



Exam Skills: Clue Words

Clue Words in Exam Questions

In exams (especially essay exams), every question contains a clue word. Clue words are the words that are used to indicate the angle you should take when answering the question. Clue words tell you exactly what to do in your essays, so they are extremely important in essay exams. An essay exam is like a mental game in which the professors (who write the exams) tell you what they want. To play the game successfully you need to be aware of the precise meanings of the clue words in the questions. Once you have found the clue words and worked out exactly what they mean, you can answer the questions as clearly as possible.

For example:

Compare the goals of liberal and socialist feminism

The clue word in this question is **compare**

If the question asked you to "Evaluate the goals of . . ." it would require a completely different answer.

The following is a list of the most common clue words and their meanings in exam questions to help you prepare for exams. Because the list is long, it is a good idea to read through past exam papers to familiarize yourself with the most commonly used clue words in your discipline.

Glossary of Clue Words

Analyze	To find the main ideas, how they are related and why they are important
Comment on	To discuss, criticize, or explain it's meaning as completely as possible
Compare	To show both the differences and the similarities
Contrast	To compare by showing the differences
Criticize	To give your judgment or reasoned opinion about something, showing its good and bad points. However, it is not necessary to attack
Define	To give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a matter of giving a memorized definition
Describe	To write a detailed or graphic account in a logical sequence
Discuss	To give the details and explain the positives and negatives of something
Evaluate	To give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of a concept. Show the advantages and disadvantages
Enumerate	To list. Name and list the main ideas one by one
Illustrate	To make plain by concrete examples, comparisons or analogies



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Interpret	To give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make something clear.
Justify	To give a statement of why you think something is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.
List	To produce a list of words, sentences or comments. Same as Enumerate.
Outline	To give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasizing structure and relationship. A general summary
Prove	To show by argument or logic that something is true. However, the word 'prove' has a very specific meaning in math and physics.
Relate	To show the connection between things, telling how one causes or is like another.
Review	To make a survey or summary of, examining the subject critically.
State	To describe the main points in precise terms, fully and clearly. Omit details or examples.
Summarize	To give a brief, concise account of the main ideas.
Trace	To follow the progress or history of the subject.