Dissecting Prompts

What is dissecting the prompt?

In science dissection is the disassembly and examination of parts to determine the inner workings of the whole or the system. As strange as it may sound, the same thing is possible in writing (or any academic endeavor) It goes without saying that to generate an effective response to a prompt, you—the student, the writer—must understand what is being asked of you. You must understand the requirements, the specifics, the parameters, or the limits of the prompt. This way you won’t end up creating a paper or response that is totally off topic.

Before dissecting, consider that a prompt:

● Usually indicates tone, audience, and response format
● Often does not have a single question or answer, but set of directions
● Requires your direct and authoritative response

Dissecting the prompt means you:

● Critically read and find the requirements and expectations as outlined in the prompt (e.g. page count, number of sources required, due dates, etc.).
● Identify any choices (e.g. compare and/or contrast; analyze; interpret; defend, challenge or qualify; etc.)
● Determine if the prompt lets you to choose topics or approaches (e.g. you might discuss; include at least; some items to consider...)
● Check for language requirements. Is this a narrative response that allows personal references? Is this a literary analysis, or critical analysis paper requiring external support or evidence?
● Decide upon an appropriate writing strategy based on the type of essay. If it is APA or MLA style research paper, what approach or format will you use? What strategy would you use for a reflective essay? An analytical essay?