Understanding Command Words

The key to doing well on a response paper, assignment or exam question is having the ability to identify exactly what your professor or examiner wants you to write. When a teacher asks you a question in an exam or assignment, more often than not, s/he wants you to display knowledge and understanding of the topic in a particular style. The good news is, examiners and teachers will hint their expectation in what is usually the first word of the question. Knowing the implication behind all such prompt words can help you know not just what you should be writing in your answer, but also how you should be structuring your answer. Following are some such words that you will find in questions and question papers.

When a question asks you to:

1.   **Discuss**/**Consider**: Present the merits and demerits of the given issue

2.   **Analyze**: Go deep into an issue/topic, meticulously unpacking and laying bare the many layers within it

3.   **Critically evaluate**: Note the arguments (along with the relevant evidence) in favor of and against the issue and then provide your own judgement

4.   **Comment**: Give your opinion on the issue but remember that your opinion must be backed by logic, evidence, and examples.

5.   **Argue:** Make a case supporting or opposing a particular issue. The primary aim is to convince the reader of your position (unlike **Analyze** where the task is primarily to unpack the different layers to an issue, and unlike **Critically Evaluate** where you present the implications of both sides of an issue and then make a judgement based on the evidence that you have).