

Essays: Task Words

Task words are the words or phrases used in a brief that **tell you what to do**. Common examples in UK higher education are “discuss”, “evaluate”, “compare and contrast” and “critically analyse”. They are used in the marking criteria, as they are at the heart of how well you have answered the question.

Although there is broad agreement about what these words are asking you to do, none of them has a fixed meaning. We cannot guarantee that lecturers are using them exactly as they are described here. In addition, there may be discipline or task-specific subtleties regarding their usage.

It is important that you have a good idea of what they mean in your field. Check all sources of information available for the specific assignment requirements, and read your marking criteria carefully.

Table of Task Words and Descriptions.

Task word.	Description.
Account for.	Similar to “explain”, but with a heavier focus on reasons why something is or is not the way it is.
Analyse.	This term has the widest range of meanings according to the subject. Make a justified selection of some of the essential features of an artefact, idea or issue. Examine how these relate to each other and to other ideas, in order to help better understand the topic. See ideas and problems in different ways, and provide evidence for those ways of seeing them.
Assess.	This has very different meanings in different disciplines. Measure or evaluate one or more aspect of something (for example, the effectiveness, significance or “truth” of something). Show in detail the outcomes of these evaluations.
Compare.	Show how two or more things are similar.
Compare and contrast.	Show similarities and differences between two or more things.
Contrast.	Show how two or more things are different.
Critically analyse.	As with analysis, but questioning and testing the strength of your and others’ analyses from different perspectives. This often means using the process of analysis to make the whole essay an objective, reasoned argument for your overall case or position.
Critically assess.	As with “assess”, but emphasising your judgments made about arguments by others, and about what you are assessing from different

	perspectives. This often means making the whole essay a reasoned argument for your overall case, based on your judgments.
Critically evaluate.	As with “evaluate”, but showing how judgments vary from different perspectives and how some judgments are stronger than others. This often means creating an objective, reasoned argument for your overall case, based on the evaluation from different perspectives.
Define.	Present a precise meaning.
Describe.	Say what something is like. Give its relevant qualities. Depending on the nature of the task, descriptions may need to be brief or they may need to be very detailed.
Discuss.	Provide details about and evidence for or against two or more different views or ideas, often with reference to a statement in the title. Discussion often includes explaining which views or ideas seem stronger.
Examine.	Look closely at something. Think and write about the detail, and question it where appropriate.
Explain.	Give enough description or information to make something clear or easy to understand.
Explore.	Consider an idea or topic broadly, searching out related and/or particularly relevant, interesting or debatable points.
Evaluate.	Similar to “assess”, this often has more emphasis on an overall judgement of something, explaining the extent to which it is, for example, effective, useful, or true. Evaluation is therefore sometimes more subjective and contestable than some kinds of pure assessment.
Identify.	Show that you have recognised one or more key or significant piece of evidence, thing, idea, problem, fact, theory, or example.
Illustrate.	Give selected examples of something to help describe or explain it, or use diagrams or other visual aids to help describe or explain something.
Justify.	Explain the reasons, usually “good” reasons, for something being done or believed, considering different possible views and ideas.
Outline.	Provide the main points or ideas, normally without going into detail.
Summarise.	This is similar to “outline”. State, or re-state, the most important parts of something so that it is represented “in miniature”. It should be concise and precise.
State.	Express briefly and clearly.

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