

Action Words in Academic Writing

In order to write a quality essay or discussion, you must first have an understanding of what you are being asked to do. Recognizing action words or verbs used in your assignment prompts will help you broaden your vocabulary, identify specific directives, and organize your ideas accordingly, which will help you write more confidently. Here are some common action words:

Analyze

Break down the topic into its parts and explain how the parts relate to each other and to the whole. For example, if you were asked to analyze a piece of fiction you would look at specific elements that contribute to the story, poem, or drama (characters, setting, plot, language choices, tone, symbols), and how those parts add depth and meaning.

Apply

Draw connection or relevance to scenarios or examples by addressing how theoretical information relates in a different situation. For example, if an assignment requires that you to apply a specific theory to a current social issue you would need to ask yourself, *what would the theory have to say about this particular situation?*

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Argue

Examine a particular topic and the controversy that might surround it and take a stance or a position on the topic. Make a case for a particular point of view that you have. Convince your reader with support or evidence that they should see things the way that you do or take the same position on a topic that you have taken. For example, if you are asked to argue if cheerleading is a sport, you would need to provide several logical reasons why you think it should (or should not) be considered a sport and research and evidence to support those claims.

Compare/Contrast

Examine and discuss the similarities and differences between two or more areas of focus. For example, if you were asked to compare our university library to a local public library, you would discuss their similarities (free, lots of resources, helpful librarians) and their differences (online vs. in person, students vs. everyone, available 24/7 vs. business hours).

Define

Clarify a term, concept, or theory by identifying the concise meaning within the context of the assignment or area of study. This is a way to categorize and differentiate this term/concept from others. For example, if you are asked to define education, you would define it so it aligns with the concepts you are learning in that course.

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Discuss

This means to go beyond simply identifying an idea or topic. Examine and then tell your reader about the various aspects of this idea or topic. For example, if you are asked to discuss a theory, you would state the beliefs, principles, or ideals that the theory accepts and supports.

Evaluate/Critique

Determine and assess the value, quality, effectiveness, or truth of your particular topic in how it meets specific expectations. For example, when you see a movie, and you tell someone else that it was good or bad, you are giving an evaluation of that movie. Usually, when evaluating, you give reasons why you did or didn't like it. For instance, the plot was funny, there was too much violence, you liked the characters, and so forth.

Explain

Clarify a topic by giving a detailed account as to what it is, how and why it occurs, or what is meant by the use of this term in a particular context. For example, if you are asked to explain a problem, you would include what the problem is, how or why it is a problem, and how the problem might affect other areas or how it relates to the ideas and concepts you are learning in your course.

Identify

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Point out or make it known to your reader what the key points are of the topic you are discussing. For example, if you are asked to identify several solutions to a problem, you would clearly state each of the possible solutions you have come up with or found in your research.

Interpret

Conclude or determine for your reader what is being stated or suggested, what is meant by, or what the relevance of the situation or text? To interpret is to give *your* understanding of an idea, text, or controversy. For example, if you are asked to interpret a short story, you would give your own personal thoughts on what the story's underlying message is and how the characters, events, or setting work to create the message that you got from the story.

Summarize

To take larger selections of text and reduce them to their basic essentials: the gist, the key ideas, the main points that are worth noting and remembering. Think of a summary as the “general idea in brief form”; it's the distillation, condensation, or reduction of a larger work into its primary notions and main ideas. For example, if you are asked to summarize a chapter in a textbook, you would write one or two paragraphs that give your reader the main points of that chapter. That is, you would state what the chapter is fundamentally about.

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Synthesize

Combine research or information from several sources into one cohesive discussion. For example, if you are asked to synthesize several articles you have read about a single topic, you would explain where the author's agree, where they disagree, or how each article might build on or extend the ideas of the other articles.

Still Confused?

Please reach out to your instructor or email the Writing Center for assistance!

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