



Key Terms in Academic Writing: Understand the Verbs in Your Prompt

In order to write a quality essay or discussion, you must first have an understanding of what you are being asked to do. Understanding some of the terms used in your prompts will help you to better organize your thoughts and your research, which will help lead you to writing that quality paper.

Analyze

Break down the topic into its parts and explain how the parts relate to each other and to the whole.

Apply

Relate theoretical information to real-life examples; ask how this information "works" in a specific and concrete situation.

Argue

Examine a particular topic and the controversy that might surround it and take a stance or a position on the topic.

Make a case for a particular point of view that you have.

Convince your reader with support or evidence that they should see things the way that you do or take the same position on a topic that you have taken.

Compare/Contrast

To contrast is to examine and discuss the similarities between two or more areas of focus. To compare is to examine and discuss the differences between two or more areas of focus.

Define

Clarify a term, concept, or theory by giving the exact meaning of it according to a text, individual, culture, school of thought, or area of study. This is a way to categorize and differentiate this term/concept from others.

Describe

With a description, your reader should be able to have a clear image of your topic. What does this person, place, item, event, or situation look like, sound like, and feel like?

Discuss

This means to go beyond simply identifying an idea or topic. Examine and then tell your reader about the various aspects of this idea or topic.

Evaluate/Critique

Determine and assess the value, quality, effectiveness, or truth of your particular topic in how it meets a certain standard.

Explain

Clarify a topic by giving a detailed account as to what it is, how and why it occurs, or what is meant by the use of this term in a particular context.

Identify

Point out or make it known to your reader what the key points are of the topic you are discussing.

Interpret

Conclude or determine for your reader what is being stated or suggested, what is meant by, or what the significance of a text or event is as you see it.

Summarize

Condense a longer text, paragraph, concept, or theory into a shorter version by including only the most important points, written in your own words, and eliminating any non-essential details. The central idea and main points should be what is left for your reader.

Synthesize

Blend together research or information from several sources into one cohesive discussion.