Prewriting is an important part of the writing process. It encompasses all preliminary work done before writing your first draft of an assignment. Sometimes you will work extremely hard on an assignment only to lose points for not fulfilling the assignment requirements. Spending an appropriate amount of time prewriting can ensure you do not have to re-write sections, or your whole assignment, to properly address the assignment details. In this section, we will outline tips/skills for understanding university assignment details.

It is worth noting that university assignments differ from high school assignments in a number of ways. They are typically longer, or involve multiple parts, worth more of your grade, and ask that students demonstrate higher-order thinking. While high school assignments may have asked for memory, summary skills, or response-style answers, university assignments ask that students move beyond these skills and apply the knowledge they have learned through analysis or evaluation built on critical reading and thinking.

Categories in the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

So, how can you ensure that you are meeting higher-level learning objectives and fulfilling assignment guidelines? Begin by close reading the assignment guidelines.

Understand directive terms
Your assignment details and guidelines may be quite lengthy; therefore, it is important to be able to pick out what you are supposed to do in the assignment. Are you being asked to summarize? Analyze? Discuss? Reflect? These are examples of directive verbs: words that direct and specify what kind of action you should take and thus indicate how you should structure your assignment. Read through the assignment details and highlight, circle, or underline all of the directive verbs that indicate the kind of writing you are being asked to do. Once you have circled “analyze,” for example, you will need to understand what analysis means in the context of your assignment and discipline. If you are unsure what analysis entails, use Monash University’s guide to understanding these directive terms.
Identify the type of assignment and key words
The type of assignment (essay, annotated bibliography, lab report) should be clearly noted in the assignment details. Your professors may have discussed what the assignment should look like, or you might have been given a rubric or outline; however, if you are still confused about how to begin an assignment, take a look at the Writing in... section of the Writing Centre Resource Guide. Here, you will be able to find the department or discipline you are studying and will be able to view the kinds of assignments that are typically asked of students as well as access sample assignments. Keep your eye out for key words and important details like the length of the assignment, whether you need to include secondary sources, if you are supposed to be responding to a concept from lectures or tutorials, what citation style you should use, and/or what style of writing is expected (rhetorical/persuasive, concise, passive vs active voice).

Establish the Audience
Once you have identified and understood the type of assignment you are being asked to prepare, you can think about the audience. Establishing the audience for your assignment will help ensure that you are writing in a manner that makes sense for the assignment. Think about the level of information that is required. If you are asked to write an essay, your professors might note that you do not need to include a summary of the novel in question because they, as well as the TAs, are familiar with the text. Try to find a balance between summary-style contextual information and leaving out key details that are needed to make sense of your inclusion of evidence. Determining whether to include background information or summary will help you begin planning for your assignment. The other important topic to remember when establishing the audience is tone: is the assignment meant to be formal (research paper, or lab report which usually omit the personal pronoun “I”) or informal (reflection where the personal pronoun is encouraged)? The assignment description should give you an idea of what tone you should use.

Manage your time
One of the most challenging parts of the Prewriting stage is managing your time. Make sure you know when the assignment is due and whether it has been broken into multiple parts with corresponding due dates. Maybe the final assignment isn’t due for three weeks, but you have an in-tutorial peer editing session in two weeks, which means you’ll have to have a working draft completed ahead of the final deadline. Often, professors will break a final assignment (like a research paper) up into smaller pieces (thesis statement/hypothesis, annotated bibliography, paper outline, peer-editing session, and final paper). Breaking assignments up so that you build upon each one means that you will be working on the final product over a longer chunk of time in stages – this assignment strategy eliminates the option of pulling an “all-nighter” to write the entire assignment the day before it is due. After you determine the due date(s), you can work backwards to figure out how much time you will need to complete each stage of the assignment, and when you need to begin working on it in earnest. Try using Dalhousie’s Assignment Calculator if you struggle with creating self-imposed deadlines for your assignments.

Use all the resources available to you
Another technique for managing your time is to book an appointment at The Writing Centre. It’s a common misconception that the Writing Centre is only willing and able to help with
completed drafts. In fact, many tutors and many students find that some of the most productive sessions they have together come before pen has been put to paper. Some students come simply to “talk things out” with a supportive audience, seeing how well they are able to find the words to express their ideas, and how well the tutor is able to understand them. Others like to have a tutor present they can ask questions of while drawing up an outline for their paper. Essentially, no time is too early in the writing process to make an appointment with the Writing Centre. If you struggle with time management, make an appointment for the date you would like to have material completed; having a scheduled appointment will help make you more accountable. Even if you don’t finish everything you had planned before the appointment, come anyways: the writing tutors are happy to help you with prewriting skills.

Additionally, read the class syllabus or Brightspace page and figure out your professors’ office hours. Email in advance or stop by and come prepared with specific questions (such as about the tone, or the type of assignment). If your course has a TA, you can also go see them and ask for help understanding the assignment guidelines.

Finally, think about why your professors have asked you to complete this particular assignment. Certainly, they are interested in seeing that you have read and understood the course material but think beyond this learning objective and think about what skills they are looking for you to develop through working on this assignment. You know your purpose for completing assignments, but it is helpful to think about your professors’ purposes in creating assignments for your courses. If you can figure out their purposes, it may give you insight into tackling the structure, tone, or writing style for your assignments.