

PAPER WRITING: FIRST STEPS & ASSIGNMENT TASK WORDS

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.