

Task analysis: Direction words

Before you start writing your essay, you need to carefully analyse the question so you fully understand what the task is asking you to do. This will help you to avoid going off topic, or only addressing part of what is being asked. Generally speaking, essays have a question which consists of:

- **Direction words:** Words, usually verbs, that tell you what you have to **do**, for example, 'discuss' or 'compare'.
- **Content words:** Words that deal with topics or subtopics and identify the material you should focus on.
- **Limiting words:** Words that limit the scope of the topic to a particular area, e.g. all, some, the majority of; references to time, place(s) and/or specific group(s).

Identifying direction words in questions is often relatively easy, but each of these words has a different focus, so it's important to make sure you understand exactly what each requires you to do.

Here are some examples of common direction words and their definitions.

Direction word	What you need to do
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.
calculate	Work out exactly.
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.
derive	Work out by reasoning or deduction (from general to specific).

Direction word	What you need to do
describe	Characterise, recount and relate systematically.
determine	Come to conclusions about after calculations or discussion.
discuss	→Analyse and →critically →examine in detail. Consider pros and cons in order to come to a supported assessment and conclusion.
enumerate	Give a listing, number.
estimate	Work out an approximate or rough figure or judgement.
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.
give an account of	→Describe, give a list of reasons for something.
identify	Establish or say what it is →distinguish from other items, point out.
illustrate	→Explain and clarify by the use of 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 main features and how they relate to each other in a logical order. Include all main points and omit details.
relate	Narrate or tell about, show how things are connected to each other and to what extent they are alike.
review	Survey and →examine →critically and comprehensively. →Comment on controversial aspects.
state	Present the main points briefly and clearly. Omit details and examples.
suggest	Give ideas about, make a suggestion.
summarise	Give a short and clear description of the main points.
trace	Follow the development of a something from a particular point in time.