

Instruction verbs in essay questions

Understanding your assignment question

When you get your assignment question, decide:

- What the question means
- What it is asking you to do.

Read the question several times and consider any implicit assumptions behind the question. Define the key words (use a dictionary if necessary) and look for any words that focus or restrict the area you need to examine in your answer.

Key words in the title

Underline the key words or phrases in your question. Use the context around each key word to help you understand what is required, for example, 'discuss briefly' as compared to 'discuss in the context of...'.

Also bear in mind that some words may have slightly different meanings depending on the discipline in which they are used. If in doubt check with a subject specific dictionary or your tutor.

The following list provides an explanation of some common question words.

Account for	Give reasons for; explain (note: give an account of; describe).
Analyse	Break the information into constituent parts; examine the relationship between the parts; question the information.
Argue	Put the case for or against a view or idea giving evidence for your claims/reasons for or against; attempt to influence the reader to accept your view.
Balance	Look at two or more viewpoints or pieces of information; give each equal attention; look at good and bad points; take into account many aspects and give an appropriate weighting to those aspects.
Be critical	Identify what is good and bad about the information and why; probe, question, identify inaccuracies or shortcomings in the information; estimate the value of the material.
Clarify	Identify the components of an issue/topic/problem/; make the meaning plain; remove misunderstandings.
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which is preferable; implies evaluation.
Conclude/draw conclusions	The end point of your critical thinking; what the results of an investigation indicate; arrive at a judgement by reasoning.
Contrast	Bring out the differences.
Criticise	Give your judgement on theories or opinions or facts and back this by discussing evidence or reasoning involved.
Deduce	Conclude; infer.

Define	Give the precise meaning. Examine the different possible or often used definitions.
Demonstrate	Show clearly by giving proof or evidence.
Describe	Give a detailed, full account of the topic.
Determine	Find out something; calculate.
Develop an opinion/ a view	Decide what you think (based on an argument or evidence).
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; debate; give reason for and against; examine the implications of the topic.
Elucidate	Explain and make clear.
Estimate	Calculate; judge; predict.
Evaluate/weigh up	Appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess and explain.
Examine	Look at carefully; consider.
Explain	Make plain and clear; give reasons for.
Give evidence	Provide evidence from your own work or that of others which could be checked by a third party to prove/ justify what you say.
Identify	Point out and describe.
Identify trends	Identify patterns/changes/ movements in certain directions (e.g. over time or across topics/ subjects).
Illustrate	Explain, clarify, make clear by the use of concrete examples.
Infer	Conclude something from facts or reasoning.
Interpret	Expound the meaning; make clear and explicit, giving your own judgement.
Justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions, a particular view or conclusions and answer main objections likely to be made to them.
Outline	Give a short description of the main points; give the main features or general principles; emphasise the structure, leaving out minor details.
Prove	Show that something is true or certain; provide strong evidence (and examples) for.
Review	Make a survey examining the subject carefully; similar to <i>summarise and evaluate</i> .
State	Present in a brief, clear form.
Summarise	Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, removing unnecessary detail.
Synthesise	Bring elements together to make a complex whole, draw together or integrate issues (e.g. theories or models can be created by synthesising a number of elements).
Trace	Follow the development of topic from its origin.