



Common task words

Your assignment question may be a 'what', 'how' or 'why' question. But it may not have a question word at all. You may also find that your assignment uses more than one task word.

Here is a handy guide to common task words used in university assignments, and what they are asking you to do.

Account for

Explain why something has occurred. You are being asked to find out about the different factors that may have contributed to a particular state of affairs. You then have to decide which factors are most likely to have brought that situation about.

→ Example from Economics: **Account for** the economic success of the 'tiger' economy of Singapore during the 1960s. (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Analyse

Consider a concept, statement, or situation, identify the different components it is made up of, and describe how the components relate to each other. Your answer should be methodical and logically organised.

→ Example from History: **Analyse** the major social and technological changes that took place in European warfare between 1789 and 1871. (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Assess

Consider how true, reliable or beneficial an idea(s) or subject(s) is. You might present points for or against the idea(s), or state whether the idea(s) or subject(s) being discussed is valuable or relevant. You might also need to address counter-arguments. Your judgment should be influenced by other authors' views as well as your own opinion (similar to *Evaluate*).

→ Example from Law: **Assess** the arguments for and against Australia signing the Kyoto Protocol. (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Classify

Divide a topic into sub-topics, categories or classes in a systematic way.

→ Example from Education: **Classify** the resources and interventions being used in mathematics education at a school of your choice.

Comment on

State your opinion on a topic or idea. You may explain the topic or idea more fully. Your opinion must be expressed objectively and supported by evidence from reliable sources.

→ Example from Law: **Comment on the criminal justice system in Indonesia.**

Compare OR compare and contrast

Set the two items side by side and show their similarities and differences.

- Example from Sociology: **Compare and contrast Marxist and pluralist conceptions of politics, power and the state.** (Brick, 2011, p. 29)
- Example from Computing: **Compare 'Traditional File Processing' with the 'Database Management Approach'.** (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Contrast

Point out only the differences (not the similarities) between two or more topics.

→ Example from Linguistics: **Contrast the phonology of Australian English and British English.**

Critically

Often used in conjunction with other directive words, such as critically discuss, critically examine or critically analyse. It does not mean criticise. It is asking you to give a balanced answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses and any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. The decision or overall judgment you make must be supported with evidence from reliable sources.

→ Example from Management: **Critically analyse two major areas of risk in general contracting and construction management.** (Southampton Solent University, 2016)

Define

Explain the precise meaning of a concept. A definition answer will include a discussion of the concept and may also state the limits of the concept's meaning.

→ Example from Accounting: **Define inventory as it relates to a merchandiser.** (Brick, 2011, p. 28)

Describe

Identify and outline the attributes or characteristics of a subject.

→ Example from Nursing: **Describe the five phases of the nursing process and provide an example of a nursing activity that represents each phase.** (McDonald, 2014, p. 183)

Differentiate

See *Contrast*.

Discuss

Explain the item or concept, and then give details about it with supporting information, examples, points for and against, and explanations for the facts put forward from various points of view. This can be one of the most difficult types of essay question. You may be given a claim or statement to discuss, and/or a specific topic you need to relate your discussion to.

- Example from Information Technology: *'Human efficiency is more important than machine efficiency.'* **Discuss** this statement in relation to commercial software production. (Brick, 2011, p. 29)

Distinguish

Highlight the differences between two items. The items that you have to distinguish are sometimes things that are easily confused, so you are being asked to identify precise differences that may not be obvious to everyone.

- Example from Sociology: *Distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research methods.*

Enumerate

This requires you to list or specify and describe items or ideas one by one. You may be required to format your response as a list or outline.

- Example from Politics: *Enumerate the main differences between pluralist and elitist analyses of power distribution in liberal democracies.* (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Evaluate

See Assess.

Examine

Investigate a topic thoroughly. This may include identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a proposition.

- Example from Sociology: **Examine** sociological explanations for the 'divorce phenomenon'. (Monash University, 2007)

Explain

Offer a detailed and exact rationale behind an idea or principle, or a set of reasons for a situation or attitude. This is what you need to do in response to a 'why' or 'how' question. The explanation should increase the reader's understanding of a topic or idea.

- Example from History: **Explain** how the collapse of the Tokugawa regime in feudal Japan was inevitable. (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Explore

See *Examine*.

Hypothesise

Suggest the reasons for some phenomenon or situation and the processes by which it occurred. A hypothesis is a theory regarding particular occurrences. You confirm hypotheses through testing. So the hypothesis you come up with has to be testable.

- Example from Linguistics: **Hypothesise** about why there is less variation between Australian English dialects than between British English dialects.

Illustrate/demonstrate

Give concrete examples to explain a topic or phenomenon, or demonstrate the validity of a claim. You will often be given further instructions with this kind of task word.

- Example from Science/Social Science: **Hypothesise** about the origins of dog (*Canis familiaris*) domestication.

Interpret

Very similar to *Explain*. Describe what your subject means. Examine the key components of a topic or idea and give an evaluation of it. You may be required to interpret the subject in terms of a particular framework or theory specific to your discipline.

- Example from Education: 'Jemma (aged 14 years) fights a lot with her parents but not with her friends. She used to be a keen student but now seems to have lost interest in both her school studies (she wants to leave school next year) and outside school activities. But she does take a passionate interest in the environment and in boys.' **Interpret** these behaviours in the light of Erikson's stage theory on adolescence. (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Investigate

Research, study and carefully survey all areas of the subject.

- Example from Psychology: **Investigate** the effects of television viewing on children's perception of violence.

Outline

Summarise information about a subject. You should only include the main points, not the details. Questions of this type often require short answers.

- Example from Computing: **Outline** the stages of the software life cycle. (Brick, 2011, p. 28)

Relate (relationship)

Make links or connections between two or more ideas, and show how these ideas are associated, as well as the nature of the relationship.

- Example from History: **Relate** the development of archaeology in the 19th century to the social conditions during that period. (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Review

Analyse, criticise and comment on the main ideas of a topic. Your assignment needs to be structured in a logical order.

- Example from Science/Philosophy: **Review** the theory of relativity in the history of scientific thought.

State

Express the relevant points briefly and clearly without lengthy discussion or minor details. This is a purely descriptive task, so you are not expected to evaluate or give your opinion on the points you make.

- Example from Sociology: **State** the five characteristics of qualitative research.

Summarise

See *Outline*.

Trace

Describe in logical order the stages in the development of a theory, a person's life, a process, etc. 'Trace' is frequently used in historical questions (but not only in History courses).

- Example from History: **Trace** the archaeological origins of the Neolithic revolution in Egypt and the Sudan.

(Adapted from *UniStep Guide*, 2013, pp. 78-70).

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