

## Common Essay Terms

**Analyze** The goal of an analysis is to break an idea into its key factors or parts and to show how each works together. An instructor is usually looking for you to demonstrate a knowledge of the relationships between the different elements of an idea, theory, or scenario, and how they interact with the whole.

**Argue** When an essay calls for you to argue, the instructor wants you to adopt a position for or against a topic. However, you need to provide reasons or evidence to support your position and attempt to convince the reader that your position is viable. Remember, you do not need to argue both sides of a issue and present a balance of evidence for and against. You should instead stick to one side and present evidence in support of it. Only raise those objections that you are prepared to defeat.

**Compare and Contrast** A comparison element should highlight similarities between subjects, while a contrast element focuses on differences. Ideally, a compare/contrast essay would not be a simple list of how two subjects differ or conform, but rather this essay form should expose points of tension and agreement, while analyzing the significance of each instance. In this way, an argument can be created based upon a critical examination of two subjects, without resorting to a cumbersome list of similarities and differences.

**Critique** Like an evaluation, a critique assesses the fitness of a idea according to appropriate criteria. Unlike an evaluation, however, a critique will usually require the use of a particular theory as context for assessment. Alternatively, this may involve highlighting points of consistency and inconsistency within an idea or argument in order to assess its validity.

**Defend/Justify** This essay form is crafted much like an “Argue” essay, except that, in this case, an instructor has determined the position you will take. You are required to show reasons for support of a topic or idea, or to argue in favor of a suggested course of action.

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**Define** When asked to define a term or concept, remember to provide the meaning of the term or concept as it is used in context. For example, the term *society* may mean several things, but you need to define the term as it is used in your subject area. Provide any information that is necessary to the term's deeper understanding.

**Describe** This term calls for you to present an account of a topic with emphasis on description rather than analysis. An instructor who assigns this an essay question with this term is likely interested in hearing more about the “what” and the “how,” rather than the “why” of a topic.

**Discuss** To discuss mean to write about a topic in whatever manner seems most appropriate to you. This instruction can usually be interpreted broadly, and you may choose to use any of the other methods listed here. However, remember that a discussion essay should not be written conversationally. It should still possess a clear thesis with valid argumentation.

**Evaluate** In evaluative essay, you need to assess the value of a topic or idea based on certain criteria. Unlike argumentative essay, you should include positive and negative points, as well as advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of a topic. Once this is done, it should be possible to determine the significance, relevance, or validity of a topic within a conclusion.

**Explain** In many ways “Explain” is the opposite of a “Describe” essay, as this assignment requires you to present a “reasons” associated with a topic rather than just facts. You should focus on the “how” of a subject and analyze a cause-and-effect relationship. This essay should get at the deeper meaning behind your topic, often including historical and cultural influences.

**Illustrate** Instructors using this term usually expect you to clarify a point through explanation, example, or figures. If used as an element of an argument, this clarification can be a piece of factual evidence (as opposed to logical or structural).

**Review/ Summarize** When writing a review/summary essay, briefly outline the main points or most important elements of a topic for a broad understanding. The details are less important than the overall effect. Focus on elements of a topic that are most important to clear understanding.