How to Analyse an Assignment Brief

When preparing to start a university-level writing assignment, bear in mind the importance of the assignment brief. This handout uses an example of a real assignment brief (or question) in order to demonstrate an effective approach. You will see that when the title is broken down into segments, it will be much easier for you to respond to it.

Example Assignment Brief

*Compare and contrast two communication models and discuss how they are used in advertising practice. Identify two examples to support your findings.*

Advertising and Marketing does not have to be your subject. You will be shown that any assignment task can be broken down and analysed.

Identify directive words

Every word in the brief is important. Some words will be there to direct you in terms of the type of argument to use; others will advise on what the content should be. Use a highlighter to underline directive words.

In the above brief, the directive words are all verbs – they require an action. The directive words are:

*Compare* and *contrast* two communication models and *discuss* how they are used in advertising practice. *Identify* two examples to support your findings.

There are many other directive words that you may come across in assignment briefs. For example: *evaluate*, *analyse*, *argue*, *explain*, *illustrate*, *critically consider*, *define*, and *outline*. 
### The meaning of directive words

**Analyze**
Pick apart and examine different components of an idea or a theory and think about their individual contribution to the whole. Take into consideration all the significant factors that have contributed to an argument, theory or concept and ask both *why* and *how* conclusions/results were reached.

**Argue**
Defend a position by stating your case. Your case will stand or fall depending upon the quality of the evidence which you have provided to back up your argument.

**Compare and contrast**
Identify different views on a subject and then discuss the similarities and the differences of those views.

**Critically consider**
Identify the advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses, of an argument and justify your position in relation to the argument.

**Define**
Establish the meaning of something (for example, a theory or a technical term) so that the reader has a clear understanding of it. Rather than providing your own definition, it is usually better to research the definition from a reliable source and then to quote, paraphrase or summarise it.

**Discuss**
Consider an idea, theory or concept from different points of view in order to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses – imagine that you are having a conversation about the topic and the person with whom you are conversing has an opposite viewpoint to your own. It is up to you to persuade that person, by pointing out evidence, that your argument is sound.
Evaluate  Weigh up, or judge, in order to find out the value of something. Get used to asking questions such as:

- Is this idea a good one, and, if so, why?
- What are its strengths?
- What are its weaknesses?
- Can it be supported with credible evidence?
- Does it leave out any important considerations?

Explain  Make something very clear to the reader and, if necessary, give a step-by-step explanation of a process or an idea, concept or theory.

Identify  Pinpoint a fact, an example, an argument, or a theoretical position.

Illustrate  Give an example in order to demonstrate a point. This could be in the form of a diagram or a graph, but it might also be in the form of a written example which supports your point.

Outline  Identify the key points so that the reader has an overview of the subject being discussed.

Support  To back up. You may have an opinion about your subject and your overall argument will, therefore, be aimed at justifying that opinion. However, in order for your opinion/argument to be taken seriously by academics, it must be supported, or backed up, with evidence from academic sources (books, academic journals or reputable websites). Whenever you make a statement in your assignment, ask yourself whether you have supported it with evidence.
Identify content

After highlighting the directive words in your assignment title, use a different colour highlighter to underline the content of what you are expected to write about. Look again at the example assignment brief:

*Compare and contrast two communication models and discuss how they are used in advertising practice. Identify two examples to support your findings.*

In this example, the content would be:

- Two communication models
- Advertising practice
- Two examples

The brief is asking you to look at two theories, or communication models, and to discuss how these models are followed in creative practice, that is, in the role of professional advertising agency.

Firstly, you must find the models and, secondly, you must assess their validity, or usefulness. Finally, you are being asked to identify two examples of advertising in which the theories are recognisable to you. In other words, you need to demonstrate how theories relate to practice.