

Summarize? Evaluate? Support...?

The first criterion for a successful writing assignment is “Responds to prompt.” Make sure you respond to the prompt, whether it is a homework prompt or an exam prompt, by understanding the key words.

Information words

Information words ask you to tell what you know: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

- *Summarize* means to briefly sum up an author’s main points without giving your opinion.
- *Explain* means to say *why* or *how* something happens.
- *Define* means to identify something in terms of its characteristics. You may have to define in more than one way, such as in terms of conflicting viewpoints.
- *Trace* means to describe how something has developed or changed over time.
- *Research* means to gather information from expert sources, usually to draw your own conclusions.

The writer below has *summarized* and *explained* a passage:

Ving complains that China’s food industries are still not safe even though officials are under pressure to make improvements. New laws have had little effect because decentralization of the food industry makes enforcement more difficult. He says local officials are asking for new inspection and enforcement procedures.

Interpretation words

Interpretation words require you to express your opinion and defend it by offering evidence.

- *Evaluate* or *respond* means to state your value judgment (good, bad, right, wrong) about something.
- *Support* means to give reasons and evidence for an explicitly stated belief.
- *Prove* or *justify* means to show by reasons or examples that something is true.
- *Analyze* or *critique* means to say how parts (of a text or of an idea) relate to a whole, how something works, what the implications are, or why something is important.
- *Synthesize* means to mesh two or more ideas together into a related whole.
- *Argue* means to defend an idea while at the same time undermining the opposite idea.
- *Discuss, write about, investigate* or *explore* means to show systematically and in detail how or why something exists or develops and how it affects other things or is related to other things.

The writer below has *evaluated* and *analyzed* a passage:

The author fails to explain why provincial officials find themselves unable to enforce the new laws. For instance, are they poorly trained, unaware of the new regulations, or taking bribes in exchange for lax oversight? His proposed solution seems hollow since he cannot even name a root cause for the problem.

Relationship words

Relationship words require you to show how things are related or connected to each other.

- *Compare* means to show how things are similar.
- *Contrast* means to show how things are different.
- *Apply* means to show how an idea or theory works in a specific situation.
- *Relate* means to show or describe the connections between things.

The writer below *relates* his idea to something he knows about the fallacy “begging the question”:

Ying begs the question: why can’t local officials enforce the law?