



Understanding your Writing Assignments

There are lots of different kinds of writing assignments in university. You can use this chart to get a sense of what your professor is asking you to do with common assignment words.

For specific assignment questions, be sure to ask your instructor for help.

Assignment Word	What it means	How to Get Started
Analyze	Break concepts or sections into component parts and talk about how the parts make up a whole.	Don't just summarize the elements; show how they work together to make patterns, arguments, or claims.
Compare	Show similarities between two or more concepts or ideas.	Define the similarities and what the similarities mean. Note: assignments often ask students to "compare and contrast" – make sure you do both in these cases.
Contrast	Show differences between two or more concepts or ideas.	Define the differences and what the differences mean. Note: assignments often ask students to "compare and contrast" – make sure you do both in these cases.
Critique	Analyze and make a judgement about a concept.	Explain what is wrong (and what is right) about a concept. Include your own ideas, which need to be supported with evidence and quotes from experts that support your judgement.
Define	Describe the meaning of a word, phrase, or concept.	Define the concept, idea, or problem in your own words. Use evidence to support your definition.

Discuss	Explain a problem, the origins of an idea, or a concept.	Talk about the key questions, ideas, and concepts around the issue. Make sure you explore all the relevant data and information.
Explain	Clarify and give the reasons for something.	Talk about why things happen, and the issues involved.
Illustrate	Used to demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter.	You might talk about all the component parts, and you could answer using charts, graphs, and tables.
Prove	Provide evidence and arguments that something is true.	You will need to prove that something (a theory, a formula, or an idea) is true, and may need to discuss why other ideas are not true.
Summarize	Give a brief and precise description of the idea, concept, or argument in your own words.	Make sure you cover all the main points. Focus on putting the thing you're summarizing into your own words to make sure you understand it.

You will notice that many of these direction words have some overlap with each other. Academic writing requires that you be a bit more flexible in your style.