What, Why, and How?

3 PAPER TOPICS

Text-Based Approach
General Paper Guidelines
Types of Paper Topics
  - Creating your own
  - Breaking down assignments/prompts
WHAT IS A TEXT-BASED APPROACH TO PAPER TOPICS?

Paper topics are an instructor’s way to provide guidelines for writing essays. At Skyline College, the English composition classes are designed to teach text-based writing (also known as reading-based writing). Therefore, the paper topics are generally text-based which promote an understanding and analysis of the assigned reading. This means that students create essays that argue a point of view about the reading. In text-based writing, if you write an essay that does not mention the reading or directly examine the reading, it is off topic. However, text-based writing is not simply summarizing what you read. You will summarize parts of the reading to support your arguments, but summary should not take over your paper. In text-based writing, you will center the paper on an argument (thesis) that gives your opinion on and analyzes what you read. The body of the paper then provides evidence (from the assigned reading as well as other sources) and your own reasoning to prove and illustrate that argument.

WHY THIS APPROACH?

Text-based writing…

- applies what you read putting the information into long-term memory.
- promotes higher order critical thinking as it involves processing complex information and forming educated well-reasoned opinions on it.
- promotes advanced critical reading by requiring close, interactive reading.
- adds a scholarly authority to your writing as you react to, assess, and incorporate the views of others.
- develops confidence in forming your own position on the human condition and societal issues.
- helps writers relate texts to other texts and to their lived experiences applying the valuable skills of synthesis which allows readers to see important commonalities, patterns, and trends.
- makes you a better thinker, stronger reader, clearer writer, and more sophisticated scholar.
HOW DO I APPLY IT?
To be able to effectively respond to paper topics, you should know the following:

I. Follow standard paper guidelines and know expectations.

Paper topics come in all shapes and sizes, but in general for an English class, you can expect to find the following requirements:

- **Meet stated page length requirements.** Turning in papers that are under the required page length sends a message that the assignment was not taken seriously and that a lack of time, effort, and consideration was put into the project.

- **Adhere to due dates.** Plan ahead and break down the project into manageable stages, so you don’t cause yourself undue stress by doing things “last minute” or by hurting your grade through missing due dates and not being able to turn in assignments.

- **Use the stated paper formatting standards.** In an English class, the most common paper formatting approach is MLA. See Chapter 5 on MLA Conventions.

- **Follow the assignment.** It is essential that you follow the guidelines of the assignment or else you risk receiving little to no credit for your work. English classes are also teaching students how to successfully complete college-level tasks, so take some time in the beginning to ensure you are doing what was asked.

- **Apply writing standards in your paper.** This Rhetoric walks you through the fundamental essay components, so apply these concepts to your writing. There is also an Essay Checklist in Chapter 4 that you can use to ensure you have covered all the bases your instructor will be expecting in an academic paper.

- **Seek opportunities for additional help.** Writing can be an isolating experience but it does not have to be. Use campus resources to help you formulate your writing plan and to get outside perspective and feedback on your writing. You can visit your instructor during office hours at any stage in the writing process. You can also use the tutoring services offered in the Learning Center: http://www.skylinecollege.edu/learningcenter/index.php. Getting feedback is one of the most effective ways to focus and improve your writing.

II. Be prepared for different types of writing assignments.

When responding to and analyzing the written work of others, sometimes you will be asked to form your own response and to create your own paper topic on what you read. Other times, you will be given a writing assignment (also known as a writing prompt) by your instructor. It is important to have the skill of developing your own paper topic as well as being able to breakdown and follow the paper topics given to you. What follows is information on how to do both.
(1) Creating your own paper topics in response to texts:

If you are asked to create your own paper topic in response to the assigned reading, here are some easy steps you can follow to come up with an argument (thesis):

**CREATING YOUR OWN ARGUMENT:**

To arrive at a good topic and a strong thesis try this process:

- **Brainstorm** all the issues, ideas, and themes raised in the reading.
- Create complex **questions** using the journalist questions about the ideas raised in the brainstorm.
- **Answer** several of your best questions about the reading with your opinion.
- Deepen your answer by answering “**so what?**” So what is the significance? So what can be learned?
- Gather strong **supporting evidence** to illustrate and prove your argument.

This process is covered in more detail and with an example in the section “How Can I Create a Thesis” in Chapter 7.

