

# Interpreting Assignment Instructions

MSVU International Education Centre

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# Reminder

**Today's session:  
Is not recorded**

**PPT will be posted to MSVU  
webpage**



# Presenter



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# Outline

Today we will look at 4 strategies to understanding assignment instructions:

1. Analyzing the wording of the assignment
2. Noting the language being used
3. Using the course outline
4. Applying a rubric



# Preview

## Questions for the audience:

In the chat box:

1. How many courses are you taking this semester?
2. Do you have family or children living with you?
3. Do you have a job or other outside commitments?

*Outside of school, we are all busy in our own way.  
Understanding assignment instructions helps you be more  
efficient!*

4. How do you approach an assignment?



# Research says...

"If students don't have a clear idea in mind of what a task or assignment looks like when completed, then they will spend more time worrying about what to do rather than how to do it" (Schaelling, p. 3, 2018).



# Research says...

According to research, students often misinterpret or simply do not understand assignment requirements, many times because they fail to read assignment instructions carefully. This results in missing key information or misjudging the difficulty of the assignment (Nelson, 1990).



# Part I

## 1. Instructions





# Instructions

## 1. Read the assignment instructions carefully

### Why?

- The assignment may look simple or straightforward, but it still may take time and planning to complete
- You may be required to learn a new skill
- This early effort will save you time, problems, and stress later
- Do this well in advance



# Instructions Cont'd

## 1. Read the assignment instructions carefully

### **Read actively + analyze. Ask yourself, highlight, take notes:**

- What is the purpose of this assignment, what do I need to do to respond correctly? Is there a central question I need to answer?
- What kind of assignment am I being asked to do? How much do I know about this kind of writing?
- Are there sub-questions I need to answer?
- Are there any plural nouns? Ex: factors, reasons, descriptions? (indicating the number of answers/reasons I must provide)
- What kind of evidence do I need to support my response? Class work or readings? Additional research?
- Are there different sections to the assignment?
- Are there additional requirements? Due date? Format? Word count?



## 2. Language



# Language

## Understand the verbs in assignment questions

When reading assignment instructions or questions, instruction verbs are the key to understanding and offering an appropriate and relevant answer. Instruction verbs can have varying functions:

1. Some instruction verbs ask you to **select** and **present** information:

Indicate	Summarize
Trace	Describe
List	Outline
Identify	State
Show	

# Language

## Verbs in assignment questions

2. Other verbs ask you to **explain** something to or **persuade** your readers of something:

Explain	Discuss
Define	Account for
Suggest	Put forward
Propose	Analyze
Investigate	

# Language

## Verbs in assignment questions

3. Another group of verbs relates to **comparison** and **classification**. These require you to work out relationships between different phenomena:

Compare	Contrast
Differentiate between	Classify
Categorize	Analyze
Match	Correlate
Measure	Separate

# Language

## Verbs in assignment questions

4. A small number of verbs relate to **time** (chronology), and are often associated with process and development:

Trace	Outline
Relate	Categorize
Chronicle	Narrate
Report	Record

# Language

## Verbs in assignment questions

5. The following verbs require you to **evaluate** something:

Evaluate	Assess
Measure	Estimate
Calculate	Comment on
Critique	Survey
Grade	Gauge



## 3. Course Outline



# Course Outline

## Pay attention to the course outline

Your course outline is everything your professor will cover but also what they require from you. Often general assignment expectations can be found there.

- Due dates and times
- Modes of submission – Moodle, email
- Citation styles – APA, MLA, etc
- Additional conditions



## 4. Course Outline

—	✓	
—		✓

# Rubrics

## Read the rubric

A rubric is an assessment or evaluation tool your professor uses to score your assignment. It is made up of categories of criteria you will be evaluated on and points awarded for the quality of work.

The benefits of understanding the rubric:

- Clarify the purpose of the assignment
- Help students understand the assignment requirements
- Identify exactly how to score an “A”
- Reduce uncertainty
- Inspire motivation
- Equalize scoring – no bias



## 5. Recap



# Recap

1. Analyze the assignment instructions carefully:
  - Unpack what you're being asked to do
  - Have a clear idea before you begin
2. Note the language – Instruction Verbs
  - Narrow your focus
  - Key to writing an appropriate response
3. Read your course outline
  - Offers overarching information regarding assignment
  - Due dates, number count, citation style, submission method, etc
4. Refer to the rubric
  - Clarify the purpose of the assignment
  - Inspires motivation



Thank You!  
Questions?



# References

Nelson, J. (1990). This was an easy assignment: Examining how students interpret academic writing tasks. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 24(4), 362-396.

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