

# Common instruction words you will see in Assignments

## Common instruction words used in assignment questions

Every assignment 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 question (they don't address the **what**)  
or
- (b) answer the question in the way the marker expects (they don't address the **how**).

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

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

The words which tell you how to go about answering the question 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 **how** to address a task.

This guide is about **instruction** words.

## Academic Skills Quick Guide

### What is in this guide

- A short discussion about **content** and **instruction** words in assignment questions.
- A table of common instruction words and what they mean.
- Related Quick Guide.

### Typical instruction words you are likely to come across in an assignment

Instruction word	What it means
Account for	Explain how it is that something happens or happened.
Analyse	Examine in close detail. Identify important points and chief 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. Indicate the relevance or consequences of these similarities.
Contrast	The opposite of compare. Point out what is different. Indicate whether or not the differences are significant. If appropriate, give 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	Say what something is. Give the exact meaning. Don't use a regular dictionary meaning. Use the meaning that is standard in your field of study.
Describe	Say what something is like. Give the main characteristics or features of something.
Discuss	Similar to critically evaluate. Give arguments and evidence for and against something and make some judgment.

## Typical instruction words you are likely to come across in an assignment

Instruction word	What it means
Distinguish	Bring out 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 <i>for</i> and <i>against</i> .
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.
Justify	Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why decisions or conclusions were made.
Narrate	Concentrate on saying <i>what</i> happened, telling it as a story.
Outline	Give only the main points.
Relate	Show how two or more things connect.
State	Give the main features, in very clear English (almost like a simple list but written in full sentences).
Summarise	Similar to outline. Draw out 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'.
Trace	Follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

## Related Quick Guide

[Analysing assignment tasks](#)