So, what do you REALLY want me to do?

Some guidelines for interpreting most college writing assignments:

1. Do NOT panic and do NOT procrastinate!
   - When your instructor gives you the writing assignment, do not try to read the whole assignment sheet at breakneck speed...take a deep breath and focus.
   - If your instructor talks about the assignment, stop what you are doing and LISTEN
   - Write down any information or advice your instructor provides about the guidelines, his or her expectations, changes, possible approaches, or topic ideas.
   - Pay attention to your classmates questions...the answers may be helpful
   - Remember – as an undergraduate taking more than one class, it is very common to have several writing assignments and projects due within days of each other....hence, do NOT procrastinate!
   - Start your assignment as soon as possible and leave yourself plenty of time to plan for the unexpected

2. Read the Assignment. Read it again and again. Refer to it often.
   - The ability to read critically is a useful skill (remember do not be afraid to write on the assignment sheet):
     - Skim the reading first for major ideas
     - Re-read
     - Highlight or underline important items
     - Make notes in the margins
     - Look up unfamiliar terms
     - Compile a list of questions
   - When working on the assignment, always keep the assignment sheet /guidelines right beside you and refer to it often to keep yourself on the right track and to ensure you have included everything required.

3. Know your PURPOSE and AUDIENCE
   - Instructors give writing assignments so students can demonstrate their knowledge and/or their ability to apply knowledge. In addition, your instructor is often evaluating your critical thinking skills.
   - Some instructors detail explicitly what they intend to evaluate and many even provide a rubric or score sheet...while others do not give many details
   - Another critical component to a writing assignment is audience.
Obviously the person evaluating your essay is typically the audience most students consider first. But your instructor may identify a separate audience to whom you should tailor your response...DO NOT ignore this audience! Analyzing the background, existing knowledge, needs, and concerns of your audience will help you make more informed decisions about word choice, structure, tone, and/or content in your paper.

4. Locate and Understand Directive Verbs
   - One thing you should do when interpreting a writing assignment is locate the directive verbs and know what the instructor means by them.
     - Directive Verbs = verbs that tell you what you should do in order to formulate a written response.
     - Common Directive Verbs:
       - Analyze
       - Defend
       - Illustrate
       - Apply
       - Describe
       - Investigate
       - Argue
       - Design
       - Narrate
       - Compare
       - Contrast
       - Discuss
       - Show
       - Consider
       - Explain
       - Summarize
       - Explore
       - Synthesize
       - Create
       - Evaluate
   - Use the following steps to develop an understanding of the assignment’s directive verbs to help you create an effective response:
     1. Look up the verb in a dictionary and write down all the definitions
     2. List all possible synonyms or related terms and look those up as well; then see if any of these terms suggest a clearer interpretation of what the assignment is asking you to do.
     3. Write down several methods you could use to approach the assignment
     4. Consult with your instructor
     5. Consult a trusted peer or SASS writing consultant
     6. Figure out what you know.
       - Use a chart to decipher an assignment’s purpose by listing what you know, what you think you know, and what you do not know about what the assignment is asking you to do.
   - 5. Ask yourself: do I need an argument?
• Perhaps one of the most important things to know is whether or not your instructor is asking you to formulate and support an argument.
• Look for clues in the assignment indicating a need for evidence...if you need evidence, you’ll probably need an argument

6. Consider the evidence
• If your assignment mentions a minimum number of required sources, references a particular citation style, or suggests scholarly journals to review during your research, then these are telltale signs you will need to find and use evidence
  o What qualifies as evidence...some examples:
    ▪ Personal Narrative
    ▪ Narrative Examples (historical or hypothetical)
    ▪ Statistics (or numerical forms of data) and facts
    ▪ Graphs, charts, or other visual representatives of data
    ▪ Expert opinion
    ▪ Research results
  o Each type of evidence offers benefits and drawbacks
• So how do you know what types of evidence works best? Know the field you’re writing in : what types of evidence it values, why it’s valuable, and what sources provide that evidence. Some other questions to consider:
  o Where, in the paper, is the most effective place for this evidence?
  o What type of evidence is required?
  o What type of evidence would support my argument effectively?
  o What kind of evidence would most convince my audience?
  o What’s the best way to integrate this evidence into my ideas?
  o What reference/citation style does this discipline use?

7. Calculate the best approach – how to structure your essay.
• Structure is the way you construct and organize your ideas and move from one idea to the next.
• Typical structural patterns include:
  o Question/answer
  o Comparison/contrast
  o Problem/solution
  o Methodology
  o Cause/effect
  o Narration/reflection
  o Description/illustration
  o Classification/division
  o Thesis/support
- Analysis/synthesis
- Theory/application

- These patterns can be used individually or in combination with each other
- Some instructors clearly detail how you should structure your essay and others do not
- Learn what structures are useful in particular writing situations to accurately and effectively deliver your message
- Know what structures are acceptable within the discipline you are writing...examine scholarly publications in that field to help you identify commonly used structural patterns.

8. Understand and adhere to formatting and style guidelines

- Writing assignments usually provide guidelines regarding format and/or style. Requirements like word count or page length, font type or size, margins, line spacing, and citation styles fall into this category.
- Most instructors have clear expectations based on official academic styles: MLA, APA, CMS, or CSE
  - If your instructor specifically references a style then locate a handbook or manual, so you’ll know how to cite your sources and format your document
  - Occasionally an instructor may modify a style to meet his or her personal preferences...make sure you follow the directives from the instructor so you do not lose points unnecessarily

9. Identify your available resources and ask questions

- Even after following these steps you may still have questions. When this happens, you should know who your resources are:
  - Your primary resource is ALWAYS your instructor
  - The library
  - SASS Writing Consultants

Adapted from:

To make an appointment with a Writing Consultant go to: http://library.defiance.edu/studio/writinghelp

For more information contact:
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