

Terms used in psychology writing assignments:

Critique vs. Examine: What is your instructor asking for?

The terms below commonly appear in paper assignments or in essay exam questions. Some of these terms may have different meanings in different contexts. When in doubt, ask your instructor for clarification. Also see our handouts on [Taking Essay Exams](#) and [Writing a Psychology Literature Review](#).

FREQUENTLY USED TERMS

Compare: Write about the ways in which two or more things are similar and the ways in which they are different.

Contrast: Focus on the ways in which two or more things are different.

Criticize/Critique: Make a detailed judgment. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thing you are judging? Is it correct? Is it morally acceptable? Does it make sense? Is it too costly? Include any judgment that is relevant to what you are critiquing. Your judgment or conclusion **must** be backed up with evidence.

Define: Tell the reader what a term means using words that are already familiar to the reader. Definitions should be brief and to the point. The word being defined should not be part of the definition.

Enumerate: See **List**.

Evaluate: An evaluation is similar to a **critique**, although it may imply a more general discussion of a program or theory's strengths and weaknesses. See **criticize/critique**.

List: Be sure to identify what it is you are listing. Provide your list in brief form using numbers or bullets unless the question indicates otherwise. A list is less detailed than an **outline**.

Outline: An outline is a brief, organized overview that includes main points and important subpoints, but omits minor details. Use numbers and letters, or bullets, to organize your outline; but the traditional outline format is not always necessary. See our handout on [How to Make an Outline](#).

Review: Give a brief, organized, **critical** overview of important points. Based on this overview, you should draw a conclusion.

Summarize: A summary consists of a condensed version of the main points that have been (or will be) covered. No details, examples, or elaboration should be included.

Synthesize: Combine parts to form a whole. A synthesis goes beyond a list or summary in that you should not only summarize each of the points to be included, but also explain how they relate to each other.

[Additional terms on back]

ADDITIONAL TERMS

Describe: Explain the subject in such a way that the reader experiences it secondhand. A description usually is a list of relevant facts or a summary of a line of evidence.

Diagram: Present the requested information in a visual way. Diagrams include drawings, charts, and graphs. Labels often are needed for the reader to understand the information.

Discuss: Provide a complete, detailed, in-depth analysis. Discussions often include **comparison** and **criticism**.

Elaborate: Go beyond a brief statement -- include additional comments, **descriptions**, **explanations**, or examples.

Explain: The emphasis in an explanation is on the *why* and/or the *how* of the thing that is being explained, as opposed to a simple statement or description.

Illustrate: Provide either a concrete example or a **diagram**, whichever is appropriate.

Interpret: Translate or explain the subject in your own words and give your opinion about it.
See also **criticize/critique**.

Justify: Tell the reader why you think your answer or position makes sense (see also **criticize/critique**).

Relate: Describe any connections or associations between two or more things (see also **compare**).

Trace: To trace means to describe a course of events, in order, from beginning to end.