

Understanding the Question

Whether for an exam or an essay:

- Recognise that you are not being asked to write everything that you know. You must be selective and organise your points.
- Higher marks are given for critical thinking, and for answering the question.
- It is very helpful to analyse the question before you begin to plan your answer.
- Ask yourself:

- What are the key terms? Do I need to define any of them in order to answer the question?

- Example: **Young people** are **apathetic** in **today's society**. Discuss.

An essay answer to this question will need to be clear about what each of the highlighted terms means.

- How many sections are there?
 - Example: How much power did women have in the Middle Ages? Be sure to discuss women in at least two social classes.

This question has TWO sections.

- What are the “command terms” in the question? In other words, what are you being asked to do in your answer?

- Examples:

Analyse the importance of gender in gang warfare.

“Religion is the opium of the masses.” (Karl Marx) **Critically discuss**.

Compare and contrast the views of Smith and Jones on market-led economy.

On the next page you will find a partial list of command terms, with suggested definitions.

In an exam, you may also ask yourself:

- How does the question relate to the course as a whole?

Command Terms And Suggested Definitions

Account for:	Give reasons for/give evidence to support a statement
Analyse:	Identify important components / aspects, and explain why they work the way they do
Argue/Justify:	Use evidence to prove or disprove a point of view/statement
Assess/Comment on:	Use evidence to determine the value or importance of the subject in question
Calculate:	Find the value of (show your working)
Comment on:	Identify the main issues and give an informed opinion (i.e. evidence-based not purely personal)
Compare and Contrast/Compare:	Find similarities and differences
Critically Evaluate:	Balance arguments for and against, assessing the strength of the evidence
Define:	State the precise meaning
Demonstrate:	Show how, with examples
Describe/Identify:	Give the main characteristics, features or events
Discuss:	Give arguments for and against, consider the implications
Examine/Explore:	Look in detail
Explain:	Relate clearly how/why
Illustrate:	Support your points with examples (e.g. statistics, diagrams, sketches, quotes etc)
Interpret:	Give the meaning of data or other evidence presented
Outline/Summarise:	Point out the main features of a topic or sequence of events
Prove:	Establish the truth by offering indisputable evidence or a logical sequence of steps or statements

Relate:	Show similarities and connections
Review:	Look back on/survey a topic and assess its worth/importance/usefulness
State:	Give the main points
To what extent/How far:	Assess a situation or the truth of statement
Trace:	Show the stages of development, from start to finish

Adapted from Stella Cottrell, *The Study Skills Handbook*, Palgrave 2003, p. 155