Understanding the Assignment

Even after reading the assignment instructions multiple times, you still may not understand what the professor is asking of you. Usually, the first step in understanding the assignment involves paying attention to the verbs, which describe what you are supposed to do throughout the paper.

Here is a list of common verbs that you may find on a writing prompt or assignment instructions. Although some of them may overlap, others require a deeper level of critical thinking. For example, a summary is usually objective, but a critique entails a more comprehensive, and often subjective, look at the material. You can double check this list to ensure that you understand and meet your professor’s expectations for the assignment. If this list does not include a verb found on your assignment directions, consult a dictionary for synonyms.

→ Analyze
    Pick the content apart. Think about the implications, results, or causes. Take the material a step further. Determine the main and supporting ideas.

→ Compare/Contrast
    Point out both subtle and obvious similarities. Identify the differences that exist. Give supporting examples to show these similarities and differences.

→ Critique
    Question the content. Play "devil’s advocate" by attempting to see the subject from a different point of view. Look for fallacies or unsupported opinions. Determine any weaknesses. Bring sound arguments to light.

→ Describe
    Convey the story. Give an account of the content. Speak about your personal observations (if permissible). Express an idea.

→ Discuss
    Write about your thoughts. Present arguments and counterarguments. Speak about the material as a whole or in separate pieces.

→ Evaluate
    Judge the significance of the content. Assess the opinions made. Provide reasons for your own viewpoint. Consider the audience. Investigate the argument.

→ Explain
    Interpret the content. Expound on the main ideas. Give meaning to the subject at hand. Include details. Make plain.

→ Illustrate
    Use examples, analogies, case studies, or personal references to establish your position. Clarify the content.

→ Persuade
    Formulate an opinion. Use support to establish credibility. Argue for your perspective. Appeal to your audience.

→ Summarize
    Extract the main points. Present an objective outline of the content. Give an overview. Omit any personal opinion.

→ Support
    Provide examples. Create a foundation for your argument. Use credible outside sources. Conduct research.