

# Learning Skills.

## Guidance Notes 13

### COMMON ESSAY QUESTION TERMS 1

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**.

Listed below are a number of key process or direction words together with a description of what these words generally mean.

- **Account for** – explain, clarify, give the reasons for (quite different from “Give an account of...” which is more like “Describe in detail”).
- **Analyse** – break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them and show how they interrelate.
- **Argue** – make a case, based on appropriate evidence and logically structured for and/or against some point of view.
- **Assess** – consider the value or importance of something, paying attention to positive, negative and disputable aspects, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own.

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- **Comment on** – it is fairly safe to assume this means something more than “describe” or “summarise”. More likely, it implies “analyse” or “assess”.
- **Compare** – identify and discuss the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
- **Contrast** – point out and discuss the differences between two things (but probably identifying their similarities as well).
- **Criticise** – spell out your judgement as to the value or truth of something, indicating the criteria on which you base your judgement and citing specific instances and arguments as to how the criteria apply in this case.
- **Define** – make a statement as to the meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail as to allow it to be distinguished from other similar things.
- **Describe** – Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic, or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
- **Discuss** – probably the most common word to appear in essay titles and usually requiring analysis and evaluation of evidence, as well as weighing up arguments and drawing conclusions.

For more resources, see the Learning Skills Hub:  
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