



Understanding assignments and instruction words

Understanding the assignment task is an important first step. If you are not clear about what you are expected to do in your assignment, you could waste a lot of time and receive a poor mark because 'you didn't answer the question'. When you analyse the assignment task carefully, you can identify the specific focus so that you:

- are clear what direction to take with your research
- ensure you address **all** aspects of the assignment

How do I analyse the question?

Step 1: Read the question and check the meaning of any words or phrases you do not understand.

Step 2: Identify and understand the **instruction word(s)**.

Instruction words tell you what you need to do for the assignment. For example:

Discuss the significant factors which contribute to successful study at university.

- Check what it means to 'discuss' something in the list of 'Instruction words' on page 2 of this resource.

Step 3: Identify and understand the **key content words**.

Content words tell you what the topic of the assignment is. Each main point you make in your paper needs to be relevant to these key content words. For example:

Discuss the **significant factors** which contribute to **successful study at university**.

- Your focus will be on factors related to successful study, specifically at university and not elsewhere.

Step 4: Identify and understand the **limits** of the assignment task.

Limits include the length expectations and due date of the paper. For example:

Length: 1500 words

- This will limit the number of factors you choose to focus on in your paper.

Due: May 17

- This will dictate how much time you have to plan, research, draft and finalise your paper.

It may also include other specific guidelines such as particular resources, structure, layout and referencing style.



Note 1: Sometimes you are asked to discuss a statement or quote. The statement or quote often presents one opinion or ‘position’ on a topic. You need to explain that view and discuss it in relation to the positions of other writers.

Note 2: Where the wording of an assignment task is long, break the task into smaller sections or a series of questions. Make sure you understand how each part links to the other parts of the task, so that all aspects are answered in your assignment. If you are still not sure, check your interpretation with other class mates or your lecturer/tutor if possible.

Instruction words

An instruction word lets you know how to approach your assignment task. Here is a list of instruction words commonly used in assignment tasks and an interpretation of what they mean.

Table 1: Instruction words and their meanings (adapted from Marshall & Rowland 1993, Peters 1985)

| Instructions | Meaning |
|-------------------|--|
| analyse | examine something closely in terms of its parts and how they are related to each other |
| argue | present a case for and/or against something |
| assess | decide on the value of something |
| compare | discuss two or more things in terms of their similarities and differences |
| criticise | give a judgement and support it with evidence |
| define | make clear what is meant by something; or use a definition(s) to explore a concept |
| describe | present a detailed account of something |
| discuss | offer some interpretation or evaluation of something; present a judgment on the value of arguments for and against something |
| enumerate | give an item by item account of something |
| evaluate | form a judgment about the value of something |
| examine | inspect something in detail and investigate the implications |
| explain | make clear the details of something; show the reason for, or underlying cause of, or the means by which something occurs |
| illustrate | offer an example(s) to show how or that something happens; explain a concept by giving examples |
| interpret | make clear the meaning of something and its implications |



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|-------------------------|---|
| <i>justify</i> | give reasons why certain decisions should be made, or certain conclusions reached |
| <i>outline</i> | go through and identify briefly the main features of something |
| <i>prove</i> | show by logical argument |
| <i>review</i> | report the chief facts about something, or offer a criticism of something |
| <i>summarise</i> | describe something concisely |
| <i>trace</i> | identify and describe the development or history of something from some point, or from its origin |

References

Marshall, L & Rowland, F 1993, *A guide to learning independently*, 2nd edn, Longman Cheshire, Milton, Qld.

Peters, P 1985, *Strategies for student writers*, Wiley & Sons, Melbourne.