

UNDERSTANDING EXAM QUESTIONS

Half the battle with exams is being able to understand the questions in order to identify what sort of answer is required. Once you understand what these phrases or words actually mean, this should give you clues as to the type of answer and detail that the examiner requires.

Many of the 'command' words used in exam questions are the same across all subjects and require a similar response, even if the subject is different. Therefore, what follows is a glossary of the types of 'command' language you should expect to see in your GCSE exams. Those in bold all require the same sorts of analytical skill and are the types of question that require more depth and detail – more marks are awarded for these types of question.

Advise	Requires you to help somebody reach a decision through a mixture of facts, opinions, commands and options.
Analyse	Look closely at the detail; give reasons why or how something is done and the effect of this – use P.E.E/ P.E.A paragraphs which help you to back up your points with evidence and explain your thoughts.
Argue	Put forward a point of view in a structured and reasoned way – usually one sided but takes account of other points of view.
Calculate	Work out.../ Marks are usually awarded for both the process and outcome.
Combine	Put together...
Comment on...	This requires you to analyse and evaluate in a balanced way. Give your opinions or point of view, with reasons.
Compare	Looking closely at two or more things which have something in common in order to see how they are the same and how they are different. This is looking for an analytical response – P.E.A paragraphs could be used.
Complete	Finish in full.
Consider	Discuss from all angles/ analyse .
Contrast	Often used with ' compare '; look at the differences of two or more things.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Describe... ■ Describe in detail ■ Describe the differences... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A detailed account. More simply – 'Write down...' Tell the examiner in your own words what/ how/ or why something happens; must use words precisely (in scientific subjects this means using scientific terms). ■ Will often be linked to more marks and therefore you will be required to go into more depth in your answer and develop your key points using precise, clear language. ■ Structure around key points which you compare across the two things up for discussion – don't describe all the features of one thing and then all the features of the other – link ideas together.
Develop...	Go beyond and expand something; take it forward; add detail; improve upon a basic idea.
Discuss	Also known as ' examine ' and ' consider ' – give the main reasons 'for' and 'against' and come to a conclusion.
Draw	Similar to 'sketch' or 'illustrate'. Obvious I know, but people can panic in an exam and do completely the wrong thing...don't let this be you!
Ensure	Make sure/ make certain.
Estimate	Guess/ calculate approximately/ give a rough idea with evidence.
Evaluate	Make a judgement about how good or bad/ successful or unsuccessful something is, usually against a specific criteria. This is an opinion based response but it may require you to provide evidence for your points and clear explanations as to why you think the way you do. In Maths it means – work out/ calculate!
Examine	Look closely at something and discuss in a balanced and detached way in order to come to a decision/ conclusion.
Explain	Give reasons for how or why something happens; you need to give examples. They are questions which normally carry a lot of marks and they require you to treat the subject analytically – often using a P.E.A paragraph will help in certain subjects.
Explore	Investigate / Look deeply at... – often this will require you to look at reasons.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give ■ Give reasons (normally they will specify how many) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ These tend to be short, factual answers and normally they will specify how many points are to be made. ■ Say why or how something might happen.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How ■ How far/ successfully... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Explain something. ■ Requires you to explain, evaluate and make a judgement about the effectiveness of something – depending on the subject, use evidence and P.E.A paragraphs.
Identify	Pick out/ select/ find/ highlight.
Illustrate	Give examples that make your point clear (diagrams/ figures/ drawings)/show how.../ demonstrate/ make clear.
Interpret	Explain the meaning in your own words. How do you 'see', 'read' or 'understand' something?
Justify	Give a reason to support an argument/ give an explanation for something/ defend a point of view.
List	Can require single words or phrases – sometimes the order will be important. Questions with this word in do not require any reasoning or explanation remember – simply select the information required and write it – don't waste time on anything else.
Modify	Change/ adapt a drawing or sketch (more often than not).
Name	Again, simply name but be very specific – no general terms.
Outline	Give only the most important details/ give a brief overview/ a brief explanation – often carries fewer marks.
Persuade	Aim to change your reader's mind about something using biased points and persuasive devices.
Predict	Say what you think or expect will happen – the second part of this question may require you to explain this and justify your ideas.
Present	Show your ideas/ demonstrate your ideas (remember to look how you are meant to be presenting – drawing? writing?).
Produce	Create/ make/ construct/ bring to life/ bring into being.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Show the method ■ Show how... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Demonstrate/ illustrate/ explain a way of doing something or a process. ■ Explain how...
Sketch	Draw/ draft/ outline using a pencil. In Maths you need to use a ruler and a pencil.
State	Write, briefly, the main point.
Study	Look in detail at a picture, passage or drawing in order to access information necessary to answer the question.
Suggest	Offer ideas/ put forward ideas/ propose something.
Summarise	Draw your key ideas and points together/ review key points in one paragraph.
Use...	This often means they are directing you to a specific passage, rule or drawing – check carefully.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What is meant by... ■ What are the disadvantages and advantages... ■ What do you need to consider... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ You are being asked for a definition of the word. ■ A simple form of discussion. ■ You are being asked to highlight key information appropriate to a process in your response. <p>'What' questions usually carry fewer marks.</p>
Why	Involves you discussing and explaining a process, outcome or point of view using evidence to back up your ideas. Will involve a balanced approach usually.
Work out...	Asks you to solve something – marks are usually awarded for you showing the process behind your thinking as well as the answer you come up with.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Write down ■ Write about how 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Could mean 'Describe' or require you to select relevant information. ■ This is more detailed and requires you to explain a process/ how something happens.