Key Words Used in Writing Assignments

The following list presents a selection of key words that represent certain task types. They simultaneously highlight strategies for analysis and writing that are typical for academic papers.

**Analyze:** Identify and describe the parts of X, and explain how they relate to each other or work together. If it is a theory or claim or argument which you analyze, see if the claims on which they are based are true or false; present and discuss points *for and against*. This may lead to an evaluation. Your answer needs to be methodical and logically organised.

**Assess:** This usually refers to the importance of something: positive/negative, to what extent successful/useful unsuccessful and often refers to contribution to knowledge, events or processes.

**Compare:** Describe X and Y; highlight similarities and differences. A comparison requires that different texts or objects are subjected to the same set of categories by which they are compared - a balanced (*objective*) answer is required. This may lead to an evaluation.

**Contrast:** This is similar to compare, but focussing on the differences between two or more items. Like compare it may, but need not, lead to an evaluation.

**Criticize:** Point out mistakes or weaknesses & favourable aspects - a balanced answer is required.

**Define:** Give the precise meaning of a concept or term. Look up the definitions in dictionaries, encyclopaedias, or handbooks – compare them and give the most appropriate definition.

**Describe:** State which form, structure, and/or properties characterize a given object – this can be the shape and spatial relations of surface forms, a sequence of events, or a relation of cause and effect, or other statements of fact.

**Discuss:** Identify, describe and explain one or more statements on the given topic. Give supporting information – are they statements of facts or opinions? Compare them and give examples, points for and against (*analyze*), and then draw a conclusion from the points presented.

**Evaluate:** Similar to *discuss* but the emphasis is on a judgement in the conclusion.
**Examine:** Similar to analyze: Describe and divide a given topic into parts; distinguish major from minor characteristics of it, hierarchically distinguish super-ordinate from sub-ordinate features; add a critical comment if appropriate.

**Explain:** Give a precise and detailed explanation of an idea or principle or set of reasons for a situation or attitude (analyze implied). Make clearer, possibly by giving examples or illustrations (a figure, or diagram).

**Illustrate:** Requires concrete examples - including figures/diagrams (often added to another instruction) *Interpret* = explain + comment upon the subject and make a judgement (evaluation)

**Relate:** Emphasize connections and associations (analyze implied)

**Review:** Analyze and comment briefly, in organized sequences, on the main points.

**State:** Give the relevant points briefly - no lengthy discussion or minor details are required.

**Suggest:** Give possible reasons - analyze, interpret and evaluate.

**Summarize/outline:** No details – only the main points are required.