(2) Breaking down and understanding writing assignments/prompts:

If you are given a writing assignment (also known as a writing prompt) then be sure to use techniques to effectively break down and fully understand that prompt before you begin the writing task. This will ensure you do not write off topic or miss important elements of the assignment.

It is essential to understand and identify key words within any writing prompt. Here are some commonly used command verbs used in prompts. It is not guaranteed these words will be used, but if they are, be sure you understand what each command is asking you to do:

**Key Words Commonly Used in Writing Assignments/Prompts:**

- **Describe:** Write about the subject so the reader can easily visualize it; tell how it looks or happened. Use adjectives, adverbs and descriptive language to paint a mental image for you reader.
- **Compare:** Analyze the similarities and the differences between two or more items.
- **Contrast:** Look only at the differences between two or more items.
- **Explain:** Give the meaning of something often answering the question “why”?
- **Discuss:** Provide a broader range of possibilities that critically explore your topic.
- **Argue:** Present a point of view or take a position and prove it. Don’t be concerned about taking the “right” or “wrong” position; just support a position soundly and consistently.
- **Analyze:** Break the subject down into parts, and explain and critically examine the various parts.
- **Criticize/Critique:** Point out both the positive and negative aspects of the topic.
- **Evaluate:** Give your opinion of the value of the subject; discuss its strengths and weaknesses.
- **Illustrate:** Make the point or idea by giving examples.
- **Trace:** Tell about an event or process in chronological (time) order.
- **Prove:** Show that something is true by giving facts or logical reasons.
- **State:** Give the main points in a brief, clear form.
In The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, author Michelle Alexander argues that it is important for us to understand that The New Jim Crow is the Prison Industrial Complex system which has disproportionately incarcerated black men at an alarming rate in the United States. She writes: “Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race (Alexander, 13).

Carefully consider the four key points that Alexander raises in the passage above. In your essay of 4-5 pages, discuss whether or not you support Alexander’s position on her insights about mass incarceration in the Age of Obama. Remember to do the following in your essay: state your own position in your thesis statement, and support your thesis by discussing specific points that address Alexander’s main arguments. All in all, your essay will include a combination of your own ideas, analysis, observations, and examples/details as they relate to the main points that Alexander makes.
Looking again at the step-by-step process, let's do the tasks and apply them to this assignment:

### Breaking down a writing assignment/prompt:

1. Read the prompt carefully and several times.
2. Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?).
3. Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.
4. Circle and/or underline the key words.
5. Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.
6. Make a list of the paper requirements.

1. Read the prompt carefully and several times.

   As you read, highlight, take notes, and ask questions in the margins.

2. Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?).

   **Mass incarceration of black men**

3. Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.

   Do I agree with Alexander that the U.S. prison system operates as a new Jim Crow system that oppresses black men? Do I agree that “mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions” that guarantees the subordinate status of black males in our society?

4. Circle and/or underline the key words.

   Carefully consider the four key points that Alexander raises in the passage above. In your essay of 4-5 pages, discuss whether or not you support Alexander’s position on her insights about mass incarceration in the Age of Obama. Remember to do the following in your essay: state your own position in your thesis statement, and support your thesis by discussing specific points that address Alexander’s main arguments. All in all, your essay will include a combination of your own ideas, analysis, observations, and examples/details as they relate to the main points that Alexander makes.

5. Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.

   1. **Consider** Alexander’s four key points: laws, policies, customs, and institutions
   2. **State** whether I support Alexander’s position about mass incarceration.
   3. **Discuss** and support my position using Alexander’s main points
   4. **Include** a combination of my own ideas, analysis, observations, and examples/details

6. Make a list of the paper requirements:

   * Use Chapters 1-6 in Alexander’s book
   * Plan out ideas on “Planning & Prewriting Worksheet” before writing first draft
   * Length should be 4-5 pages
   * First draft due 1/28, second draft due 2/4, final draft due 2/18
   * Refer to “Formal Essay Guidelines” for essay policies and formatting
   * Not required but good idea: meet with tutor or instructor to discuss ideas and drafts
BREAKING DOWN A PROMPT: An approach for visual thinkers

Using a graphic organizer, you can make a visual breakdown of an assignment/prompt:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
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<th>Requirements</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State the topic in its most basic form.</td>
<td>Describe the writing task or tasks in your own words.</td>
<td>Make a list of key essay requirements.</td>
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<td><em>What is this prompt about?</em></td>
<td><em>What is the prompt asking you to do? How many parts/tasks are there?</em></td>
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**EXAMPLE**

**ESOL 400**

**Essay #1: Intelligence and Mindset**

What is intelligence, anyway? So far this semester, we have touched on the themes of intelligence in Isaac Asimov’s “What Is Intelligence, Anyway?” and Carol Dweck’s “Brainology.” These authors challenge our traditional notion of intelligence and discuss different ways of thinking about intelligence.

