

## 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.