

ACADEMIC WRITING: UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

- Correctly answer essay and exam questions by paying close attention to important action verbs (e.g., compare, evaluate, list) embedded in the questions. Each action verb is a key word that tells you how to structure and develop your answer.
- Circle, underline or highlight the action verbs, as well as other key words, when reading a question. Know the specific meaning of the action verbs to prevent misunderstanding the question and, consequently, providing an incomplete or off-topic answer—this is a common exam error!
- The following is a list of action verbs often used in essay and exam questions. Write the letter for the verb on the line in front of the correct definition. Each verb is used only once.

General definitions are provided in this exercise. To ensure that you have correctly interpreted a specific essay or exam question, check with your instructor.

Verbs	Academic Writing Tasks
A. Analyze	_____ 1. Give a detailed description, graphic account or “picture” of the subject (e.g., characteristics, qualities, parts).
B. Compare	_____ 2. Assess, appraise or estimate the worth of a subject, noting pros and cons. State your opinion or cite an expert’s, and justify it with sufficient evidence (e.g., statistics, quotations, reasons, examples).
C. Contrast	_____ 3. Thoroughly review, examine, debate or argue the pros and cons of a subject. Note conflict. Compare and contrast providing detailed reasons.
D. Define	_____ 4. Enumerate or write down, one by one, several points about a subject (e.g., characteristics, reasons, qualities). Usually paragraph form is not required.
E. Describe	_____ 5. Give a detailed explanation with reasons. Support or justify by showing logical development and providing details (e.g., example, causes, results).
F. Discuss	_____ 6. Break the subject into its main parts or ideas. Provide a detailed discussion, examination or interpretation of each.
G. Evaluate	_____ 7. Provide an exact, concise and authoritative meaning--often from a specialized field. Note essential qualities that distinguish it from a similar one. Give an example or illustration, if appropriate or requested.
H. Explain	_____ 8. Explain or make clear by giving concrete evidence (e.g., examples, comparisons, analogies, drawings, figures, diagrams).
I. Illustrate	_____ 9. Describe the similarities and differences.
J. List	_____ 10. Provide a brief, concise, condensed account of the subject (e.g., main ideas or events). Include conclusions, but omit unnecessary details.
K. Summarize	_____ 11. Describe the differences between subjects.

References

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- Feldman, Robert S., and Sheila Chick. *Power Learning: Strategies for Success in Higher Education and Life*. 1st Canadian ed. Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2003.
- Oxford University Press. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford UP, 1998.
- University of Regina Counselling Services. *Study Skills*. Regina, SK: U Regina, n.d.
- Van Blerkom, Dianna L. *College Study Skills: Becoming a Strategic Learner*. 3rd ed. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2000.

Answer Key: Verbs & Academic Writing Tasks

1. E = describe
2. G = evaluate
3. F = discuss
4. J = list
5. H = explain
6. A = analyze
7. D = define
8. I = illustrate
9. B = compare
10. K = summarize
11. C = contrast