Key Terms in Essay Assignments

There are many key terms in essay assignment questions that often confuse students. Having a good understanding of the differences between each term can help determine how you should approach your paper.

Key term: Discuss
Definition: Write an essay or answer about a particular topic.
Tip: Give a brief summary of the character(s) or idea(s) that you will be mentioning in your paper. You can do this by defining key terms or by using quick anecdotes from the piece.

Key term: Analyze
Definition: Describe any similarities, differences, or associations between two or more subjects.
Tip: Do not simply summarize the story or article in your paper. You must go beyond surface ideas and dig deep for further meaning.

Key term: Support
Definition: Provide concrete evidence as to why something is true or false.
Tip: This term directs you to show, not tell readers why something is true or false. The important thing here is how well you can support your position on a topic, not what the actual position is.

Key term: Describe
Definition: Provide an explanation on a specific subject or object.
Tip: Imagine that your readers have no background information on your topic. Consider the point of view of the reader when you write, so that your description can be clear and concise.

Key term: Evaluate
Definition: This term asks for your opinion on a particular subject.
Tip: Remember, your opinion is valid only when you are able to justify and support it with solid evidence. Be sure to look at both sides of an argument, and counter the opposing arguments.

Key term: Criticize or critique
Definition: This term asks for your position on a particular subject.
Tip: Do not simply critique something independent of its relationship to other parts. Instead, you should relate this idea or object to other parts of the text and explain how it helps you understand the overall meaning of the text.