

Glossary of Task Words

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question. Here is a list of task words that you may come across in your course.

Words	What they (might) mean . . .
Account for	Explain the cause of the given topic.
Analyze	Break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them, and show how they interrelate.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something, paying due attention to positive, negative, and disputable aspects, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own.
Argue	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence for and/or against some given point of view.
Comment on	You should give a written criticism or explanation, expressing a personal or professional opinion. (The context of the question will tell you which is required).
Compare	Identify similarities between two items you are asked to compare. You may also mention the differences. You may be asked to 'compare' and 'contrast' in the same question; be sure to do both.
Contrast	Identify similarities between two items you are asked to compare. You may also mention the differences. You may be asked to 'compare' and 'contrast' in the same question; be sure to do both.
Criticize	Spell out your judgement as to the value or truth of something, indicating the criteria on which you base your judgement and citing specific instances of how the criteria apply in this case.
Define	Make a statement as to the meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail so as to allow it to be distinguished from similar things. Use concise and clear language.
Describe	Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic, or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Make a detailed assessment of the problem, including both advantages and limitations. Evaluation involves making a judgement about how effective, useful, or successful something is.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications.
Explain	Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to 'describe' and to 'analyze'.
Identify	Highlight what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use.

Illustrate	Similar to 'explain', but probably asking for the quoting of specific examples or statistics or possibly the drawing of maps, graphs, sketches, etc.
Interpret	Comment on the subject, and also give your judgment or reaction to the issue.
Justify	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to 'argue' a case.
Outline	Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
Prove	Demonstrate the truth of something by offering irrefutable evidence and/or a logical sequence of statements leading from evidence to conclusion.
Reconcile	Show how two apparently opposed or mutually exclusive ideas or propositions can be seen to be similar in important respects, if not identical. Involves the need to 'analyze' and 'justify'.
Relate	Either 'explain' how things happened or are connected in a cause-and-effect sense, or may imply 'compare' and 'contrast'.
Review	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe'.
State	Express the main points of an idea or topic, perhaps in the manner of 'describe', briefly but clearly. Do not involve examples or illustrations.
Summarize	'State' the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail and side-issues.
Trace	Identify the connection between one thing and another either in a developmental sense over a period of time, or else in a cause-and-effect sense. May imply both 'describe' and 'explain'.
To what extent...?	Explore the case for a stated proposition or explanation, much in the manner of 'assess' and 'criticize', probably arguing for a less than total acceptance of the proposition.

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