

# 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   |
|----------------------------|--|
| <b>Analyse</b>             | 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.   |
| <b>Assess</b>              | 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.  |
| <b>Clarify</b>             | 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.   |
| <b>Comment upon</b>        | 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.   |
| <b>Compare</b>             | 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.   |
| <b>Consider</b>            | 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.   |
| <b>Contrast</b>            | 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.  |
| <b>Critically evaluate</b> | 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. |
| <b>Define</b>              | To give in precise terms the meaning of something. Bring to attention any problems posed with the definition and different interpretations that may exist.   |
| <b>Demonstrate</b>         | Show how, with examples to illustrate.   |
| <b>Describe</b>            | Provide a detailed explanation as to how and why something happens.  |
| <b>Discuss</b>             | 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.   |
| <b>Elaborate</b>           | To give in more detail, provide more information on.   |

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| <b>Evaluate</b>           | See the explanation for 'critically evaluate'.   |
| <b>Examine</b>            | 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.                       |
| <b>Explain</b>            | 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. |
| <b>Explore</b>            | Adopt a questioning approach and consider a variety of different viewpoints. Where possible reconcile opposing views by presenting a final line of argument.   |
| <b>Give an account of</b> | Means give a detailed description of something. Not to be confused with 'account for' which asks you not only what, but why something happened.  |
| <b>Identify</b>           | Determine what are the key points to be addressed and implications thereof.  |
| <b>Illustrate</b>         | 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.   |
| <b>Interpret</b>          | 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.   |
| <b>Justify</b>            | 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.  |
| <b>Outline</b>            | Convey the main points placing emphasis on global structures and interrelationships rather than minute detail.   |
| <b>Review</b>             | Look thoroughly into a subject. This should be a critical assessment and not merely descriptive.   |
| <b>Show how</b>           | Present, in a logical order, and with reference to relevant evidence the stages and combination of factors that give rise to something.  |
| <b>State</b>              | To specify in clear terms the key aspects pertaining to a topic without being overly descriptive. Refer to evidence and examples where appropriate.  |
| <b>Summarise</b>          | 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  |
| <b>To what extent</b>     | 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.  
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