



## Definitions of Verbs Commonly Used on Assignments

**Analyze:** to divide something into its parts in order to understand it better, then to see how the parts work together to produce the overall pattern. Analyzing a problem may require you to identify a number of smaller problems that are related to the overall problem.

**Compare:** to look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify their similarities. Instructions to compare things often are intended to imply that you may also contrast them.

**Contrast:** to identify the differences between things.

**Criticize/Critique:** to analyze and judge something. Criticism can be either positive or negative, as the case warrants. A criticism should generally contain your own judgments (supported by evidence) in addition to whatever authorities you might invoke.

**Define:** to give the meaning of a word or expression. Definitions should generally be clear and concise and conform with other people's understanding of the terms. Giving an example of something sometimes helps to clarify a definition, but giving an example is not in itself a definition.

**Describe:** to give a general verbal sketch or account of something, in narrative or other form.

**Diagram:** to show the parts of something and their relationships in pictorial form, such as a chart. You are usually expected to label the diagram, and you may be asked to explain it in words as well.

**Discuss:** to examine or analyze something in a broad and detailed way. Discussion often includes identifying the important questions related to an issue and attempting to answer these questions. Where there are several sides to an issue, a discussion involved presenting this variety of sides. A good discussion explores as much of the relevant evidence and information on a topic as it can.

**Enumerate:** to respond in the form of a concise list or outline rather than in great detail.

**Evaluate:** to judge the worth or truthfulness of something. Evaluation is similar to criticism, but the word evaluate places more stress on the idea of making some ultimate judgment about how well something meets a certain standard or fulfills some specific purpose. Evaluation involves discussing strengths and weaknesses.

**Explain:** to clarify or interpret something. Explanations generally focus on why or how something has come about. Explanations often require you to discuss evidence that may seem contradictory and to tell how apparent differences in evidence can be reconciled.

**Illustrate:** on an essay examination, to give one or more examples of something. Examples help to relate abstract ideas to concrete experience. Examples may show how something works in practice. Providing a good example is a way of showing you know your course material in detail. Sometimes the instruction to illustrate may be asking you to literally draw a diagram or picture. If you're uncertain of the intention, ask the instructor.

**Interpret:** to explain the meaning of something. For instance, in science you may be asked to interpret the evidence of an experiment, that is, to explain what the evidence shows and what conclusions can be drawn from it. In a literature course you may be asked to interpret a poem, that is, to explain what a specific passage or the poem as a whole means beyond the literal meaning of the words.

**Justify:** to argue in support of some decision or conclusion, to show sufficient evidence or reason in favor of something. Whenever possible, try to support your argument with both logical reasoning and concrete examples.

**Label:** to point to and name specific parts of a figure or illustration.

**List:** to present information in a series of short, discrete points.-See also enumerate.

**Narrate:** to tell a story, that is, a series of events in the order in which they occurred. Generally, when you are asked to narrate events, you are also asked to interpret or explain something about the events you are narrating.

**Outline:** to present a series of main points in appropriate order, omitting lesser details. Also, to present some information in the form of a series of short headings in which each major idea is followed by headings for smaller points or examples that fall under it. An outline shows the correct order and grouping of ideas.

**Prove:** to give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of the truth of some statement. Note, however, that academic disciplines differ in their methods of inquiry and therefore also differ in what they require in statements of proof.

**Relate:** to show the relationship between things. This can mean showing how they influence each other or how a change in one thing seems to depend on or accompany a change in the other. In showing how things relate, it's often a good idea to provide an example.

**Review:** to summarize and comment on the main parts of a problem or a series of statements or events in order. A review question usually also asks you to evaluate or criticize some aspect of the material.

**Summarize:** to give information in brief form, omitting examples and details. A summary should be short yet cover all of the most important points.

**Trace:** to narrate a course of events. Where possible, you should show connections from one event to the next. Tracing a sequence of events often points to gaps in the sequence that you may need to fill in by logical suppositions about what might link one event to the next.

Adapted from: Gardner, John N., and A. Jerome Jewler. *Your College Experience: Strategies for Success*. 2nd ed. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995.