



What does the question mean?

In answering exam questions it isn't just what you know that counts, but how you say it. A great deal of emphasis is placed on being able to use what you know to argue a case that relates directly to the specific question you are asked. So whether it's answering a question in a written exam or for a piece of coursework, how you interpret the question is the most critical factor if you want to gain maximum marks.

This study advice sheet will help you to think about how to interpret questions so that you can answer in the most effective and appropriate way.

Analysing the question

The following three steps will help you to interpret what the question is asking you to do:

Identify the subject

- What is the question about?
- What is the topic you are being asked to write about?
- What is the principal issue or concept?

Identify the instruction

- What are the key words that indicate the approach your answer should take?
- What are the key verbs?

Identify other significant words

- What aspect is being asked about?
- What other words alter meaning?
- What is the scope of the question?
- Wide-ranging or restricted in a specific way?



Finding questions

It is always helpful to look for examples to analyse. You will be able to find a wide range of questions in places such as:

- past exam papers
- textbooks
- tutorial sessions
- handouts
- coursework assignments
- case studies
- newspapers
- develop your own – ask yourself how you would test someone's knowledge on the subject.



What am I being asked to do?



In most questions there will be a keyword which guides you towards the required approach. In order to successfully answer the question you will need to highlight and interpret these keywords, targeting your writing accordingly.

Common keywords

Here are some of the most common key words and a suggested meaning for each:

- **Account for**
Explain the cause of
- **Analyse**
Separate down into its component parts and show how they inter relate with each other
- **Annotate**
Put notes on (usually a diagram)
- **Assess**
Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes
- **Comment**
To make critical or explanatory notes/observations
- **Compare**
Point out the differences and the similarities. This question needs to be carefully organised to produce a logical answer
- **Contrast**
Point out the differences only and present the results in an orderly fashion
- **Describe**
Write down the information in the right order
- **Discuss**
Present arguments for and against the topic in question. In discussion questions you may also give your opinion
- **Distinguish**
Identify the difference between
- **Evaluate**
Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes
- **Explain**
The word 'explain' means that you have to give reasons. You have to explain why rather than just define
- **Justify**
Here you will need to present a valid argument about why a specific theory or conclusion should be accepted
- **Outline**
Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and stressing structure
- **Relate**
Either – show how ideas or events are linked into a sequence
Or – compare or contrast

- **Review**
To make a survey of, examining the subject critically
- **Suggest**
This question may not have a fixed answer. Give a range of responses
- **Summarise**
State the main features of an argument, omitting all that is only partially relevant
- **To what extent....**
Asks you to justify the acceptance or validity of an argument stressing the need to avoid complete acceptance
- **Trace**
Follow the development or history of a topic from some point or origin

What do I need to do to get top marks for my answer?

The following is a question from a paper on the psychology of child development.
'Compare and contrast the consequences of blindness and deafness for language development.'



This is how students who gained different degree classifications seem to have interpreted the question.

1st class

'Identify the consequences of blindness and deafness for language development. Compare and contrast these consequences, drawing conclusions about the nature of language development. Comment on the adequacy of theories of language development in the light of your conclusions.'

Upper 2nd class

'Identify the consequences of blindness and deafness for language development. Compare and contrast these consequences.'

Lower 2nd class

'List some of the features of blindness and deafness. List some consequences for development including a few for language development.'

3rd class

'Write down almost anything you can think of about blindness, deafness, child development and language development. Do not draw any justified conclusions.'

Example taken from: Habeshaw, T. et al. (1995) *53 interesting ways of helping your students to study*. Technical and Educational Services Ltd: Bristol.