

# PAPER WRITING: FIRST STEPS & ASSIGNMENT TASK WORDS

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You are ready to start your assignment and you might be asking: What do I do? Where do I start? What is my professor looking for? Follow this step-by-step method to get your assignment started.

## STEP 1: Confirm the Type of Assignment

The *type* of assignment determines how you start, as different papers require different elements.

- **Research papers** require a lot of preparation and research. Supporting your ideas using articles, journals, books, etc. is essential, so start early to have time for revision and editing.
- **Summaries** demonstrate to your professor that you have absorbed and *understood* the required content. Usually research is not necessary, but you will want to carefully read your readings and pay attention to lectures to properly summarize afterwards.
- **Critical reviews** require interaction with course content that shows you thought about what you just read or watched. Analyzing a text's strengths and weaknesses, or explaining something you disagree with, can prove that you have seriously considered the material.
- **Reflections** give you a chance to share your own opinions, growth, or thoughts about a book, course content, a retreat, etc. Sharing personal experiences (where appropriate) shows your professor that you understood the content and can apply your knowledge.

## STEP 2: Examine the Instructions

Look for key words and *task words* in your assignment instructions, to determine what your professor is asking.

- **Task words** are words that describe what kind(s) of "tasks" your essay should accomplish. There is an extensive list on the next page that explains what each word is asking for.
- **Key words** are those which explain the *content* to focus on in your assignment. These words will often be the keywords you use when researching your material.
- **Ex:** *Critically examine the effect(s) that self-esteem can have on romantic relationships. Your essay should use at least 6 academic sources and be no more than 1000 words.*
  - The task words of these instructions are *critically* and *examine*.
  - The key words of these instructions are *self-esteem* and *romantic relationships*.

## STEP 3: Determine the Length of the Assignment

Your professor will assign a page count and/or word count for your assignment.

- Page count includes footnotes and headings but not usually title page or bibliography.
- Word count does not include the words in footnotes, bibliographies, or title pages. A general rule is you are allowed 10% above or below the word count.
  - Ex: A 2000-word paper can range from 1800 to 2200 words as needed
- However, some professors will not read past the word count or page limit, so use caution.

## Step 4: Taking the First Step

How you actually start the assignment will depend on the type of assignment you determined earlier.

- **Research papers** start with researching your topic and finding sources.
- **Summaries** require you to find the most important points from the reading/content.
- For **critical reviews** or **reflections**, take some time to think about aspects of the material that you agreed with *and* aspects that you are questioning or disagree with.
- For **all papers**, before you start writing, consider creating an outline that divides your paper into sections and includes a draft of your thesis.

Use this list of task words and definitions to determine what your professor is asking of you.

Task Word	Definition
Account (for)	Explain, clarify, or give reasons for something.
Analyze	Break down a subject into smaller parts and show how those parts relate to one another.
Argue	Defend a claim by using reason and proof.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something, noting the positive, negative, and disputable aspects.
Classify	Divide a large group into distinguishable sub-groups or categories.
Comment (on)	May need clarification from professor, but often involves analyzing or assessing.
Compare	Describe the similarities (and differences) between two or more things.
Contrast	Show the differences between two or more things.
Criticize	Weigh the value or truthfulness of something, citing the criteria upon which you base your judgement.
Define	Provide a clear, detailed explanation; identify the essential elements or meaning of something.
Describe	Show in detail; explain the main aspects of an idea or a sequence of events.
Discuss	Examine key points and possible interpretations; investigate an idea, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Weigh the truthfulness or worth of something (similar to <i>assess</i> or <i>criticize</i> ).
Examine	Inspect closely and investigate the implications.
Explain	Make something plain and understandable or give reasons for the cause(s) of something.
Identify	Select the key features of something.
Illustrate	Demonstrate or explain by using specific examples or statistics.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of something in your own words.
Justify	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion.
Outline	Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events and show how they interrelate.
Prove	Establish the truth or validity of something by presenting irrefutable evidence or a logical sequence of statements.
Reflect (on)	Share your thoughts on a subject.
Relate	Explain a cause-and-effect sequence or the connection between two things.
Review	Survey a topic; critically examine.
Summarize	Restate the main ideas in your own words.
Synthesize	Connect facts or ideas to create something new; combine elements or parts to create a whole.
Trace	Describe or portray in detail; carefully outline or explain step by step.

#### Additional Tips

- Ask for help! Your professors are usually more than happy to provide clarification on assignment instructions and can provide guiding questions to help you get started.
- Run ideas by a family member, friend, or classmate if you are unsure if they make sense.