

Direction Words

Below is a list of key words often used in assignment questions together with an explanation.

Do not assume that these terms are used with *exactly* these meanings by academics setting essay topics. As you can see, there are often no hard edges between many of these so called "direction words". The explanations are intended as a guide only.

ANALYSE	Show the nature of a thing by identifying the essential elements and showing how they are related. Weaknesses or disadvantages may come to light in this process.
ARGUE	Present the case for and/or against a particular proposition.
COMMENT ON	Point out the important features, criticise.
COMPARE	Identify characteristics or qualities that resemble each other. Emphasise similarities and also mention differences where appropriate.
CONTRAST	Stress the dissimilarities and differences between things, events, problems, or qualities.
CRITICISE	Express your judgement about the merit or truth of the factors or views mentioned. Draw conclusions, discussing both the limitations and the good points.
DEFINE	Provide concise, clear, and authoritative meanings. Give the limits of the definition, but omit detailed explanations. Show how the item defined differs from items in other classes.
DESCRIBE	Recount, characterise, outline, and relate in sequence.
DIAGRAM	A drawing, chart, plan, or graph. Diagrams should be labelled and there should be an accompanying explanation.
DISCUSS	Examine, analyse carefully, and give reasons for and against. Be complete and give details, usually with a view to assessing <i>how satisfactory</i> something is.
EVALUATE	Carefully appraise in relation to some standard, referring to advantages, limitations, and costs and benefits as appropriate; attempt to come to a judgement.

EXAMINE	Investigate critically, appraise a subject in detail.
EXPLAIN	Clarify, interpret, and elaborate on the material presented. Give reasons for differences of opinion or results, and try to analyse causes.
ILLUSTRATE	Use a concrete example, diagram, or figure to explain or clarify a problem.
INDICATE	Identify, then focus attention so as to clarify.
JUSTIFY	Prove or give reasons for conclusions or decisions.
OUTLINE	Present the essential features, showing main points and subordinate points. Omit minor details. Stress the arrangement or classification of things.
REVIEW	Examine a subject critically, analysing and commenting on the important or controversial statements.
STATE	Present the main points in a brief and clear sequence, usually omitting details or examples.
SUMMARISE	Give the main points or facts in condensed form.