

Learning Skills.

Guidance Notes 14

COMMON ESSAY QUESTION TERMS 2

In essay and exam questions you are likely to come across a number of different “process” or “direction” words. These words are the key to what is required of you in answering the question and you should pay particular attention to them.

Despite what these words suggest, it is fairly safe to say that, in most cases, you will be expected to offer a **critical analysis** of the topic in question. It is rare to find an essay question at Higher Education level that only requires **description**.

Guidance notes 13 sets out some common essay question terms. Listed below are some more key process or direction words together with a description of what these words generally mean.

- **Evaluate** – similar to assess in that you need to consider the value and importance of something and weigh up its different aspects, citing evidence and argument in support of your case.
- **Explain** – tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to describe and to analyse.
- **Identify** – pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use in doing so.
- **Illustrate** – similar to explain but probably requesting you give specific examples or statistics to support your case.

Guidance Notes 14

COMMON ESSAY QUESTION TERMS 2

- **Interpret** – clarify something or explain it, perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing, or explaining a particular way of looking at it.
- **Justify** – express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to argue a case.
- **Outline** – indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
- **Relate** – in some questions it means narrate a sequence of events or outline the story of a particular incident. In other questions, it requires you to show how certain topics or issues are connected or affect each other.
- **Review** – survey a topic with the emphasis on assessing rather than describing.
- **Summarise** – give the main points briefly, omitting details and illustrations.
- **Trace** – describe in narrative form the progress, development or sequence of events from some particular point.
- **To what extent** – explore the case for a stated proposition or explanation, much in the manner of assess and criticise, probably arguing for a less than total acceptance of the proposition.

For more resources, see the Learning Skills Hub:
canterbury.ac.uk/learning-skills-hub

Email us at learner@canterbury.ac.uk

canterbury.ac.uk