

# Assignment Genres: Writing Critical Analyses and Essays

Your first writing step is to make sure you understand the assignment.

## Read the prompt and ask yourself:

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**Why was this assigned?** Professors design assignments with specific learning objectives in mind. Does your professor intend for you to learn how to write a literature review, a research proposal, or a policy memo? Is your task to demonstrate your understanding of a concept, or to practice critiquing a theory?

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**What am I being asked to do?** Most prompts contain key verbs, or action words, that help you determine the main tasks. The [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) divides these words into three categories: *information*, *relation*, and *interpretation*.

- **Information words** ask you to demonstrate your knowledge about a subject. Examples include define, describe, explain, illustrate, summarize, trace, and research.
- **Relation words** ask you to show connections between ideas. Compare, contrast, apply, cause, and relate fall into this category.
- **Interpretation words** ask for you to defend your own argument, thesis, or idea. These words include assess, prove, justify, evaluate, respond, support, synthesize, analyze, and argue.

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**What evidence is required?** Some assignments, like a reflective memo, may not require any formal evidence. More often, though, assignments will ask you to draw on outside research or other types of evidence.

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## About critical analyses and essays

While they vary depending on the course, a critical analysis assignment typically identifies themes or central questions and asks the student to respond with their own analysis.

### Prompt 1

*Each week, classmates will sign up in advance to write a response paper (3-5 pages, typed and double-spaced with APA citations) addressing the following:*

- *In no more than 1-2 paragraphs, briefly synthesize what you understood to be the key ideas, concepts & arguments in the assigned texts for the week's readings.*
- *Critique, analysis & contextualization. How do these ideas compare to other dominant and/or marginalized concepts in the larger field of education? Put the key ideas in the reading into conversation with other key ideas in education, as well as with central issues raised in this class or previous texts with which you've engaged. Provide thoughtful analyses and critiques.*
- *Personal engagement with and practical application of key concepts. In the final paragraph or two, draw connections between the key concepts and your personal experiences as an educational practitioner, community organizer, policy specialist and/or researcher. What is the relevance of these concepts to YOUR daily-lived reality working and/or conducting research in education and/or community organizations?*

## Prompt 2

*Over the course of the semester, we have read about and discussed children's development of the various components that contribute to skilled reading (e.g. phonological awareness, vocabulary), the forms that develop within each component, and the functions those forms serve. One representation of the relationship among these components was offered by Hollis Scarborough in 2001. In the decades since, there have been many advances in our thinking about literacy outcomes and the array of skills that successful readers and writers have mastered. For this essay, we ask you to reflect on the Scarborough model. Discuss what is valuable in it and identify anything you think is missing. Explain how you would modify this model in light of new research and the modern educational context. You can make use of any of the readings on the syllabus, as well as any relevant literature you have reviewed elsewhere.*

## Reading the prompt

<b>Format</b>	Critical essays vary in length from quite short, as little as 1-2 pages for a weekly response, to a longer essay of 10-15 pages.
<b>Evidence</b>	You must cite evidence. Assignments may ask for research beyond what has been covered in class, particularly in a longer paper, or they may only ask you to draw connections between course materials.

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<b>Audience</b>	Typically, a critical analysis or essay has an academic audience.
<b>Purpose</b>	The sample assignments ask you to do multiple tasks in all three domains: an informational goal to represent a working knowledge of many ideas from multiple places, a relational goal to compare and critique ideas, and an interpretation goal, to provide and defend an original argument.

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