In this essay, you will explore new ideas about intelligence and argue your own beliefs about intelligence and mindset.

Please choose ONE of the essay topics:

1.) **Isaac Asimov’s “What Is Intelligence, Anyway?”**
What does Asimov believe about the nature of intelligence? Do you agree or disagree with his ideas about intelligence, and why or why not? Explain the **significance** of his ideas about intelligence in terms of education and to your life. Give specific examples to support your opinion.

2.) **Carol Dweck’s “Brainology”**
What does Dweck believe about the different types of intelligence? Do you agree or disagree with her ideas about intelligence/mindset, and why or why not? Explain the **significance** of her research in terms of education and to your life. Give specific examples to support your opinion.

In this essay, you should first **SUMMARIZE** the article and then give your response to the essay question.
Requirements:

- Length should be approximately 2 pages (no shorter than 1 ½ pages, no longer than 2 ½)
- Essay should be typed in 12-point standard font (such as Times New Roman or Arial)
- Use MLA format (double spaced, with proper heading)
- You should incorporate ONE quotation in your paper using MLA format
- Essay should have a creative title (centered in the middle of the page)
- You need to turn in a signed tutor feedback form with your rewrite
- All essays must be turned in on the Turnitin link on WebAccess (due the same day as the rewrite)

Due dates:

- Outline, typed, one page, due: Wed., Feb. 5
- Rough draft, typed, one page, due: Wed., Feb. 5 (be ready for peer review)

Using the graphic organizer, you can visually separate the different parts of the assignment to better understand it and to break it down into manageable tasks:

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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>New and different ways to think about Intelligence.</td>
<td>1. Choose Asimov OR Dweck as my paper topic.</td>
<td>• Due dates: outline (2/5), draft (2/5), final (2/12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Summarize the author’s position on the nature or types of intelligence.</td>
<td>• 2 pages, 12pt font</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Agree or disagree with the author. Provide specific examples to support my position.</td>
<td>• MLA format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Explain the significance in terms of education and my life.</td>
<td>• 1 quotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Creative title</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Meeting with tutor required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Use Turnitin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the step-by-step process, break down the following assignment:

**Breaking down a writing assignment/prompt:**
1. Read the prompt carefully and several times.
2. Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?)
3. Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.
4. Circle and/or underline the key words.
5. Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.
6. Make a list of the paper requirements.

**ART HISTORY TERM PAPER**

**OBJECTIVE:**
A very basic objective of this course has been to learn how to examine the culture and social structures of a civilization during a particular period in order to understand the artwork. This approach to the study of Art History is called "iconology." To make this process of investigation a little more personally meaningful, you are to prepare a term paper about any artwork produced in any time period we cover in this course. Therefore, select one work from your textbook as the subject of the paper.

The major theme of your term paper is try to explain why the selected artwork fits within its culture and time period. For instance, if the work is from the ancient Egyptian culture, what makes the work "ancient Egyptian?" How does one identify the work from that time and place as opposed to similar works made elsewhere? What reasons are given as to what the artists were doing at the time that was different from the styles before their time? What was the artwork for? Thus, how does the artwork reflect the time and place (the culture) in which the works was produced?

In the attempt to explain the "why" it will be necessary to discuss many aspects of the culture that influenced the choices made for the design and look of the artwork. For example, what possible choices were made because of the religious or spiritual ideals held by the culture? Or what social structures influenced the artwork (i.e. class distinctions based upon sex, wealth, heritage, or any other differences used to separate peoples in the same society)? Was the art made to honor the culture from which it emerged, or was it done to demonstrate a rejection or disapproval of some element of the culture? It will be your choice as to how you want to discuss culture and the artwork.

The objective of this research effort is to present the important factors which influenced the appearance of a specific art work. Thus, your paper should include the following:

- Identification of an artwork (what is it, who made it, when, where, etc., and a detailed description of the work (what does it look like?)
- Why was it made, or what is thought to be the most reasonable function of the work? Why does it look the way it does?

**WHAT TO SUBMIT:**

The paper must be typed, double spaced, two to three pages, not including title and bibliography pages. The sources must be properly cited. Be sure you include footnotes or end notes and a bibliography.
(1) Read the prompt carefully and several times *(As you read, highlight, take notes, and ask questions in the margins).*

(2) Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?)

(3) Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.

(4) Circle and/or underline the key words *(rewrite the command portion of the assignment below and mark the key words).*

(5) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.

(6) Make a list of the paper requirements.
Using a graphic organizer, make a visual break down of the following assignment:

English 110
ESSAY #2 (Mini-Research Paper) : Sula

**DUE DATES:**
- October 23rd– Preliminary Citations Worksheet (20 pts.)
- October 25th-- First Draft (6 pages-20 pts.)
- November 6th– Final Revision

**ESSAY TOPICS**

Like many other short stories and novels, *Sula* functions as a literary commentary that offers insight and/or criticism about the society and individuals that it describes. In an essay of at least 6 pages, discuss a specific, primary issue/concern that the novel conveys about race, class, gender, or identity. What is this issue/concern that you’ve identified, and why do you think it is significant enough to explore and discuss in your essay? Lastly, how do the details and specifics in the novel help to convey your ideas about it?

Along with citations and information from the novel itself, you will be required to include information, ideas, and quotes from a minimum of 3 academic sources in your essay. The information from these sources should help to support and supplement your own ideas and should add insight to the points that you have made about the issue/concern you have chosen to write about.

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<td><em>What are the main requirements of this essay?</em></td>
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Here's a blank step-by-step process for you to use in breaking down an assignment/prompt you have been given:

**Breaking down a writing assignment/prompt:**

1. Read the prompt carefully and several times.
2. Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?)
3. Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.
4. Circle and/or underline the key words.
5. Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.
6. Make a list of the paper requirements.

(1) Read the prompt carefully and several times.

(2) Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?)

(3) Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.

(4) Circle and/or underline the key words (rewritten command portion of the assignment below and mark the key words).

(5) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.

(6) Make a list of the paper requirements.
Here are some blank graphic organizers for you to use in breaking down assignments/prompts you have been given:

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Possible answer for USING THE LINEAR APPROACH:

Breaking down the assignment/prompt for the ART HISTORY TERM PAPER

(1) Read the prompt carefully and several times.

(2) Sum up the topic in a few words (What is the focus of the prompt?)

   Understanding art by examining its cultural and social context

(3) Restate the prompt in your own words to help you fully understand it.

   Choose one artwork from the book, describe it, and explain how it fits within and reflects its culture, social structures, and time period.

(4) Circle and/or underline the key words (rewrite the command portion of the assignment below and mark the key words).

The objective of this research effort is to present the important factors which influenced the appearance of a specific art work. Thus, your paper should include the following:

- **Identification** of an artwork (what is it, who made it, when, where, etc.? and a **detailed description** of the work (what does it look like?)

- **Why** was it **made**, or **what** is thought to be the **most reasonable function** of the work? **Why** does it **look** the way it does?

(5) Identify and count the required steps in the writing task.

   (1) Choose **one artwork** we have studied from the textbook.

   (2) Give a **detailed description** of it.

   (3) **Explain its purpose/function and why it looks the way it does** (examine the culture, social structures, and time period when it was created using the guiding questions in prompt)

(6) Make a list of the paper requirements.

* Paper typed and double-spaced
* 2-3 pages plus a title page and bibliography
* Footnotes within the paper
Possible answer for USING THE VISUAL APPROACH:

Breaking down the assignment/prompt for the ENGLISH LITERATURE SULA ASSIGNMENT

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>How novel offers insight and/or criticism of the society in regards to race, gender, class, or identity</td>
<td>1. Choose to write on ONE specific, primary issue/concern about race, class, gender OR identity in <em>Sula</em>.</td>
<td>• Due dates: citations (10/23), draft (10/25), final (11/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Why is this issue significant?</td>
<td>• 6 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How do the details in the novel help convey my ideas about it?</td>
<td>• Quotes/ideas from 3 academic sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>