



# Answering the Question

Students sometimes receive feedback from their tutors that they have not answered the tutorial or question set, leaving students perplexed. ‘The question was about democracy,’ a student might wail, ‘and I wrote ten pages on democracy!’ That is very frustrating and reveals a gap between tutors’ and students’ expectations.

By better understanding the ‘academic’ approach to answering questions, you can close this expectation gap and answer tutorial, collection, and exam questions in a way that meets—and ideally exceeds!—your tutors’ and examiners’ expectations.

## Understanding the key ‘instruction’ words in the question

The first step is to look at the individual key ‘instruction’ words in a question and to analyse what they actually are asking you to do.

Words such as **how**, **why**, and **what** have their common meanings, but they rarely indicate that the question demands a straightforward description. Instead most questions usually tap into a debate or argument around a topic.

Turn to the next page to take a look at the other key ‘instruction’ words that pop up in questions and give you important clues about how best to answer the question at hand.

## Key 'instruction' words

<b>Account for</b>	Give reasons for a debate/argument/development
<b>Analyse</b>	Break the topic into its constituent parts. Examine the parts and the relationship between them, often questioning various views or theories
<b>Contrast/compare</b>	Show the similarities and differences between...
<b>Critically examine</b>	Question the various opinions on the topic. Use facts, evidence, and well-argued debate for support
<b>Define</b>	Give the precise meaning if there is one. List the differing meanings which have been put forward, and consider the merits and pitfalls of each
<b>Demonstrate</b>	Show clearly with supporting evidence
<b>Discuss</b>	Show the main points of the debate around the subject, and give reasons for and against, coming down clearly on one side if you can
<b>Discuss with reference to...</b>	As above but more limited to specific examples, so the examples have to be more detailed
<b>Do you agree?</b>	Needs a 'yes' or 'no' answer: 'maybe' is often appealing but not the easiest to argue
<b>To what extent? How well? How much?</b>	Always involves words such as not much, very, or completely. Often demands contrasting examples
<b>Examine</b>	Look carefully/in detail at
<b>Explain</b>	Give reasons for... say why...
<b>Identify</b>	Describe, looking at major trends and examples
<b>Justify your answer</b>	Support your answer with examples and offer counter-arguments to the principal objections which have been made to the argument you propound
<b>Outline/summarise</b>	Describe briefly, omitting minor points
<b>Parse</b>	Break the sentence into its parts and describe the roles each word or phrase plays in the syntax. For example, is it a verb or an adjective?
<b>Should...?</b>	Demands a 'yes' or 'no' answer with reasons why