

Essay terms explained

To write a good essay, you firstly need to have a clear understanding of what the essay question is asking you to do. Looking at the essay question in close detail will help you to identify the topic and 'directive words' (Dhann, 2001), which instruct you how to answer the question. Understanding the meaning of these directive words is a vital first step in producing your essay.

This glossary provides definitions of some of the more typical words that you may come across in an essay question. Please note that these definitions are meant to provide general, rather than exact guidance, and are not a substitute for reading the question carefully. Get this wrong, and you risk the chance of writing an essay that lacks focus, or is irrelevant.

You are advised to use this glossary in conjunction with the following study guides: Writing essays, and Thought mapping written by Learning Development.

Essay term	Definition
Analyse	Break an issue into its constituent parts. Look in depth at each part using supporting arguments and evidence for and against as well as how these interrelate to one another.
Assess	Weigh up to what extent something is true. Persuade the reader of your argument by citing relevant research but also remember to point out any flaws and counter-arguments as well. Conclude by stating clearly how far you are in agreement with the original proposition.
Clarify	Literally make something clearer and, where appropriate, simplify it. This could involve, for example, explaining in simpler terms a complex process or theory, or the relationship between two variables.
Comment upon	Pick out the main points on a subject and give your opinion, reinforcing your point of view using logic and reference to relevant evidence, including any wider reading you have done.
Compare	Identify the similarities and differences between two or more phenomena. Say if any of the shared similarities or differences are more important than others. 'Compare' and 'contrast' will often feature together in an essay question.
Consider	Say what you think and have observed about something. Back up your comments using appropriate evidence from external sources, or your own experience. Include any views which are contrary to your own and how they relate to what you originally thought.
Contrast	Similar to compare but concentrate on the dissimilarities between two or more phenomena, or what sets them apart. Point out any differences which are particularly significant.
Critically evaluate	Give your verdict as to what extent a statement or findings within a piece of research are true, or to what extent you agree with them. Provide evidence taken from a wide range of sources which both agree with and contradict an argument. Come to a final conclusion, basing your decision on what you judge to be the most important factors and justify how you have made your choice.
Define	To give in precise terms the meaning of something. Bring to attention any problems posed with the definition and different interpretations that may exist.
Demonstrate	Show how, with examples to illustrate.
Describe	Provide a detailed explanation as to how and why something happens.
Discuss	Essentially this is a written debate where you are using your skill at reasoning, backed up by carefully selected evidence to make a case for and against an argument, or point out the advantages and disadvantages of a given context. Remember to arrive at a conclusion.
Elaborate	To give in more detail, provide more information on.

Evaluate	See the explanation for 'critically evaluate'.
Examine	Look in close detail and establish the key facts and important issues surrounding a topic. This should be a critical evaluation and you should try and offer reasons as to why the facts and issues you have identified are the most important, as well as explain the different ways they could be construed.
Explain	Clarify a topic by giving a detailed account as to how and why it occurs, or what is meant by the use of this term in a particular context. Your writing should have clarity so that complex procedures or sequences of events can be understood, defining key terms where appropriate, and be substantiated with relevant research.
Explore	Adopt a questioning approach and consider a variety of different viewpoints. Where possible reconcile opposing views by presenting a final line of argument.
Give an account of	Means give a detailed description of something. Not to be confused with 'account for' which asks you not only what, but why something happened.
Identify	Determine what are the key points to be addressed and implications thereof.
Illustrate	A similar instruction to 'explain' whereby you are asked to show the workings of something, making use of definite examples and statistics if appropriate to add weight to your explanation.
Interpret	Demonstrate your understanding of an issue or topic. This can be the use of particular terminology by an author, or what the findings from a piece of research suggest to you. In the latter instance, comment on any significant patterns and causal relationships.
Justify	Make a case by providing a body of evidence to support your ideas and points of view. In order to present a balanced argument, consider opinions which may run contrary to your own before stating your conclusion.
Outline	Convey the main points placing emphasis on global structures and interrelationships rather than minute detail.
Review	Look thoroughly into a subject. This should be a critical assessment and not merely descriptive.
Show how	Present, in a logical order, and with reference to relevant evidence the stages and combination of factors that give rise to something.
State	To specify in clear terms the key aspects pertaining to a topic without being overly descriptive. Refer to evidence and examples where appropriate.
Summarise	Give a condensed version drawing out the main facts and omit superfluous information. Brief or general examples will normally suffice for this kind of answer
To what extent	Evokes a similar response to questions containing 'How far...'. This type of question calls for a thorough assessment of the evidence in presenting your argument. Explore alternative explanations where they exist.

References

Dhann, S., (2001) How to ... '*Answer assignment questions*'. Accessed 12/09/11.
http://www.education.ex.ac.uk/dll/studyskills/answering_questions.htm

The following sources have also been consulted in writing this guide:

Johnson, R., (1996) *Essay instruction terms*. Accessed 12/09/11. <http://www.mantex.co.uk/samples/inst.htm>

Student Study Support Unit Canterbury Christchurch College (no date) *Common terms in essay questions*. Accessed 22/02/08.
<http://www.wmin.ac.uk/page-2714>

Taylor, A.M. and Turner, J., (2004) *Key words used in examination questions and essay titles*. Accessed 12/09/11
<http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Essays/sta-planningessay.aspx#answering>

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studyhelp@le.ac.uk | www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies