

INTERPRET

Here you are expected to examine a statement or idea and give a clear explanation what it means, and what the implications of this interpretation are

JUSTIFY

To justify means that you are required to give reasons for a position or argument. You need to provide supporting evidence and explanations for your position.

OUTLINE

An outline is a summary of all the available information about a topic in a logical order, and should explain the relationship between each point. An outline should just be the main points, without any details. A question of this type usually requires only a short answer. Another directive word which requires the same thing is ***"SUMMARISE"***.

PROVE/DISPROVE

Both of these directive words require answers that demonstrate the logical argue either for or against a proposition or idea. *PROVE* requires that you explain the "pro" points, and *DISPROVE* the 'contra' points.

RELATE

An essay which asks you to relate things expects you to clearly show the relationship between two or more ideas, theories, etc. You must show how these ideas are related to each other and what the nature of that relationship is. Also you should show what effect they have on each other through their relationship.

INTERPRET

This is similar to ***"EXPLAIN"***. Interpretation means that you must explain a topic or concept through an examination of the key components of the topic/idea, and give an overall evaluation of it.

INVESTIGATE

This requires you to enquire into all aspects of a topic through research. A question like this often requires you to collect original research data.

REVIEW

Here you have to identify the main ideas or events within the topic and briefly summarise them, explaining their importance and how they are related to the topic.

STATE

Such an answer expects you to express the main ideas briefly and clearly without any lengthy discussion or minor details

TRACE

This is frequently found in historical questions (but not exclusively) where a statement and brief description of a the stages in the development of something (e.g. theory, person's life, process, etc) is required.

Ken Cage
Manager: Student Learning Centre
Massey University, Auckland
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"Task or Directive Words Commonly Used in Essay
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<http://www.international.mq.edu.au/pdfs/TaskWords>
<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/assignment/taskwords.htm>



Massey University

UNDERSTANDING ESSAY QUESTIONS

One of the main reasons students do badly in assignments is that they do not understand the question.

This brochure will help you interpret the question properly so that you will understand what it is you are expected to do in the assignment.

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INTRODUCTION

Answering essay questions can cause problems for most students. It may be that the topic you are expected to write about is extremely difficult to understand. However, most times it is the question itself which is a source of confusion.

Essay questions usually contain **TASK** or **DIRECTIVE** words. These direct the writer to answer the question in a particular way.

This brochure will introduce you to the key task words which are often used in essay questions. Knowing what these words mean will assist you in answering the question which has been set.

Task/directive words, as the name implies, give you directions as to what task is expected of you. Below is a list of the most common task/directive words, along with their meanings.

ACCOUNT FOR

You are expected to give reasons for something, or explain why something has occurred.

ANALYSE

You are expected to take an idea, concept or statement apart and examine the elements of which it comprises. Your answer should be methodically and logically organised.

ARGUE

This question requires you to present a case for and/or against a concept or situation.

ASSESS/EVALUATE

This involves you making a judgment about an idea or a topic. After acknowledging the points for and against the idea, you need to state, with reasons, whether the topic/idea being discussed is valid or not. Your judgment should be based on other author's views on the subject, as well as your own opinion of the merits of the idea/subject.

COMMENT ON

This type of question expects you to state your opinion on a topic, situation or idea. Your opinion should be informed by your reading.

COMPARE

Here you must set items/ideas side by side to show their similarities and differences. A balanced, fair and objective answer is expected. You are not expected to give your opinion.

CONTRAST

Here you are expected show only the *differences* between two or more topics/ideas/etc.

CRITICISE

This answer requires you to point out flaws or weaknesses in an argument/idea, but also you are expected to indicate any positive aspects of the subject in question. Your answer must not be biased, and should give a balanced answer.

Any decision or judgment you may make must be supported with evidence. Sometimes the directive words used are: **CRITICALLY EXAMINE**

DEFINE

A definition of something means that your answer must explain the precise meaning of something.

DESCRIBE

Here a simple description of the attributes or characteristics of a topic or idea must be given. A definition answer must include a discussion of the concept and should also state the limits of the idea being defined.

DISCUSS

Here the answer must explain a topic or concept, and then give details through supporting evidence, 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 questions.

EXAMINE

You must investigate or inspect closely, and give an opinion on your observation.

EXPLAIN

You must show how or why something happens, or is constructed in a particular way. The explanation should increase the reader's understanding of the topic or idea.

HYPOTHESISE

A hypothesis is a theory which is confirmed or rejected through testing. This type of question requires you to give reasons for, and explain why an event occurs.

ILLUSTRATE

Such an answer consists mainly of examples which demonstrate or prove the subject of the question. Another directive word will usually be included in the question.