How to Read an Assignment

(Adapted from UNC's website, on http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/readassign.html)

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

- **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 list the important ideas you learned about the subject
- **trace** — outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form
- **research** — gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you have found

Relation Words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- **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. Do not see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by concrete evidence. Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation.

- **assess** — summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **prove, justify** — give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth
- **evaluate, respond** — state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons
- **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 have not been put together in class or in your readings before; do not just summarize one and then the other, and say that they are similar or different--you must provide a reason for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper
- **analyze** — determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, figure out how something works, what it might mean, or why it is important
- **argue** — take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side