Understanding Assignment Questions:
Descriptive v Critically analytic

This workshop will:

- Explain the importance of answering a set question or task appropriately
- Explore the differences between questions that ask for descriptive or critically analytic answers
- Provide a list of words along with required actions to competently answer set questions

Teaching points:

1. What markers want
2. Explanation of descriptive and critically analytic questions or tasks
3. Key command words
4. Tips for answering descriptive and critically analytic questions
1. **What markers want**

Your tutor or marker spends time formulating questions or tasks, and writing marking criteria. That is part of their job. Your job is to answer the question/s they set. Your tutors award marks for the right answer/s, not how much you know about anything that's vaguely to do with the subject. You may write well and argue a particular case in depth and accurately, but if it does not answer the question, your marks will be low.

A brief or question is like a code that you have to decipher. To do this, you need to unpick the question by working out the type of question/task you’ve been set and finding the key words to help you to work out what to include in your assignment. If you can define them, you can address them.

Key words are usually the ones that ask you to do something, raise the main issues, or are the main subject of the sentence. It is likely you will have to define or address them demonstrating your understanding of them and the issues they raise.

“**AND**” is an important word: you must write about **both** of any linked items

2. **Explanation of descriptive or critically analytic questions or tasks**

Many disciplines ask students to produce detailed descriptive writing although most also request you to write analytically too. Because analytical text involves breaking something into its constituent parts before asking questions about them, you will need to describe the parts you then analyse.

Descriptive writing is needed to give essential background information so that the writing makes sense to the reader. However, if you are also being asked to be analytic, you should keep descriptive writing to the bare minimum and spend the majority of your word count on being analytic as this is where the bulk of the marks will be gained.

What are the different types of questions/tasks asking you to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive questions/tasks</th>
<th>Critically analytic questions/tasks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test your knowledge of a subject and your ability to present ideas in a clear and organised way. You are expected to identify the component parts, main elements and distinguishing features of any topic under discussion.</td>
<td>Test your knowledge of a subject – <strong>but</strong> they are more concerned with your ability to get below the surface of a subject. You are expected to examine it from different perspectives, points of view and (if applicable) to propose alternative ideas, models, and practices.</td>
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**3. Key command words**

You will find command words in the questions or tasks tutors set. These are the words or phrases that give you the key to unlock the questions and to produce answers the markers want. Giving the tutors what they ask for is important as it is what you will gain marks for. This sounds obvious but many students guess at what the question wants and end up writing in a way that loses them marks.

Together we will allocate which of the following key command words or phrases go in which box – descriptive or critically analytic. Two have been done for each type to get us started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discuss</th>
<th>Demonstrate</th>
<th>Comment on</th>
<th>Consider</th>
<th>Show how</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Compare and contrast</td>
<td>Identify</td>
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<td>Evaluate</td>
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<td>Trace</td>
<td>Justify</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criticise</td>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>Distinguish between</td>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>Describe</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>Critically analytic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Descriptive command words usually include:</td>
<td>The command words for analytical questions typically include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classify</td>
<td>• Account for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Define</td>
<td>• Analyse</td>
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Don’t forget, you can always ask your tutor if you are unsure.

All these words or phrases above are ‘command’ words – that is they tell you to include specific aspects and concepts in your writing. What are they?
Activity 1: Required actions to command words

In pairs or small groups, cut out the ‘action expected’ segments and match them to the command word/phrase.

………………………………………………

Now, let’s see if we can identify the key command words or phrases in this question:

A. ‘Evaluate the impact of the internet on practices for recruitment and selection employed by firms.’

‘Evaluate’ is the key command word which asks you to **identify (descriptive) and explain (critically analyse)**, if any, ‘the impact of the internet on practices for recruitment and selection employed by firms’. Also, note the ‘and’ in ‘recruitment AND selection’: you must evaluate **both** elements. In addition, it asks about ‘firms’ plural, so you must consider **more than one** and probably of different sizes. Do not forget to discuss any negative and positive impact.

Let’s find the key command word or phrases, decide whether it is asking us to be descriptive or critically analytic, and what we should do to answer the following question:

B. ‘What is the difference between a conductor and an insulator? Give experimental evidence for the descriptions that you give, and try to account for these descriptions using a microscopic model of the material.’

Key command words or phrases:

Descriptive or critically analytic:

How to answer:

Activity 2: Key command words in questions

In pairs or small groups, read the following questions and highlight the key command words, decide if they are asking you to be descriptive, critically analytic or both, and what you should include in your answer.
C. It can be said that the long-standing nature-nurture argument about the development of human behaviour still rages today. Some theorists take the position that behaviour is attributable to generic factors, while others argue that environmental factors are responsible. Explore this issue, with reference to relevant theorists and commentators.

