



Commonly used directive words

Directive word or words such as 'analyse', 'discuss' or 'compare' tell you what kind of 'job' you need to do in your essay. It is important that you clearly understand this. A list of commonly used directive words and an interpretation of what they mean appears below.

Directive word	Meaning
analyse	examine closely; examine something in terms of its parts and how they are related to each other
argue	present a case for and/or against something
assess	decide the value of something
compare	discuss two or more things in terms of their similarities and differences
contrast	discuss two or more things, emphasising their differences
criticise	give a judgment about the value of something and support that judgment with evidence
define	make clear what is meant by something; or use a definition or definitions to explore a concept.
describe	present a detailed account of something
discuss	consider and offer some interpretation or evaluation of something; present and give a judgment on the value of arguments for and against something
enumerate	give an item by item account of something
evaluate	attempt to form a judgment about something
examine	inspect something in detail and investigate the implications
explain	make clear the details of something; show the reason for, or underlying cause of, or the means by which something occurs
illustrate	offer an example or examples to show how or that something happens; or make concrete a concept by giving examples
interpret	make clear the meaning of something and its implications
justify	give reasons why certain decisions should be made, or certain conclusions reached
outline	go through and identify briefly the main features of something
prove	show by logical argument
review	report the chief facts about something; or offer a criticism of something
summarise	describe something concisely
trace	identify and describe the development or history of something from some point, or from its origin.

Adapted from:

Marshall, L & Rowland, F 1993, 2nd edn, *A guide to learning independently*, Longman Cheshire, Milton, Qld.

Peters, P 1985, *Strategies for student writers*, Wiley & Sons, Melbourne.