



The Purpose Section

Although the purpose may seem perfectly clear to you, students may not understand it or interpret it as "busywork." By outlining the motivation for the assignment, students can orient their thinking towards its purpose.

Our Constitution Essay Example

For example, a common prompt for history classes is an argument about the ongoing relevance of the Constitution, and it usually looks like this:

"Compose an argumentative, thesis-driven essay about whether you believe the Constitution is still relevant today."

Add A Purpose

Purpose: to demonstrate your textual comprehension of the Constitution, your understanding of the Constitution as an historical document, your familiarity with 18th century politics and cultural mores, and your ability to apply that knowledge to your contemporary surroundings.

Or:

Purpose: to highlight your understanding of the contemporary world and how an historical document fits into a modern context.

The Expectations Section

Get Clear

Students often complain that they don't know what their teachers want, so I use this space to clarify my expectations.

Sample Expectation Sections

"I expect you to reread this assignment sheet before emailing me with questions.

Or

"I expect you to turn this assignment in on time. To ensure that you do so, please submit it at least one hour before class begins."



How To Craft Your Expectations Section

How have past students not met your expectations? In particular, consider patterns of student behavior (rather than unusual circumstances or outliers), and try to anticipate those behaviors with this section.

I often like to include a "what you can expect from me" section here too, in which I delineate my expectations for myself and which can help to control student questions and uncertainty. That section might look like this:

- Responses to emailed questions within 24 hours
- Comments on drafts within two days
- Final drafts, with comments and grades, handed back within a week of the due date

Why It Works

Clarifying that the students and I both have responsibilities can make the process feel reciprocal, and it can help to avoid frustrating student questions. ("I sent you an email two hours ago but have not heard back yet. Please respond!")

The Process Section

Giving students process advice can be incredibly helpful in avoiding writer's block, frustration, and lots of extra questions addressed to you.

Our Constitution Essay Process

1. *Begin by rereading the Constitution and notating it: mark each section that feels particularly relevant or irrelevant today, and include notes about your thinking.*
2. *Next, collate those sections of the document into a list so you can look at them together. Do the points you've identified seem more relevant or irrelevant to today's world?*
3. *List some specific situations in the current world in which the Constitutional points are either relevant or irrelevant.*
4. *Once you have this list and your notes, formulate a thesis statement that can encompass many (but not necessarily all) of your points. Check your argument: is it arguable? (Can someone potentially disagree?) Is it truthful? (Does it accurately*



articulate your feelings about the topic?) Is it supportable? (Can you identify examples, text, or logical points to bolster it?)

5. *If the answer to all of these questions is "yes," begin writing the essay to prove the argument. If the answer to one or more questions is "no," hone the argument until the answer to all three questions is "yes."*
6. *Begin to construct the body paragraphs.*
7. *After you've written the body of the essay, try writing the introduction and conclusion rather than beginning with them.*
8. *We'll talk together in class about how to revise the draft, but work on getting this structured first draft before worrying about revisions!*

This is merely one example of a process section. You might instead recommend free writing or referring to secondary sources or some other process. See the Process tab for even more ideas.

Combat Student Worries

Remember that students have far less experience constructing essays than you do and will likely feel overwhelmed. The more advice you offer, the better equipped they'll be to write. In addition, a process section expands their writing toolbox without using additional class time.

Offer Alternative Process Suggestions

If this is a class' first assignment, on the next assignment you can offer a different process suggestion and say, "If the first assignment's process worked well for you, use that process again! If it didn't, try this one instead." As the semester or year progresses, students will have more and more process tools from which to choose.

The Grading Section

Help Students Prioritize

The grading section of an assignment prompt can be brief or detailed, but either approach helps students prioritize. A brief version lists the qualities you care most about.

Sample Grading Section (Brief)

"Grading for this assignment will be based primarily on the strength of your central argument, support for that argument, and clarity of expression."



Sample Grading Section With Tiers Of Importance (Detailed)

"The most important aspects of this essay are its thesis, integration of quotations, and organization. Secondly, I will consider your introduction and conclusion, which should appropriately prepare readers for your argument and synthesize your ideas. Finally, poor grammar and proofreading can lower your final grade, but strong grammar and proofreading cannot compensate for weak ideas."

The Product Section

Product descriptions are easier to write than process steps, and I use them to cover smaller details. I like to separate product from process because each needs to be approached at different points: process at the outset and product mostly towards the end.

Two Sample "Product" Sections

Product Sample 1:

- *A three-to-four page double-spaced essay in Times New Roman 12-point font.*
- *The final draft should include page numbers, your name, and a substantive title relevant to the essay's content (so not "Essay #2" please!).*
- *A "List of Works" cited should be included at the end of the essay on a separate sheet of paper. It is not included in the page count.*

Product Sample 2:

- *An essay of approximately 2500 words, submitted through our course page before class on Monday, November 5.*
- *It should include our standard class heading and the self-reflective cover sheet, which is available on our course page.*
- *Font, margins, and spacing are up to you.*
- *Remember to include paragraph breaks: your essay should have an introduction and conclusion as well as separate body paragraphs for each supporting idea.*

Why It Works

Student writers tend to focus on product more than process, so articulating each separately, and emphasizing that process matters more, shows students that issues like font and length deserve only minimal attention. Page numbers and double spacing may matter to you, but not as much as argument and ideas!



The FAQs

Alleviate Student Anxiety

Addressing potential questions in a lighthearted and anticipatory manner can alleviate students' anxiety. As you write your FAQs, envision the kinds of questions they might ask.

Clarify The Assignment

Some FAQs are clarifying questions that may not have been addressed earlier in the assignment prompt, like "how many sources do I have to use?" or "can I use ideas we've already discussed in class?"

For certain questions, like "Should I cite my sources?" the answer in my class is "always," so I write that on every FAQ. For others, though, like "can I alter the parameters of the assignment in some way?" or "can I use first-person voice?" the answer differs depending on the assignment goals.

Give Students More Autonomy

Others may push the boundaries of the assignment, like "Is it okay if the essay is shorter than the minimum you listed here?" with a common follow up of:

- *"What if I can't think of anything else to say?"*
- *"Can I use text(s) other than the ones you've indicated here?"*
- *"Can I answer a different question than the one you've posed?"*

You may be fine with these alterations and or not; letting students know in writing without having to address each question individually gives the students greater autonomy over their choices and frees you from constant questioning.

Teach Writing Skills Without Devoting Class Time

Clarifying in the prompt itself that different kinds of writing call for different parameters implicitly teaches students writing skills without devoting much or any class time to them. My students have learned, over time, that some genres allow for first-person voice while others don't. They do not leave my class with the impression that literary writing



must always be in the third person, but we only talk about this detail very briefly when we discuss formality and genre.

Inspire More Self-Awareness

Interestingly, after reading FAQs on several consecutive assignments, students become more self-aware about their questions. Occasionally, a student asks a question like one of these, and the others promptly say, "Go to the FAQs!" without my having to say anything.