

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 |
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| 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! |

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| 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. |