

Improve Your Marks in Essays and Exams: the Meaning of Commonly Used Words

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The Words Used in the Question Can Help You to Choose the Best Approach

Irrespective of your subject, it's a good idea to ensure that you really understand the question, i.e. that you know what you are being asked for. Each question to which you have to write an answer is designed to test you as an individual—not just your memory, but your intelligence and abilities. The examiner looks to see how you approach the question, seeing if you are logical and can communicate your ideas. The actual words used in the question often indicate what your best approach should be. The words below explain what is expected of you. Sometimes more than one of the words will appear in the same question and you are being asked to do more than one thing.

Account for:

Explain why something happens or has happened; give reasons for things; explain the cause or causes.

Analyse:

Discuss an issue, perhaps the cases for and against, or the causes and effects, the assumptions behind it and possible consequences of it. It sometimes helps to divide the question into parts; if the question falls naturally into parts, so should your answer.

Assess:

Give the case for and against, or the importance or unimportance, then sum up (possibly cautiously) one way or the other.

Comment:

You may need to assess the words used or proposition made. It often calls for mild criticism and you may have to explain under what circumstances it might be done, or possible results of doing it, and then what responses might be made, for instance by government or other bodies. You might often need to say whether something is important, or how important the various bits of the case are.

Compare:

You need to say where the two items are alike and where they are different; you may need to point out which are the more important items. If asked which you prefer, you must explain why you think this. Comparisons sometimes stress how alike things are; contrast always focus on differences.

Contrast:

Think about the differences, say what they are, explain how or why they arise, and perhaps judge the relative importance.

Criticise:

Adopt an antagonistic approach. In general, you need to disagree with the proposition, pointing out any faults and disadvantages you see. Try to support your views with reasons, evidence, or statistics if you can remember any. Quote any names of authors that you know support your view. If you know someone who supports the proposition you have to criticise you can mention them, but preferably also name someone who opposes this person, as a balance to the viewpoint.

Define:

Explain what it means, using as formal language as you can. If you have learned a definition, use it.

Describe:

Say what you know about the issue. Make sure you present your answer in a logical order.

Differentiate between:

Explain the differences between the two (or more) items you are asked about.

Discuss:

Say what you know about the issue. Often it means giving a case for and a case against some proposition or issue. You often do well by summing up marginally on one side, but indicating that both cases have merit. This covers you, if the marker prefers the other view!

Distinguish:

Explain the differences between the items or propositions.

Evaluate:

You are being asked to decide how good or bad something is; it may be how true or false; or how important or unimportant something is; or how successful or unsuccessful was whatever is being asked about. You must sum up with an opinion about the issue, because you are being asked to make a judgment.

Explain:

State clearly what is involved, or how something works, or arose, depending on your subject matter.

Identify:

Point to the essential part or parts. You might also have to explain clearly what is involved.

Illustrate:

Supply examples of the proposition in the question. This might be in words, statistics, or diagrams.

Implications:

Describe the likely results of an action, including hidden ones. Be careful to consider if there are any hidden assumptions behind the statement, as they can affect the

possible results. Consider the short term and long term possibilities—and it may help to divide your answer into these two time periods.

Interpret:

Explain the meaning of something supplied; e.g. you might be asked to interpret a set of data, a bar-chart or a graph. See if you can find something interesting to say, not just say “X went up” or similar. It may be worth looking to see if two or more things move together or in opposite directions.

Justify:

Supply reasons in support of an argument or event. Put in any statistics you might know. If your memory fogs and you cannot remember exactly, say if it was 60 percent or 70 percent, “approximately two-thirds” would cover it nicely.

Limitations:

Show where something will not work, or where it will not work as well as in other areas. Consider to what groups it would not apply, or if whatever it is would run out over time (short-term/long-term differences).

You are seeking areas of relevance and irrelevance and concentrating on the latter.

Outline:

Select only the most important aspects of a topic, ignoring all minor details. A summary is being called for.

Relate:

This word can have two meanings; either you are being asked to describe carefully, which is unlikely as it is rather simple, or to demonstrate the connection between two or more things (relate A to B).

Role:

Explain the part that something plays: how it fits in, what it causes, what effects it has, what it might drag in with it, what it might force to happen, or how it interacts with other people or groups.

Significance:

Explain the meaning of something and assess how important it is. You might consider for whom it might be significant, or under what circumstances, and tell the examiner!

State:

Put down the main points of the view or argument.

Summarise:

Select only the main points of the issue and put them in some logical order.

Support:

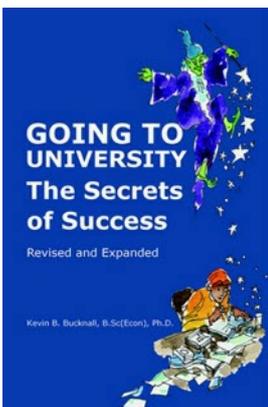
Give all the reasons you can in favour of the proposition or idea. Use data if you know any, or diagrams if relevant.

Trace:

Explain how something developed, usually over time.

Valid or validity:

Can the statement be justified by the facts and evidence? To what extent is it true i.e., are there any limitations and what are they? When will it work and when is it likely to fail?



The author's latest book is *Going to University: the Secrets of Success*, 2nd Revised and Expanded Edition, Kewei Press, UK, 2009. The recommended retail price is £9.95. An excerpt can be downloaded from www.keweipress.com. A Kindle version is now available, priced about £3.09 (inc. VAT), or in United States dollars around \$4.79. Details and links on the site below.

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