

Instruction words in examinations

Introduction

Exam questions contain words that instruct students in what is required in each answer. This resource is for general guidance only. Please find and follow the guidance issued by your department.

Common instruction words

Below are common instruction words (verbs) found in exam questions, with a description of what each means.

List

An easy one to start with. This literally means that you need to accurately list the items specified in the question. This is a pure test of knowledge and understanding. E.g. 'List four elements that are more reactive than potassium'. This can be 1 mark per time, or could be marked in bandings. Check the guidance for your exam.

Describe

To describe is to give a detailed account, in words, of something, like a theory, object, framework... It is critical to remember that describing is not explaining. For example, you can describe what a person is wearing, but if you state the reason why a person is wearing a particular item, that would be explaining.

Explain

This is asking you to write about why something is happening/connected/has particular characteristics. It requires you to give reasons why something has the characteristics, qualities or relationships that it has. E.g. a person's face becomes red when they undertake exercise due to the blood moving towards the surface of the skin, so heat can be lost to the air.

Outline

Describe the main features of something. Leave out minor characteristics. E.g. A dog has four legs, a spine, is a mammal, is derived from wolves, and is a pet kept by humans. This is a simple example, but shows the basic characteristics of outlining.

Analyse

This instruction is asking you to divide information into categories. Show relationships between categories. Account for the differences between categories. An example question: Analyse the suitability of gold as a precious metal.

Compare

To compare is to show the similarities between two or more things. Depending on the marks available, this may require detailed explanation and could also include differences. A concluding statement that concerns the overall similarity may be required.

Contrast

To contrast is to show the differences between two or more things. Depending on the marks available, this may require detailed explanation and could also include similarities. A concluding statement that concerns the overall level of difference may be required.

Define

Write a precise meaning of something. The number of marks available indicate how detailed the definition needs to be. Definitions can vary greatly in both length and level of detail involved.

Evaluate

Appraise and justify the worth of something. This requires justification and explanation using evidence. An example question: Evaluate the efficacy of interviews as a research tool in study A.

State

Present in clear, concise, brief form what something is or does. An example question: State what is meant by 'type A personality disorder'.

Discuss

Investigate or examine using argumentation of an issue or question from multiple angles using evidence. This is most typically used in exam essay questions. An example question: Discuss the factors that led to a British victory at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Identify

Point out and describe something. An example question: Identify four factors that led to success in scenario B.

Identify trends

Point out and describe patterns in data or a scenario. E.g. Using the data in figure 1, identify three trends that are significant.

Justify

Using evidence and argumentation show the reasoning that makes a decision or choice a correct one. An example question: Justify the use of force in scenario B.

What next?

- Have a look at the rest of the [exam writing page](#).