

## Instructional words

Instructional words used in an assignment or exam question tell you what you need to do.

There are three main types:

- Information words
- Relation words
- Interpretation words

Information words : ask you to show what you know about a subject

- **Action** : steps you would take
- **Define** : give the exact meaning clearly and concisely
- **Describe** : give an account of the main points about the subject in a logical sequence; no interpretation is needed.
- **Demonstrate** : use clear thinking to prove something by using statistics or reliable evidence; explain to show you understand, using examples or personal experience. Show how something is done.
- **Examine** : break down the main points in more detail and describe each point carefully.
- **Explain** : make it clear in plain language the reasons why something happened and account for the causes and results or implications of it.
- **Function** : describe what it does.
- **Illustrate**: explain and clarify ideas with the help of examples. Your answers will use such phrases as “For example”; “This is shown by ...”; “A typical case is ...”; “Namely”; “For instance”.
- **List** : give a series of brief ideas. Depending on how formal the assignment is, lists may be numbered or bullet-pointed.
- **Method/Trace** : describe the way it is done and the various steps in the correct order. You might use phrases like “There are four stages to this process”; “The first step is when ...”; “First ... Second ... Third ...”.
- **Outline/State** : describe or explain the main ideas or points without going into details. Use a logical arrangement.
- **Purpose** : explain why it is there and what it is used for
- **Research** : gather material from a wide variety of sources and analyse what you find. The use of the word “research” in the question indicates the requirement for an in-depth study of the subject.
- **Summarise** : briefly list the important ideas you have learned, without examples and details. Helpful phrases include “In short”, “In brief”, “Briefly”, “In conclusion”, “On balance”, “To sum up”.

Relation words : ask you to show how things are connected

- **Apply** : use details you have been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a set situation.
- **Compare** : show the similarities and differences between two or more subjects, qualities or other things. You might use words like “Similarly”, “Likewise”, “By the same token”, “Together with”, “Moreover”, “Unlike”, “On the one hand”, “On the other hand”.
- **Contrast** : show how two or more subjects, qualities or other things are different. You might use phrases like “In contrast”, “On the one hand ...” and “On the other hand...”; words like “Conversely”, “Nevertheless” and “Instead”.
- **Compare and contrast**: Describe the major similarities and then the major differences between two or more things.
- **Discuss** : come to a conclusion about the issue, after examining it carefully and completely. Analyse a range of views, noting the arguments for and against them, and give reasons for the view you have reached yourself.

Interpretation words : ask you to give an opinion which is supported by evidence: examples, definitions, concepts.

- **Analyse** : break down the main ideas and show the relationships between them and why they are important. Examine in detail causes and effects, key factors, possible results. Use words like “Because”, “As a result”, “Accordingly”, “Therefore”, “For this reason”.
- **Argue** : take a side on an issue and defend it, with evidence for your side and against the other side.
- **Assess** : summarise your opinion and measure it against something else
- **Critically analyse** : break down the topic into the main ideas and look at them in terms of strengths and weaknesses
- **Critically evaluate** : give an in-depth and logical judgment about something, Support your judgment with reliable evidence and/or authoritative views. Examine in detail. Explore alternatives,, challenging and questioning. Discuss strengths and weaknesses.
- **Evaluate** : carefully assess advantages and limitations. Emphasise evidence and authoritative views.
- **Interpret** : clearly explain the meaning. You can use examples or provide comment.
- **Prove/justify** : give reasons or examples to demonstrate why the statement is the truth. The use of reliable evidence is expected.
- **Review** : critically evaluate the important statements made by authoritative sources about a subject.
- **Support** : state clearly what you believe about the issue and give reasons or evidence to support your belief.

*Further reading*

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Williams, A. (2013). *Research: improve your reading and referencing skills*. London: HarperCollins. Appendix 2: Instruction words, p. 155-156.