

Common Instructions for Essays

These are listed according to how specifically they indicate what you should do, from most to least specific. If you compose your own question, it may be useful to consider incorporating one of these to provide you with a way of approaching your chosen topic.

Compare	Show the similarities between two subjects. If this is the only instruction, it probably also implies “contrast”	Justify	Provide arguments and evidence to support a proposition, while refuting arguments against it.
Contrast	Show the differences between two subjects. This may also be phrased as “outline key differences”. Usually this is coupled with compare: “compare and contrast”.	Critique	Systematically evaluate by analysing different aspects of something. This means identifying strong and weak characteristics, and may entail suggestions as to how something could be improved.
Define	Provide a clear meaning or explanation of a key term or concept. Go beyond the dictionary definition.	Evaluate	Judge the value, worth or significance of something by discussing its strengths, weaknesses, achievements, etc.
Debate	Explain different opinions or attitudes to a subject, evaluating the validity of different perspectives in order to reach a conclusion.	Assess	This is much the same as “evaluate”.
Explain	Clarify and interpret a problem or issue, answering the questions “how?” and “why?”	Analyse	Break up the subject into its major parts, evaluate them and show how the main ideas are related.
Explain and apply	Explain a theory or model and show how it works when applied to a concrete example.	Comment	Provide an opinion or an evaluation.
To what extent?	Judge and explain the degree to which the statement is true.	Review	Provide a structured overview of a subject or body of literature, commenting on noteworthy or debatable points. A “critical review” must include some evaluation.
How?	Explain the processes or patterns.	Discuss	This instruction has a range of possible meanings. Sometimes a clear explanation of a concept is all that is required, but more frequently this term implies that you are expected to identify and analyse key issues, or evaluate different approaches, interpretations or perspectives in a reasoned argument.
Why?	Describe the reasons or causes.		
Outline	Present the main points systematically, omitting minor details.		
Summarise	<i>Concisely</i> present the main points systematically, omitting minor details.		