

Understanding writing assignments: “Instruction/task words”

You’re looking at your assignment handout, trying to figure out what you’re supposed to do. You know you need to write something—but how can you be sure you’re on the right track?

You’ll want to **analyze** a writing assignment to determine how to go about responding.

Look for words that represent these three things:

- **Topic/content words** identify the subject matter or material the assignment asks you to address.
- **Instruction/task words** tell you what you should *do* in your discussion of the topic.
- **Restricting/limiting words** tell you more specifically how to focus your response.

Example:

instruction/task

topic/content

“Explain how women’s social roles helped shape the culture of pioneer communities in the American West.”

restricting/limiting

Instructors use lots of different **instruction/task** words in writing assignments. Use this list to help you clarify what your assignment is asking you to do.

Account for	Give reasons for
Analyze	Break down the information into its constituent parts and examine it in detail
Compare	Find similarities and differences between two or more objects, ideas, events or theories, agreements/ disagreements, advantages/ disadvantages
Consider	Take into account, weigh advantages & disadvantages (compare)
Contrast	Similar to compare, but differences should be emphasized

Criticize	Assess the merit of something. Consider both good points and bad points and give the results of your analysis
Define	Give precise meanings with key details. Examples may be useful
Demonstrate	Show how, prove with examples
Describe	Recall specific details about size, cost, texture, appearance etc.
Differentiate	Explain the differences between, distinguish
Discuss	Present a point of view after considering both sides of an issue or question. Your opinion should be supported by arguments and evidence.
Evaluate	Consider both strengths and weaknesses and make a judgment.
Explain	Relate how something happens in the order in which it occurs, or clarify reasons, causes and effects.
Illustrate	Use examples to demonstrate a point.
Interpret	Express in your own words. Examples may be useful.
List	Write your answer as an itemized series, which may be in point form.
Outline	Provide main points and leave out minor details.
Prove	Give factual evidence, examples or clear logical reasons which demonstrate the validity of a statement/idea.
Relate	Tell the story in clear sequence, or, show how things are connected or similar to each other.
Review	Examine a subject critically, analyzing and commenting on the main points.
State	Present the main points in brief, clear sequence.
Summarize	Give the main points or facts in condensed form.
To what extent...	How true is it to say that? Give evidence.
Trace	Follow the development of something from its origin.