



Understanding Graduate- Level Essay Prompts

A-State Online Writing Center

What are Graduate-Level Essay Prompts?

They are defined as “. . .learning assignments that direct students to write about a particular topic in a particular way” (www.time4writing.com). They are written to promote higher-level thinking and learning in students pursuing advanced education, such as for graduate or doctoral schooling. These of prompts require deeper critical thinking and a full analysis to be answered thoroughly.

What Topics are Covered in Graduate-Level Essay Prompts?

The topics that this type of writing prompt focuses on will depend on the area of study you are focusing upon; however, some examples could include:

- Society as it relates to your area of study
- Specific expertise or aspects of people in your chosen field
- Benefits and/or potential dangers of the occupational position you hold or desire
- Importance of certain aspects affecting your area of study
- Similarities and differences between beliefs or practices in your field
- Themes or representations to analyze in your field

Addressing the Graduate-Level Essay Prompt

Before you begin thinking about how to research, assemble, and/or write your essay, you must first understand what the prompt is asking you to do. If you do not comprehend what the prompt asks for, your essay will not be complete or satisfactory. Moreover, higher-level writing assignments usually contain A LOT of information, so it takes time to break them down and examine what information they really want from you.

Usually, a graduate-level prompt consists of three parts:

1. A quote or summation of textual information that provides the context for the written assignment
2. Thorough directions for the essay assignment
3. Recommended topics of consideration or extra details to focus upon while writing.

Breaking Down the Prompt with “CUB”

Use the acronym “CUB”, to break down an essay prompt; this stands for Circle, Underline, and Bracket.

- **Circle** any verbs that you identify in the prompt; these are any actions that the prompt wants you to take while writing; this could be explaining, identifying, comparing, contrasting, reflecting, analyzing, etc. Identifying these action words will help you see if this essay is meant to be argumentative, comparative, or another genre.
- **Underline** any key terms you find in the prompt; these can usually be found right after the verbs. These answer the question, “what are you analyzing?” Or “what are you reflecting upon?” Are you analyzing another author’s work? Are you reflecting upon personal experience? The key terms will tell you what kind of paper you are writing and will help you organize a framework to follow to create it.
- **Bracket** the specific and practical instructions for the essay. How many pages is it supposed to be? How many sources or literary materials must you incorporate into it? What format does it need to be written in (APA, MLA, Chicago Style, etc.)? When is the due date? Keep up with all of this information so that your paper meets the standards and is turned in on time!

Example of a Graduate-Level Essay Prompt and Breakdown

Below is an adapted example of a graduate-level English program essay prompt from Arkansas State University:

Several critics have pointed to the pervasiveness of food imagery and the use of hunger as a metaphor in Anzia Yeziarska’s fiction. Using two or three stories, consider how hunger and food imagery are used thematically and as an element of Yeziarska’s social realism. What does hunger and/or food represent in the stories? What does it reveal about relationships between people or community? Write a 5-page, MLA-formatted essay analyzing and explaining these concepts by the beginning of class on September 30, 2020.

So, for this example, this is what you would “CUB:”

Circle--using, consider, analyzing, explaining

Underline--How hunger and food imagery are used thematically and as an element of Yeziarska’s social realism/What does hunger and/or food represent in the stories/What does it reveal about relationships between people or community?

Bracket--5 pages, September 30, 2020 (beginning of class), MLA format, two or three stories