Directive Words

Read your academic tasks carefully to identify key *directive* words. These words, also known as *instruction* words, direct the approach you must take to complete your assigned task. Become familiar with these terms and your understanding of set tasks will increase.

A number of the most commonly used Directive Words and their meanings are listed below:

*Account for:* To give reasons for; to explain why something happens.

*Analyse:* To examine in very close detail; to identify important points and chief features.

*Argue:* To present the case for and/or against a particular proposition.

*Assess:* To weigh something up and to consider how valuable it may be.

*Comment on:* To identify and to write about the main issues, giving your reactions based upon what you have read or heard in lectures. Avoid purely personal opinion.

*Compare:* To show how two or more things are similar; to indicate the relevance or consequences of these similarities.

*Contrast:* To set two or more items or arguments in opposition so as to draw out differences; to indicate whether the differences are significant. If appropriate, give reasons why one item or argument may be preferable.

*Critically Evaluate:* To weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.

*Critique:* To give your judgment about the merit of theories or opinions about the truth of facts, and back your judgment by a discussion of the evidence; to show the good and bad points of something, looking at any implications.

*Define:* To give the exact meaning of; where relevant, to show that you understand why the definition may be problematic.

*Describe:* To give the main characteristics or features of something, or to outline the main events.

*Discuss:* To write about the most important aspects of (probably including criticism); to give arguments for and against; to consider the implications of.

*Distinguish:* To bring out the differences between two items.

*Enumerate:* To list or specify and describe.

*Evaluate:* Assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something, using evidence. There will probably be cases to be made both for and against.
**Examine**: To look at a subject in depth taking note of the detail and if appropriate, consider the implications.

**Explain**: To clearly express why something happens, or why something is the way it is.

**Explore**: To examine thoroughly from different viewpoints.

**Illustrate**: To make something very clear and explicit, by providing examples or evidence.

**Interpret**: To give the meaning and relevance of information presented.

**Justify**: To give evidence which supports an argument or idea: show why decisions or conclusions were made, considering objections that others might make.

**Narrate**: To concentrate on saying what happened, telling it as a story.

**Outline**: To give only the main points, showing the main structure.

**Prove**: To demonstrate truth or falsity by presenting evidence.

**Relate**: To show similarities and connections between two or more things.

**Review**: To make a survey of, examining the subject critically.

**State**: To give the main features, in very clear English (almost like a simple list but written in full sentences).

**Summarise**: To give a concise account of the main points only, omitting details or examples.

**To what extent**: To consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which the proposition is not true. (The answer is usually somewhere between ‘completely’ and ‘not at all’.)

**Trace**: To follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

**Verify**: To check out and report on the accuracy of something.


**Further Reading**


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