptions and prior knowledge we bring to the text, when you see the word context. Also consider how each part of the sentence informs the other parts - does any information work to explain other information? If so, what is it explaining or referencing?

Before reading, ask yourself these two questions: “what do I already know about this topic?” and “what did I think of this topic before reading the prompt or textbook?” The *second question* is inquiring about any preconceived notions or stereotypes that you, the reader, have about the topic of the prompt.

Understanding how to use and read for context is important to breaking down any prompt, but especially ones on a test where access to sources is prohibited. The more information you can bring to the prompt, the more developed your response will be.

STILL CONFUSED?!?!

If you’ve completed these steps and still have questions, consider writing an email to your Professor, attending their office hours, or scheduling a tutoring session at the ISC.

WHEN YOU GO TO YOUR PROFESSOR:

- bring a copy of the assignment with you
- bring a copy of the text/resources with you
- Write down your questions so they are clear and concise

Sources

“Everything You Need To Know About College Writing” by Lynne Drury Lerych and Allison DeBoer Criswell

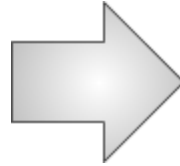
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Example Prompt Breakdown/Analysis

Sample ENG 141 Prompt: Compare and contrast two poems about wives. How does the tone of each differ? How does each poet create the effect? Cite several specific lines/moments to support your assertions. Focus specifically on alliteration and metaphor.

Step 1

When reading the prompt for the second time, you might notice the third question or the final statement which directs the student to focus on two specific poetic devices.



Steps 2 + 3

Words you might not know might include **alliteration, metaphor, assertions, effect**. Highlight or underline these words, then define them. The *keywords* in this prompt are **compare/contrast, tone/differ, focus/ alliteration/ metaphor**. These words are also the *primary information* and are asking you to respond in a specific way.

*How does each poet create the effect?
Focus specifically on alliteration and metaphor.*



Step 4

The *secondary information* in this prompt is **two poems on wives** which tells you which types of poems to choose (although it's arguable that this information is also considered primary information), **creating/effect** indicating what to focus on in those poems, and **cite/support lines/moments** which indicates textual evidence is required.

Compare and contrast **two poems about wives**. How does the tone of each differ? How does each poet **create the effect**? **Cite** several specific **lines/ moments** to **support** your **assertions**. Focus specifically on alliteration and metaphor.



Compare and **contrast** two poems about wives. How does the **tone** of each **differ**? How does each poet create the **effect**? Cite several specific lines/moments to support your assertions. Focus specifically on **alliteration** and **metaphor**.

Step 5

Reading for context might include your prior knowledge of the poems, how each author uses tone, the way effect is created in each poem, specific lines/titles and how the professor/students analyzed those lines during class. This also might include your general or specific knowledge and use of alliteration or metaphor.