

Directive Words

To complete an assignment properly, you need to understand exactly what the task is asking you to do. Here are some common instruction words used in assignments and their explanations.

Account for: Explain the reasons for how and why something occurred; consider the cause (reason) and effect (outcome).

Analyse/examine/explore: Look at something (such as an argument, idea, topic) in detail; break it down into its key parts or features; understand how the features relate to each other in order to build the 'whole' argument, idea, or subject .

Argue: Present a systematic case either supporting or rejecting an idea or theory, by stating reasons and evidence for your decision; acknowledge that there are two sides to the argument, but provide reasons and evidence for opposing the claim or the conclusion.

Comment on: Identify the main issues or ideas, then express an opinion or viewpoint based upon evidence from readings, lectures, seminars and tutorials.

Compare: Show the similarities between two or more issues or theories based on your research. Explain why these similarities are important and these may impact on real-world examples.

Contrast/differentiate/distinguish: Identify the main differences between two or more items and explain their significance and consequences based on evidence gained through your research.

IMPORTANT— Please note this..

It is often necessary to compare and contrast a topic, even if the assignment simply directs you to 'compare'. If you are unsure what to do, check assignment expectations with your tutor or lecturer. You can also come to the Help Desk in the library for advice on this.

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Critical Thinking is...

Critically evaluate: Make a judgement about an issue, statement or theory based upon your careful assessment of the information and also through reference to sources you have read. How do you do this? Build a systematic argument to support your final judgement and make sure you include all sides of the issue. Construct a set of criteria in order to assess the arguments, theories or opinions outlined in the source (s) in order to decide which ones are the strongest or the most relevant.

Criticise: Discuss *both* the *merits* (positives) and *faults* (negatives) of a theory, statement or article. This should be based on your academic reading and the evidence you have selected to help you reach a final judgement about its overall value in either academia, government policy or industry.

Define: a) Give the precise meaning of a word or phrase in a specific context and explain the necessity for this definition and any problems that may arise from this definition. b) Determine and distinctly set the boundaries of a particular word, phrase, theory or situation in the context of the assignment.

Describe: Provide details of the main features or characteristics of an object, theory or event.

Discuss: Consider all sides of an issue by providing evidence for and against the topic. You need to reach a conclusion based on the points you have presented.

Evaluate/assess: Make a judgement of the importance or usefulness of something by considering its strengths and weaknesses. Research, explain and expand on a range of perspectives, academic positions or theories and use these as evidence to support your final judgement and conclusion.

Explain: Clearly demonstrate how and why something happens or is constructed in a particular way.

Illustrate: Make something clear and easily understood through the use of examples and evidence. It may also include diagrams and figures in addition to written explanations.

Critical Thinking is...

Interpret: Clearly explain the importance and meaning of data, figures, legal cases, statistics or other types of information.

Investigate: Research, inquire into all aspects of the topic. This may involve collecting your own original research data.

Justify: To explain or defend your decision or judgement through arguments, supporting evidence, consideration of objections and/or explanations regarding a decision-making process.

Outline: Give only the main points of a theory, situation or topic and put them in a logical order (for example, in order of time, importance, value). Be sure to explain the relationship between each point.

Relate: Clearly show the relationships or connections between theories, ideas and events and so on. Consider their similarities and differences as well as their effects upon each other.

Review: Identify the main theories, issues or events in a subject area by briefly summarising and explaining their importance or relationship to the current situation.

State: Identify and clearly express the main features of a theory.

Summarise: Provide only the main points or information without including examples or details.

To what extent: Clearly express the level to which you agree or disagree with something.

Trace: research, identify and describe the stages and events regarding the development of an idea, policy or process.

If you require additional information about how to apply these words to your assignment, please go to the Help Desk in the library where a Learning Skills Adviser can assist you.