

The quick and easy guide to...

*Understanding
Question Instructions
in Assignments and Exams*

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“Why do they use fancy terms like ‘discuss’ or ‘evaluate’? Why can’t they just say it normally so that I understand what they mean?”

This is the most common complaint that students make about question instructions.

The purpose of this guide is two-fold. First, I want to assure you that the person who set the question isn’t using ‘fancy terms’ to try to catch you out. On the contrary, their purpose is to clarify your task. That way, there’s no ambiguity and no room for misunderstanding. For instance, as you’ll see in the next section, **‘Illustrate’** asks you to explain using examples, diagrams or drawings, not just to explain generally. But if you’re asked to **‘Summarise’**, should you give an example? No. So it’s to help you, not to hinder you, that these terms are used in assignments and exams.

Second, the purpose of this guide is to provide a translation in words that you can easily understand.

These words may look ambiguous, but they can be translated into very straightforward language. So why not just use the straightforward language in the first place? Simply because it takes quite a lot more words to say it the straightforward way. For instance, **‘Compare’** means ‘Find similarities and differences, then weigh up whether the items have more or less in common’. **‘Discuss’**? This means, ‘Examine important aspects of; argue all sides before drawing a conclusion one way; outline the arguments, backing them up with evidence; consider the implications’.

By the way, students often wonder whether ‘Discuss’ gives them permission to show a preference in their conclusion, and the answer is that yes, it does.

‘Discuss’ invites you to put forward the arguments for and against, as if you were relaying a discussion between two opposite camps, before drawing your own conclusions.

It’s worth spending some time and effort now learning the meaning of question instructions that come up most frequently in your subject. Not only will you improve your grades, you’ll also do so while expending considerably less time

and effort than before. For instance, '**Contrast**' usually means, 'Show differences'. It tells that you don't need to focus on similarities. '**Outline**' asks for a brief description only. '**Comment**' invites you to give your own opinion, not anyone else's. Can you see how much time and hassle you could be saving yourself?

Learn the translations that are useful for your exams. Remember that the examiner isn't trying to catch you out. He or she has a marking scheme (a scoresheet, basically) and for every point that you make that's also on that scheme, you effectively get a mark. The better you understand the tasks that the examiner has in mind, the more marks you'll get.

How do you learn this huge list? You don't. Instead, look over a few past papers in your subject to find out what kind of question instructions you're likely to get in each topic. For instance, in English, you'll often see question instructions like '**Discuss**' or '**Compare and contrast**'. In Politics and History you may be asked to '**Outline**' or '**Evaluate**'. Economics questions often ask you to '**Calculate**'.

Once you've familiarised yourself with the question instructions that relate to your topic, you may find it helpful to try a few past exam questions in timed conditions to get some practice at carrying out the relevant tasks. You don't necessarily need to write out your answer in full; it's usually enough to do timed plans.

Past paper practice of this kind will help you to get proficient at handling these terms so that they stop antagonising you and give you confidence in the exam.

Question instructions

Instruction	Meaning
Account/Give an account of	Give reasons for
Analyse	Give a detailed description, separating into different parts; investigate
Assess	Show how important or successful
Calculate	Find the value of and show your working
Comment	Give your opinion
Compare	Find similarities and differences, then weigh up whether the items have more or less in common
Consider	Think about; explain
Contrast/Distinguish between/Differentiate	Find differences
Define	Give exact meaning of
Demonstrate	Show how, using examples
Describe	Give a detailed account of
Discuss	Examine important aspects of; argue all sides before drawing a conclusion one way; outline the arguments, backing them up with evidence; consider the implications
Evaluate	Weigh up the value of theory or idea in the light of evidence, giving your opinion
Examine	Look closely into
Explain	Paraphrase; give reasons for; interpret

Explore	Examine from every viewpoint
How...	In what way. Such questions are answered with 'By', not 'Because'
Illustrate	Show by giving examples, diagrams or drawings
Interpret	Give the meaning of
Justify	Give evidence for a particular point of view, anticipating counterarguments
Outline	Describe without detail; give main features. Do this showing how points connect, develop or relate to other points
State	Present clearly but briefly
Summarise	Give the main points, without detail or examples
Trace	Show how a topic has developed from beginning to end

About Eileen Tracy

Eileen Tracy works with students, in the UK and internationally, in person or by telephone and email. She offers EFT and teaches study skills developed in her own exam preparation at Oxford University. She writes for the national press on education and parenting, and appears regularly on radio and television. For more information visit www.eileentracy.co.uk.

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- **The Quick and Easy Guide to How to Stop Panicking and Start Learning at School and at University**
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