

Process words for Assignments and Exams

Account for	Explain why something happens, clarify, give reasons for
Analyse	Identify the main points and significant features. Examine critically and/or in great detail.
Assess	Identify the value of, weigh up (See also Evaluate)
Comment on	Identify the main issues, providing reactions and evidence (examples, sources, authors) to support your points. Avoid personal opinions lacking supporting evidence.
Compare	Show similarities between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these similarities.
Contrast	Show differences between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these differences. If appropriate, justify why one item/argument may be more convincing or preferred.
Compare and contrast	Show the similarities and differences between two (or more) things.
Criticise	Make a judgement – based on and using examples, evidence and reasoning – about the merit of two or more related things: for example, theories, opinions, models, items.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, indicating and then assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Be clear about your criteria for how you judge which side is preferable/more convincing.
Define	Provide the exact meaning of a word, concept or phrase. Where appropriate you may need to identify other alternative definitions and/or disagreements about the definition.
Describe	Give the main characteristics or features of something, or give a detailed account of it.
Discuss	Explain and give arguments for and against an issue; consider the implications of. Provide evidence to support your points. Often used in connection with a quotation or statement that can be disputed.
Distinguish or differentiate between	Look for differences between...
Evaluate	Assess the worth, importance, validity, effectiveness of something using evidence. There will probably be a case both for and against (see Assess)
Examine	Look in detail – this may also involve 'critical evaluation' as well
Explain	Clearly identify why something happens or why it is the way that it is.
How far...	Usually involves looking at evidence/arguments for and against and weighing them up. (see also To what extent...)
Illustrate	Make clear and explicit, usually requiring carefully chosen examples
Interpret	Give the meaning and relevance of data or other material

Process words for Assignments and Exams (continued)

Justify	Provide evidence supporting an argument/point of view/idea. Show why a decision or conclusions are made, considering and exploring objections.
Narrate	Focus on what happened as a series of events
Outline	Give only the main features or points on a topic, omitting minor details and emphasising the main structure (see Summarise)
Relate	Show similarities and connections between two or more things
State	Give the main features in brief and clear form
Summarise	Draw out the main points only (see Outline)
To what extent	Consider how far something is true and how convincing the evidence is, including any ways in which the proposition remains unproven (see also How far...)
Trace	Follow the order of different stages in an event or process

If you want to test yourself on 'process words', try the activity on the Open University website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/understanding-the-question.php>

When reading essay or exam questions, remember to use the process word to help you break down the question and identify:

- Process word – WHAT you need to do (your action)

...which will be used to write about the:

- Topic – the broad subject (there may be more than one)
- Focus – the specific aspect of the topic (again: there may be more than one)

You may need to decide, depending on what the module was about, which aspect(s) – the topic or the focus – has greatest importance

Sometimes questions may begin with other types of words such as 'is' 'was' 'why' 'what is' or 'how important' – it can often help to write in the implied 'process words' or action

- e.g. (To what extent) is...
 (To what extent) was...
 (Discuss) why...
 (Discuss / Identify) what is...
 (Discuss) how important...

Here is an example showing how a question can be broken down:

What is the	contribution of behaviouralism	to political science?
Process words	Focus (an aspect covered in the module)	Topic (based on what the module is about)