

LOOKING AT AN ASSIGNMENT IN DETAIL: KEY TERMS

Here are some common key words and definitions to help you think about assignment terms:

Information words ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject, such as who, what, when, where, how, and why.

- **define**—give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject's meaning
- **explain**—give reasons why or examples of how something happened
- **illustrate**—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject
- **summarize**—briefly list the important ideas you learned about the subject
- **trace**—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form
- **research**—gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you have found

Relation words ask you to demonstrate how things are connected.

- **compare**—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different)
- **contrast**—show how two or more things are dissimilar
- **apply**—use details that you've been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation
- **cause**—show how one event or series of events made something else happen
- **relate**—show or describe the connections between things

Interpretation words ask you to defend ideas of your own about the subject. Do not see these words as requesting opinion alone (unless the assignment specifically says so), but as requiring opinion that is supported by concrete evidence. Remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretation.

- **assess**—summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **prove, justify**—give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth
- **evaluate, respond**—state your opinion of the subject as good, bad, or some combination of the two, with examples and reasons
- **support**—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe)
- **synthesize** —put two or more things together that have not been put together in class or in your readings before; do not just summarize one and then the other and say that they are similar or different—you must provide a reason for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper
- **analyze**—determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, figure out how something works, what it might mean, or why it is important
- **argue**—take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side



CLOSELY READING THE ASSIGNMENT TO DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

It is crucial that you understand exactly what the assignment is asking of you. Pay close attention to the words the instructor uses—in particular look for action verbs and concrete nouns, which will give you important clues about how to complete the assignment successfully.

Verbs are the words in a sentence that convey action; in an assignment, the verbs tell you what kind of thinking and writing tasks are required. Some common assignment verbs include: describe, explain, and compare. Please note that sometimes actions will also appear as nouns or other word forms (e.g., describing, explaining, comparing). Nouns are the words in a sentence that name objects (people, places, and things); in an assignment, the nouns tell you the topics and/or texts to use, as well as the form your response should take. Some common assignment nouns are: story, argument, and essay. Let's look at an example where the actions have been circled and the nouns underlined:

In this paper, you will discuss the relationship between characters in the short story we read in class. Write a three-page essay explaining your analysis.

Now you try. Use an assignment from one of your classes to complete the steps below.

- Identify and circle the verbs and other actions in the assignment.
Identify and underline nouns.
In your own words, define 2-3 of the assignment's most important verbs and nouns. Use a dictionary (merriam-webster.com) if necessary, but then be sure to put the definitions in your own words.

Table with 2 columns: ACTIONS, How do you understand the action involved? and 3 empty rows.

Table with 2 columns: NOUN, How do you understand the object defined? and 3 empty rows.