

CLUE WORDS IN EXAMS

Clue (also known as instruction or directive) words tell you what you are required to do – for example: *discuss, critically analyse, compare*. Typical essay and short-answer questions contain clue words, so it is vital to understand these words to fully address the topic under consideration. If you have a deep understanding of the clue words, you will be able to understand exactly what the question is asking of you and you can answer the question fully and clearly.

Note that there are usually two types of short-answer questions: factual (recalling relevant information) and interpretative (applying your understanding of key concepts); a question can sometimes require you to first provide facts and then demonstrate your understanding. In this table, the factual words are highlighted in blue.

It is very useful to closely read past exam papers and highlight the clue words that are commonly used in your discipline. Here are some examples of common clue words and their meanings:

Directive word	Definition
account for	Give a justified explanation of why and how something is the case.
analyse	Divide into parts or elements to discover the nature of something. Describe the function and relationships of the parts to identify possible problems or weaknesses.
argue	Make a case for accepting or rejecting a position by systematically giving reasons and evidence for or against it. Demonstrate that you are aware of opposing viewpoints and provide grounds for rejecting them.
assess	Examine from different viewpoints, weighing up strengths and weaknesses. Make a considered judgement.
comment on	Provide an informed and supported viewpoint.
compare	Identify characteristics that are similar. Also stress differences where relevant.
contrast/ differentiate/ distinguish	Identify characteristics that are different. Emphasise similarities where appropriate.
critical(ly)/ criticise/ critique	→Analyse systematically from different perspectives and identify positive aspects as well as limitations. Draw conclusions from the analysis and express an informed judgement. This does not mean to criticise in only negative terms!

define	Determine essential qualities. →State concise and clear meanings, but omit details. Mark the limits of the definition and emphasise differences to similar items or objects.
describe	Characterise, recount and relate systematically.
discuss	→Analyse and →critically →examine in detail. Consider pros and cons in order to come to a supported assessment and conclusion.
enumerate	Name and list the key points or ideas one by one.
evaluate	→Assess
examine	Investigate closely, paying attention to detail and considering implications.
explain	Make something clear by elaborating on it. Give reasons and try to analyse causes.
illustrate	→Explain and clarify by using concrete examples, data, diagrams, etc.
interpret	→Explain something and make its meaning explicit. Give your own judgment.
justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions.
list	Present in an ordered way.
outline	Present the principal features and how they relate to each other in a logical order. Include all main points and omit details.
prove	Show that something is true by presenting facts, statistics, examples etc. Note: prove has a particular meaning in the mathematical/physics context.
review	Survey and →examine →critically and comprehensively. →Comment on controversial aspects.
state	Present the main points briefly and clearly. Omit details and examples.
summarise	Give a short and clear description of the main points.