Key command words or phrases:

Descriptive or critically analytic:

How to answer:

D. 'History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make today.' (Henry Ford 1916). Discuss.

Key command words or phrases:

Descriptive or critically analytic:

How to answer:

E. Evaluate the concerns that for all the talk of a new flexible workforce the reality is somewhat more contradictory and problematic.

Key command words or phrases:

Descriptive or critically analytic:

How to answer:
4. Tips for answering descriptive and critically analytic questions

- **Read** the question or task **CAREFULLY** and more than once
- **Identify** and highlight **key command words**
- **Decide** if the question or task is asking you to be **descriptive or critically analytic or both**
- **Make a plan** of how to answer the question
- **Stick** to your plan and **do not over-write**

**References**


**Answers**

**Talking Point**

and **Activity 1**: key command words and actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive</th>
<th>Action expected</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>You are expected to locate, identify, and present the main features, elements, or components of the topic under discussion and, if applicable, the underpinning theoretical knowledge of the subject.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
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<tr>
<td>State</td>
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<td>Classify</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate</td>
<td>As above, plus you would be expected to present and explain examples to show that you understand how something works, e.g. how a theory, model, idea, or practice can be applied to a given situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Show how</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>You are expected to identify and summarise the main points of the topic under discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trace</td>
<td>This means that you identify and outline the stages of development of the topic under discussion.</td>
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### Critically analytic

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<th>Action expected</th>
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<tr>
<td>You would clarify why something is as it is, or what happened in any given situation.</td>
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- Account for
- Explain

- Discuss
- Examine
- Explore
- Evaluate
- Consider
- Interpret
- Comment on

If you see any of these command terms you are expected to identify and explain the main features of the subject under discussion, including the main theories, ideas, models, or practices underpinning the topic.

If applicable, you would be expected to know of and weigh up any counter-arguments and to make connections between different ideas, models, or practices.

- Analyse
- Criticise

This involves a detailed scrutiny of the topic in question. This could include explaining the origins, structure, organisation, or development of the topic in question, the positive and negative features of it, and the connections between theories, ideas, models, and practices. You would also demonstrate your awareness of any flaws in particular points of view, and your knowledge of alternative viewpoints.

- Justify

This involves making out a case and giving reasons to support a particular viewpoint, position, judgement, or decision against other possibilities.

- Compare and contrast
- Distinguish between

This involves a close study of the differences between one idea, phenomena, or situation, and another. You would need to identify the structure or features of one and make comparisons with another. You may be required to make a judgement on which is more applicable or relevant for the situation in question.

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**Key command word or phrases in the question:**

‘What is the difference between a conductor and an insulator? Give experimental evidence for the descriptions that you give, and try to account for these descriptions using a microscopic model of the material.’

**Key command words or phrases:** *What*, *give* and *account for*

Descriptive or critically analytic: Both as *what* is descriptive; *give* could be both or either (although the following phrase ‘evidence for the descriptions’ just asks for more description) and *account for* is asking you to be critically analytic.

**How to answer:** Provide identifying features of each item and evidence for them. Then, clarify and explain why conductors and insulators are different.
Activity 2: Key command words in questions

C. *It can be said that the long-standing nature-nurture argument about the development of human behaviour still rages today. Some theorists take the position that behaviour is attributable to generic factors, while others argue that environmental factors are responsible. Explore this issue, with reference to relevant theorists and commentators.*

Key command words or phrases: *'Explore'*

Descriptive or critically analytic: **Critically analytic** (both)

How to answer: **Identify** the main features of the nature-nurture argument including the main theories, ideas, models, or practices underpinning the topic from all sides of the subject, and so **explain why** there are opposing views.

D. *'History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make today.'* (Henry Ford 1916). **Discuss.**

Key command words or phrases: *'Discuss'*

Descriptive or critically analytic: **Critically analytic** (both)

How to answer: **Identify** the context of the remark and the main features of the role of history in contemporary life, the relationship of history to contemporary life and the role of tradition and contemporary action, including the main theories, ideas, models, or practices underpinning the topic from all sides of the subject. Then **explain why** there are a number of opposing opinions on this viewpoint.

E. *Evaluate the concerns that for all the talk of a new flexible workforce the reality is somewhat more contradictory and problematic.*

Key command words or phrases: *'Evaluate'*

Descriptive or critically analytic: **Critically analytic** (both)

How to answer: **Identify** the main features of a flexible workforce, including the main theories, ideas, models, or practices underpinning the topic from all sides of the subject, and **explain why** this view may or may not be so.