

Responding to Short Answer Prompts

Short answer prompts in college may come in many different forms: quizzes, homework, online discussion boards, and exams. These assignments can be challenging because they ask for concise answers to a wide variety of questions. Here are some tips to help students effectively respond to short answer prompts.

Know Your Instructor's Expectations

The length requirement for short answer questions can vary. While one professor may expect only a few sentences, another may ask for full paragraphs. Be sure to review any guidelines regarding the length of your responses. If none is provided, reach out to your professor and ask for their expectations. Unless instructed otherwise, be sure to write your answer in complete sentences.

If the assignment asks for just one or two sentences, the most important aspect of your response will be its accuracy: answering the question correctly. If the guidelines ask for a full paragraph or two, it will be important to organize your response so that it progresses logically from one idea to the next. Address the main elements of the question first, before offering more specific details and examples.

Read the Question Carefully

Short Answer prompts are designed to test your understanding of course content. It is important not to skim the questions, responding with just any idea that springs to mind. Read the question carefully and consider its exact language. What is the instructor asking of you? What ideas from course readings are relevant to the question?

Perhaps most importantly, examine the question for active verbs and key terms, which are meant to guide your response. When prompts use different terms—*explain vs. summarize, compare vs. analyze*—they are asking for different types of responses. It is important to be aware of the distinctions between these terms, and answer the question precisely as it is posed.

Understand Key Terms

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill has an excellent list of these key terms and how they can be understood:

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/understanding-assignments/>

Information words, such as who, what, when, where, how, and why ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject. Information words may include:

- define—give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject's meaning.
- explain why/how—give reasons why or examples of how something happened.

- illustrate—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject.
- summarize—briefly cover the important ideas you learned about the subject.
- trace—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form.

Relation words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected. Relation words may include:

- compare—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different).
- contrast—show how two or more things are dissimilar.
- apply—use details that you’ve been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation.
- cause—show how one event or series of events made something else happen.
- relate—show or describe the connections between things.

Interpretation words ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject [...] Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation. Interpretation words may include:

- prove, justify—give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth.
- evaluate, respond, assess—state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons (you may want to compare your subject to something else).
- support—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe).
- synthesize—put two or more things together that haven’t been put together before; don’t just summarize one and then the other, and say that they are similar or different—you must provide a reason for putting them together (as opposed to compare and contrast—see above).
- analyze—look closely at the components of something to figure out how it works, what it might mean, or why it is important.
- argue—take a side and defend it (with proof) against the other side.

Write and Edit your Response

The process of writing your response will vary, depending on the assignment. For a quiz or an exam, you will need to study the material ahead of time in order and work from memory. For a homework assignment or a discussion board post, there is more freedom to review course materials, to draft your response, and to edit before submission.

Regardless of the assignment type, be sure to review your final answer. Make sure that you are responding to the prompt itself, recognizing its key terms. If the assignment asks for a full paragraph or more, re-read your response for its organization. Make sure that your

tone is not overly casual. Although short answer assignments are less formal than an essay submission, your response should nevertheless be clearly composed and easy to follow.