

THE LEARNING CENTRE

EXAMINATION SKILLS – CLUE WORDS

In essay exams, every question contains a clue word. Clue words are the words that the lecturer uses to indicate what angle he/ she wants you to take when answering the question. Clue words tell you exactly what to do in your essay, so they are extremely important in essay exams.

An essay exam is like a mental game in which the lecturers tell you what they want. To play the game successfully, you need to be aware of the precise meanings of the clue words in the questions. Once you have found the clue words and worked out exactly what they mean, you can answer the question as clearly as possible.

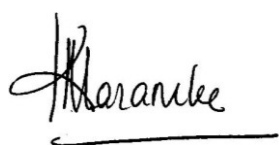
e.g. “Compare the functions of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems”

The clue word in this question is **compare**. If the question asked you to “Evaluate the functions of...”, it would require a completely different answer.

The following is a list of the most common clue words and their meanings in exam questions to help you prepare for essay exams. Because the list is long, it is a good idea to read through past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the most commonly used clue words in your discipline. Many Schools have past exam papers held in the library.

CLUE WORD	MEANING
Analyse	Means to find the main ideas and how they are related and why they are important.
Comment on	Means to discuss, criticize or explain its meaning as completely as possible.
Compare	Means to show both the differences and similarities.
Contrast	Means to compare by showing the differences.
Criticise	Means to give your judgement or reasoned opinion of something, showing its good and bad points. It is not necessary to attack it.
Define	Means to give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a matter of giving a memorized definition.
Describe	Means to write a detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence or story form.

Diagram	Means to make a graph, chart or drawing. Be sure to label it and add a brief explanation if it is necessary.
Discuss	Means to describe giving the details and explaining the positives and negatives of it.
Enumerate	Means to list. Name and list the main ideas one by one.
Evaluate	Means to give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Show the advantages and disadvantages.
Illustrate	Means to explain or make clear by concrete examples, comparisons or analogies.
Interpret	Means to give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make it clear.
Justify	Means to give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.
List	Means to produce a list of words, sentences or comments. Same as enumerate.
Outline	Means to give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary facts. Show the organization of the ideas.
Prove	Means to show by argument or logic that it is true. The word "prove" has a very special meaning in maths and physics.
Relate	Means to show the connection between things, telling how one causes or is like another..
Review	Means to give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticise if necessary.
State	Means to describe the main points in precise terms. Use brief, clear sentences. Omit details or examples.
Summarise	Means to give a brief, condensed account of the main ideas.
Trace	Means to follow the progress or history of the subject.



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