

Analyze Your Assignment for Strategy Terms and Cue Verbs

Analyze

Divide an event, idea, or theory into its component parts, and examine each one in turn—in other words, take it apart to understand it better.

Example: Analyze the apparent increase in tattoos and body piercing among young adults.

Argue

Persuade your readers by supporting your beliefs and opinions with reasons based on evidence you provide.

Example: Do you believe that gender bias exists in the communities you belong to? If so, how important is the problem of gender bias in language?

Compare and/or Contrast

Demonstrate similarities and/or dissimilarities between two or more events or topics.

Example: Compare the portrayal of women in Beloved with that in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Define

Identify and state the essential traits or characteristics of something, differentiating it clearly from other things.

Example: Explain the concept of social class as we have discussed it in this class

Describe/Illustrate/Observe

Tell about the subject in specific detail, creating a clear and vivid image of it. Use concrete examples that engage the five senses (see, taste, touch, hear, smell).

Example: Observe a one foot patch of earth for 20 minutes and describe what you see

Discuss/ Demonstrate/ Show/Suggest

This is not a green light to dump everything you know about the topic onto the page; your teacher is not looking for a jumbled list of all information available. Instead, construct a question before responding so your essay can follow some kind of organization, coherence, and/or context.

Example: Discuss the implications of Dan Brown's setting for The DaVinci Code.

Evaluate

Assess the value or significance of the topic based on criteria your audience is likely to accept.

Example: Evaluate the contribution of charter schools to the development of quality education in Allen County, IN.

Explain

Make a topic as clear and understandable as possible by offering definitions, reasons, examples, and analysis.

Example: Discuss the relationship between connotation and denotation

Interpret/Suggest

Bring out the meaning that can be taken from observed patterns of evidence.

Example: Interpret the evidence described as being at the crime scene.



Summarize

State the major points concisely and comprehensively—in your own words. (“Summarize” is sometimes used interchangeably with “paraphrase.”)

Example: Summarize the major arguments against using animals in laboratory research.

Problems when trying to identify strategy terms or cue verbs:

Problem: Strategy terms or cue verbs can mean whatever the teacher expects them to mean, and not all terms mean the same thing from discipline to discipline.

Recommendation: Do not assume that you understand how these common strategy terms are used for a particular class. It is your responsibility to understand exactly what terms mean in context of the material covered in your course. Do not hesitate to ask your teacher for clarification!

Problem: Strategy terms or cue verbs may not be stated—or may be in the form of nouns.

Recommendation: If strategy terms are not stated, you need to infer a strategy from the content terms. For example, an assignment that asks you to “show in what ways these two quotations are saying similar things and in what ways they are saying different things” probably means to compare and contrast. An assignment asking you to “discuss farming practices from 1862-1864” may imply summary, or comparison/contrast, or even evaluation. Again, ask your teacher to clarify her or his expectations.

Problem: Assignments often contain more than one strategy terms or cue verbs.

Recommendation: Just as some mathematical operations have to be performed before others for the answer to work out, some writing tasks are best tackled before others.

Example 1: If the teacher assigns you to “Analyze the quotation and then illustrate it by some personal experience,” he or she probably expects you to spend most of your time taking apart the quotation in order to better understand it and then to use your experience as an example of or analogy for what the quote means. (A, then B)

Example 2: If the teacher assigns you to “Describe an occasion in which you, and tell what you learned from it,” he or she probably expects you to decide what you learned first and then to use your description of the occasion to show (rather than tell) what you learned. In other words, you probably should NOT write a drawn-out personal narrative with a perfunctory moral ending (“I learned never to give up.”), but rather you should make and support a point with the evidence drawn from your personal experience. (B, then A)