

Syllabus to Sources: How to start your Writing Assignment

Every Professor has a unique way of teaching their classes, so it makes sense that they would also have unique writing assignments for their students. Assignments take many shapes, from the narrative essay to the structured report, and each of these has its peculiar characteristics and requirements. The best way to understand what is required for an assignment is to break it down into sections.

Break Down the Task

Let's say your Professor has assigned you to write a research paper. They have given you all of the instructions in your syllabus (or on a separate handout.) The first thing you should do is break down the assignment to make sure that you understand what the Professor expects of you and to leave yourself enough time to clarify if you have any questions.

Your assignment may look something like this:

Discuss the relationship between art and culture in the United States from the 20th century to the present day. In your paper, you need to refer to at least 5 different resources, 2 of which should be a cultural artifact or event – a “work” – be it literature, art, music, architecture, etc. Use Scholarly Resources and include a Bibliography of your sources.

- Minimum length 2000 words; maximum length 3000 words.
- Format: typed, double-spaced, with 1” margins, 12 pt. Times font, left justified.
- Parenthetical citations and Bibliography must follow MLA style.

Let's break the assignment into sections based on what each section addresses:

1. CONTENT
 - a. Discuss the relationship between art and culture in the United States from the 20th century to the present day.
2. SOURCES
 - a. In your paper, you need to refer to at least 5 different resources, 2 of which should be a cultural artifact or event – a “work” – be it literature, art, music, architecture, etc.
 - b. Use Scholarly Resources and include a Bibliography of your sources.
3. PAPER FORMAT
 - a. Minimum length 2000 words; maximum length 3000 words.
 - b. Format: typed, double-spaced, with 1” margins, 12 pt. Times font, left justified.
 - c. Parenthetical citations and Bibliography must follow MLA style.

Find the Keywords

Once you have dissected the assignment, you want to concentrate on the CONTENT so you can determine what resources will work best for you and how to find them. The best way to do this is to pick out the keywords:

Discuss the relationship between art and culture in the United States from the 20th century to the present day.

Find the subjects first- We can see from the keywords that we are looking for information or resources on Art and Culture in the United States. We also know that we only want resources that talk about Art and Culture in the United States from the 20th century until today.

Figure out how to talk about the subjects- Our other keywords, Discuss and Relationship (or relate), tell us that we are going to write about how the subjects are connected to or affect each other. There is a glossary of commonly used assignment terms at the end of this handout to help define what some keywords mean.

Define Your Resources

This is where the SOURCES information comes in. We know from finding the CONTENT keywords above what the subject of your paper is, but your Professor may also have specific requests for how many sources or what kind of sources you include. Once again, highlighting your keywords will help make this information easy to see.

In your paper, you need to refer to at least 5 different resources, 2 cultural artifact or event – a “work” – be it literature, art, music, architecture, etc. Use Scholarly Resources and include a Bibliography of your sources.

If you are unsure what some of the terms mean that you highlighted, now is the time to look it up, or ask your Professor. A scholarly resource is an item that is peer reviewed or published in a recognized scholarly source, like a journal or a university publisher. You will notice that we did not choose the word Bibliography. A bibliography is the part of your paper where you list the resources you used to write your paper.

Reword the Assignment

Now that you have an idea of what you are trying to find, it helps to put the assignment into your own words. If you have difficulty rewording, you may need to speak to your Professor to make sure you are understanding what he/she is asking you to do. This part will mostly be dealing with the CONTENT and SOURCES of the paper. You will deal with the PAPER FORMAT parts when you get ready to write your paper.

Example- I need to find at least 5 scholarly sources that talk about how Art and Culture in the United States (20th century to present) are connected to or affect each other. 2 of the resources have to talk about a cultural artifact or work.

Choosing Your Own Topic

Some Professors will allow their students to choose their own topic and only give them paper format guidelines. This will allow a student to pick something they are interested in, but it can also make it hard to narrow down. If you are choosing your own topic, here are some tips to make it easier for you.

First, **break down what you DO know about the assignment**, like we did earlier. This will be anything the Professor provided you in class, like type of paper, length, how many required sources, etc. Even though you get to choose your own topic, the Professor may want you to write a certain type of paper, like a comparative essay or a literature review. See the glossary for common paper type definitions.

Once you establish what you know about your paper, you can **start brainstorming ideas for topics**. Here are some questions to ask yourself for topic ideas:

- **WHAT** do I like? What topics do I find interesting?
- **WHAT** do I know? It is easier to write about something you are familiar with.
- **WHY** do I find this interesting? This is a great question because your answer will also help you to write your topic question or hypothesis.
- **HOW** does this fit in with my class? If you pick a topic that is similar to something you covered in class, it may make it easier for you to find resources.
- **WHO** will be reading my paper? Will your classmates be reading your paper or just your Professor? You want to pick a topic that will keep your reader interested.

Write a Topic Question

Once you think you have a topic you are interested in, it helps to **write a basic question, or hypothesis**, you would like to answer in your paper so you can start looking for resources. Figuring out **WHY** you find a topic interesting is a great place to find a potential hypothesis.

For example, you have to write an essay for your American History class. You decided you would like to write about R&B music, but you need to tie it into what you covered in History class, which might be culture, politics, or economics. What is it about R&B music that made you want to write about it? Is it the lyrics? One idea would be to talk about how R&B lyrics are affected by the politics of a certain time period you covered in class. Another idea would be to investigate how R&B music affected the culture of a certain time period in American History or how it influenced racial issues. There are multiple possibilities if you ask the right questions.

Hint

DO NOT get too attached to a specific idea until you get a chance to search for resources! A great place to start is to search the G.R. Little Library resources (<http://www.ecsu.edu/library>) to see what is available on your topic.

Books are a great way to get a general overview on a subject. **Articles** are another helpful resource because they are usually more current and offer more detailed information on a topic. Make sure you can find enough relevant resources on your topic before you start to write your paper. Taking an hour or so to search for resources will save you much more time later on. ***If you are having trouble finding what you need, ask a Librarian for help.***

For more info or to register for a workshop, visit <http://libguides.ecsu.edu/InfoLit>