

UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTIONAL WORDS IN ESSAYS, ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMS

Before you can answer a question, you need to know what it means. When you are trying to understand the question look for instructional words, words that tell you what to do. Examples of these are analyse, describe and review.

The table below provides a list of instructional words and explains clearly what they require you to do in your essay, assignment or exam.

Analyse	Break down a topic into parts. Look in depth at each part using supporting arguments and evidence for and against.
Argue	Present reasons and evidence to support or reject a position or viewpoint.
Assess/Evaluate	Decide how important, useful, valuable or effective something is and give your reasons and evidence.
Classify	Arrange information into groups.
Comment	Present your opinion on the topic and back up your opinion with relevant evidence/information.
Compare	Identify similarities between two or more things.
Contrast	Identify differences between two or more things.
Compare and Contrast	Identify and discuss both the similarities and differences between ideas/topics etc.
Criticise/Critique	Give your judgement about the value or truth of something. Discuss both positive and negative points. Support with evidence.
Define	Clearly state the exact meaning of something.
Demonstrate/Illustrate	Use examples or evidence to clarify and support your answer.
Describe	Give a detailed account of something. No explanation or interpretation is required.
Diagram	Make a graph, chart or drawing to illustrate an idea. Label it and include a brief explanation.
Discuss	Present both sides of an issue/subject with evidence and then draw conclusions.
Elaborate	Provide more detail with reasons and examples.
Examine	Investigate closely a topic/issue etc.
Explain	Make something clear by providing reasons and evidence.
Identify	Select relevant details and discuss these.
Interpret	Examine a statement or idea and give a clear explanation/judgement of what it means.
Justify	Use evidence to support an argument or idea. The aim is to convince the reader.
List	Give a concise numbered list of things or ideas.
Outline	Give the main points, do not include detail.
Prove	Establish the truth of something using evidence.
Relate	Show how things are connected or related to each other.
State	Briefly and clearly present the main points.
Summarise	Give a concise account of the key points of the topic removing unnecessary detail.
Trace	Describe the development or history of a topic from some point of origin.