

Common instruction words you will see in assessments

Every assessment will have a main topic and will require you to address that topic in a particular way. It will have information about what you need to write about and it will have information about how you need to write about the topic. Many students lose marks because they either do not:

- (a) address the topic of the task (they don't address the what), or
- (b) answer the assessment task in the way the marker expects (they don't address the how).

In every assessment task you will find words which tell you what the assessment should be about and words which tell you how to go about addressing the topic.

The words which tell you what the assessment should be about are commonly called **content words**.

The words which tell you how to go about answering the task are commonly called **instruction words**.

There are countless topics that you can be asked to write about but there is a limited number of ways you can be instructed on how to address a task.

The following table identifies the typical instruction words you will find in your assessment task instructions, with an explanation of the meaning of these words (i.e., specifically what the instruction word is directing you to do in your assessment).

Typical instruction words you are likely to see in an assessment task	
Instruction word	What it means
Account for	Explain how something happens or happened.
Analyse	Examine in close detail. Identify important points and primary features.
Comment on	Identify and write about the main issues. Base what you write on what you have read or heard in lectures. Avoid purely personal opinion.
Compare	Show how two or more things are similar. Identify the relevance or consequences of these similarities.
Contrast	The opposite of compare. Point out what is different. Identify whether or not the differences are significant. If appropriate, provide reasons why one item or argument might be preferable.
Critically evaluate	Examine arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use your research to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.
Define	Write the exact meaning of a term in your discipline or unit of study. Don't use a regular dictionary meaning. Use the meaning that is standard in your field of study.
Describe	Write a description (i.e. an explanation) of an item or concept. Provide the main characteristics or features of something.
Discuss	Similar to critically evaluate. Provide arguments and evidence for and against something and provide considered judgment or an appropriately referenced argument.
Distinguish	Compare the differences between two or more things.
Evaluate	Similar to critically evaluate. Use evidence to assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something. There will probably be cases to be made both for and against.
Examine	Similar to analyse. Put the subject 'under the microscope', looking at it in detail. If appropriate, critically evaluate as well.
Explain	Make clear how or why something happens or is the way it is.
Illustrate	Make something clear and explicit, giving examples or evidence.
Interpret	Show what data or other material presented means or implies. Interpretation often occurs after analysis.
Justify	Provide evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why decisions or conclusions were made.
Narrate	Concentrate on saying what happened, telling it as a story.
Outline	Provide only the main points.
Relate	Show how two or more things connect, or align to each other.
State	Provide the main features, in very clear English (almost like a simple list but written in full sentences).
Summarise	Similar to outline. Draw out/describe the main points only. Leave out details or examples.
To what extent	Consider how far or how much something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. The answer is usually somewhere between 'completely' and 'not at all'.

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