UNDERSTANDING KEY WORDS IN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

When you begin working on a writing assignment it is important to understand exactly what you are being asked to do. Often the assignment description will contain some of the words below; here is an overview of what they mean and what the professor will expect.

INFORMATION WORDS
These words ask you to show how much you know about a subject by presenting details in an organized, coherent way:
- **DEFINE**: Give concise, clear meanings of a term or phrase; don’t give details but make sure to distinguish it from related terms.
- **STATE**: Present main points in brief, clear sequence, usually omitting details and examples, unless asked for.
- **ILLUSTRATE**: Use a figure, picture, diagram, analogy, or concrete example to explain or clarify.
- **ENUMERATE OR LIST**: Write a list or outline that gives points concisely one by one.

OVERVIEW WORDS
These words ask you to present an organized, coherent overview or survey of information:
- **DESCRIBE**: Recount, characterize, sketch graphically or relate in sequence or story form.
- **SUMMARIZE**: Give main points or facts in condensed form, like the summary of a chapter, omitting details and illustrations.
- **TRACE**: In narrative form, describe process, development, or historical events from a point of origin.
- **OUTLINE**: Organize a description under main points and subordinate points; omit minor details. Emphasize structure/arrangement.
- **REVIEW**: Examine a subject critically, analyzing and commenting on important statements.
- **SYNTHESIZE**: Combine separate elements or sources in an organized, coherent and concise manner.

ANALYSIS WORDS
These words ask you to argue a point, develop an interpretation, or make an evaluation using evidence:
- **AGREE OR DISAGREE**: Give your opinion about a topic and support it with evidence from appropriate sources.
- **ANALYZE**: Break down topic into parts and explain how the parts relate to each other and to the topic as a whole.
- **APPLY**: Use concepts or theories in order to explain a problem, issue, event or experience.
- **COMPARE AND/OR CONTRAST**: Analyze two or more elements in order to show similarities and/or differences between them.
- **CRITIQUE OR CRITICIZE**: Express your judgment about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of facts, and back your judgment with a discussion of the evidence.
- **DISCUSS**: Examine by argument and debate, giving reasons pro and con.
- **EVALUATE**: Appraise worth of something in light of its truth or utility; include to a lesser degree your personal opinion.
- **INTERPRET**: Explain the meaning; make clear and explicit; usually giving your own judgment.
- **JUSTIFY**: Prove or give reasons for decisions or conclusions citing evidence.