



## Common Assignment Terminology

Occasionally, students may feel overwhelmed by unfamiliar vocabulary used in assignments. This guide is designed to help students understand those commonly used terms.

### Directive verbs

#### 1. Information verbs

Information verbs require you to show knowledge about the subject, such as who, what, when, where, how, and why.

##### Examples:

define	give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something)
describe	give details about the subject by answering the 5Ws (who, what, where, when, why, and how)
explain	give reasons why or examples of how something happened
illustrate (or demonstrate)	give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each connects with the subject

#### 2. Relation verbs

Relation verbs require you to show how different subjects are connected to each other. Quite often, *cause and effect* and *compare and contrast* are used together in assignments. They do not just require you to list the connections; you need to show their significance.

##### Examples:

cause	show how an event made something else happen
effect	show the result or consequences of a specific event
compare	show the similarities between two or more subjects
contrast	show the differences between two or more subjects



**Key tip:** Affect and effect are commonly confused terms. Remember that *affect* is a verb while *effect* (result) is a noun. Essentially, affect means *to have an effect* on something else.

#### 3. Interpretation verbs

Interpretation verbs require you to defend your own opinion about the subject. These verbs do not request your opinion only (unless the assignment strictly says so), but your opinion that is supported by evidence. Remember to include examples from class or research and use them as support in your argument.

##### Examples:

analyze	give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something)
argue	provide details about the subject by answering the 5Ws (who, what, where, when, why, and how)
criticize	form an original judgment of a text or idea based on factual or theoretical examples; this may include presenting an opposing point of view
evaluate / respond	express your opinion of the subject with examples and reasons
justify / prove	provide reasons and examples showing why or how something is true
synthesize	put two or more subjects or ideas together, providing reasons for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper

## Information Example

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### Assignment Question:

**Explain** how a person's failure to apply the fifth step of the seven-step path for making ethical decisions will impact his or her ability to make ethical decisions. Provide an example that **demonstrates** this.

By looking at this question, we can see that the question uses information verbs. To make it more understandable, it is advisable to break it down into parts:

#### 1. Determine the main idea / subject:

Explain how a person's failure to apply the fifth step of **the seven-step path for making ethical decisions** will impact his or her ability to make ethical decisions. Provide an example that demonstrates this.

Here, the main subject is the seven-step path for making ethical decisions as you are required to give examples that show how a person's decision-making process is affected if they do not follow step 5 of this. It is assumed that you know what the fifth step of the seven-path is (considering consequences).

#### 2. Look at the nouns and verbs in the question and how they are connected.

Explain how a **person's** failure to **apply** the fifth step of the **seven-step path** for making ethical decisions will **impact** his or her **ability** to **make ethical decisions**. Provide an example that demonstrates this.

The first noun of the sentence is "a person." Now: what is the person doing? The answer here is "failing to apply" or, in simpler terms, "failing to do something." The object of the sentence is step 5 of the seven-step path. So far we can understand that when a person does not follow step 5 of the seven-step path for making ethical decisions, there is a consequence. The consequence here is highlighted by the next verb: impact, or, in other words, affect. What does it affect? It affects their ability to make ethical decisions. Therefore, if we were to simplify this part of the question, we could say: Explain how a person's ability to make ethical choices is affected if they do not follow step 5 of the seven-step path for making ethical choices.



**Key tip:** Paraphrasing questions into your own words helps you understand the question.

#### 3. Connect your understanding with the question's directive verbs.

As noted earlier, the question includes information words: *explain* and *provide*. After step 2, you know what you need to explain. To fulfil the assignment question completely, you need to also give an example that supports your explanation. It is not enough to simply say "this is the impact"; you also need to show *why* and *how* that impact occurs.

#### Below is a short example of how to answer the question appropriately:

If one does not consider the consequences when making a decision, core ethical values can be violated through the lack of eliminating the unethical alternatives. For example, while drinking bottled water may appear as a safer means of water consumption, it poses ethical violations as it threatens to damage the environment. According to the Earth Policy Institute, the plastic water bottles used by Americans each year require 17 million barrels of oil to create (as cited in Gleick 1). In this way, the fifth step of the ethical decision-making process is essential as it causes one to consider the effects of their decision from various perspectives.

## Relation Example

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### Assignment Question:

What are the **effects** of a person's failure to apply the fifth step of the seven-step path for making ethical decisions?

By looking at this question, we can see that the question uses a **relation** verb. We then know that we must show a connection between the main action and its consequence.

We can go through the same process as we did earlier to figure out how to answer the question. Like earlier, the main subject is the seven-step path for making ethical decisions. This question asks for the effects of a person not following the fifth step of the seven-step decision-making process. However, always remember that this type of question does not mean that you simply list the causes and effects; you are required to demonstrate the **significance** in these causes and effects.

**Below is a short example of how to answer this question:**

If a decision capitalizes in a certain area at the expense of another, the decision is unethical. Ignorance of possible consequences when making a decision can result in damaging economical and environmental effects. For example, North Americans buy more than 30 billion litres of water per year, most of which are contained in nearly 900,000 tonnes of plastic that require 17 million barrels of oil to produce (Pacific Institute 2007). This act then presents itself as unethical since it threatens financial and environmental resources. In order to avoid these damaging effects, and institutions must pay attention to the possible consequences from social, political, and environmental perspectives when making decisions.

## Interpretation Example

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### Assignment Question:

**Evaluate** the significance of the fifth step in the seven-step path of making ethical decisions.

This question requires more in-depth thought as it is asking you to apply your own original analysis towards the subject: the fifth step of making ethical decisions. Here, it is not enough to explain what the fifth step is and provide information. You must provide your opinion (a statement that can be debated) and accompany it with evidence.



**Key tip:** Interpretation questions are issued when background knowledge on the subject is assumed to be known or already learned. For this reason, avoid providing too much description or information in these assignments; provide your **original analysis** (opinion) and supporting evidence.

**Here is an example of a short answer to this question. Notice how it presents a unique argument and analysis:**

Decisions that maximize positive outcomes have more ethical integrity. However, consequences can be difficult to predict, and measuring the moral goodness of a particular action depends on different variables. For example, the Pacific Institute reports that the production of bottled water consumes 17 million barrels of oil a year, making it an ecologically unjustifiable product (1). However, bottled water offers the distinct advantage of being accessible everywhere, providing a convenient way to stay hydrated throughout the day in every circumstance. Access to consistent hydration is a fundamental human right, and to label this as an unethical issue is therefore problematic.