

Choosing the Verb to Establish Thinking Process Central to a Writing Assignment

The underlying idea here is that there exists some kind of hierarchy of thinking skills (Bloom's Taxonomy would be one example) in which the higher levels must be built on the foundation of the lower and no steps can be skipped. For example, you can't apply principles (a higher-level skill) before you have some concrete knowledge to apply them to. You can't analyze something unless you are able to summarize it accurately.

Some verbs that ask for knowledge and comprehension (who/what/when):

NAME	LIST	TELL
DESCRIBE	SUMMARIZE	

Some verbs that ask for analytical work (how/why):

ANALYZE	CONTRAST	EXPLICATE	DEFINE
TRACE	CLASSIFY	GIVE REASONS	ILLUSTRATE
EXPLAIN	GIVE EVIDENCE		

Some verbs that require evaluation and application:

ATTACK	PROVE	EVALUATE	ARGUE
DEFEND	DISPROVE	AGREE	APPLY
SUPPORT	JUSTIFY	DISAGREE	

Some verbs that can be ambiguous:

COMPARE (could be asking for simple lists of facts or could require analysis)

DISCUSS (can mean just about whatever the user wants it to, including complex forms of argument)

PROVE and DISPROVE need to be shored up with a clear understanding of the relevant standards of proof (if proof is even possible).

EVALUATE, AGREE, DISAGREE, even ARGUE may be taken to mean "have an opinion" and thus produce a completely unsatisfactory piece of writing. Like standards of proof, relevant grounds of evaluation must be established.

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Obviously this handout only scratches the surface of a huge topic, but it's a start.