

GCSE Science

Command words in examination questions

Sometimes, questions in the examination papers that you sit use words like “How...?” and “Why...?”, but most of the time you’ll find other words used in the questions.

It’s important that you understand what these “command words” in the questions are asking you to do. So, here’s a guide to what these words mean. You can then work out how to make sure that you answer the question correctly.

Word	Meaning
Name... Give....	Asking you to recall a simple piece of information. e.g. “Give the name of a hormone produced by the pancreas” would be answered simply with “insulin”.
State....	Very similar to “Name...” or “Give...”, except often used to ask for more information. Remember that “state” is asking you to write down simple information – there is no need to give reasons. e.g. “State the equation linking speed, distance and time.”
Give a reason...	Asking you to say why something happens. Note that “Give a reason...” asks for a single answer – if you give more than one answer here and one answer is correct and the other is incorrect, the incorrect answer is likely to “cancel out” the correct one and you’ll end up with zero marks.
Label...	Asking you to show information, usually on a diagram or graph. To answer a label question, you should draw a line to the feature in the question and then write the name or an identifying letter next to the label line. e.g. “Label the test tube on the diagram of the apparatus shown”
Draw...	Can be used in two ways – either to ask you to draw a diagram, or to produce a graph or table of results. Remember that diagrams of scientific apparatus should be shown as simple line diagrams, not as 3-D pictures. If the question asks you to draw a circuit diagram, this should use standard circuit diagram symbols. e.g. “Draw a diagram to show the part of a poly(propene) molecule formed from two propene molecules.”

Write...	Usually used to ask for a chemical or word equation, or for a physics equation. e.g. "Write the word equation for the complete combustion of ethanol"
Plot...	Asking you to represent data in a graph. You'll often find it followed by a command to "draw" a line of best fit. This could be a straight line or a curve. e.g. "Plot the results and draw a straight line of best fit"
Estimate... Find...	Usually used to ask you to read information from a graph, although might be used as part of a calculation. e.g. "Use your graph to estimate the voltage in the circuit when the current is 2.5 A"
Calculate...	In calculations, you need to show your working and give your answer as a number. Check to see if the question asks for a fixed number of decimal places or significant figures. Remember to give units if none are shown on the answer line. e.g. "Calculate the efficiency of the motor. Give your answer to 2 significant figures."
Complete...	This word can be used in different ways. Firstly, you could be asked to fill in gaps in sentences, often from a list of supplied words. Alternatively, you may have to fill in a table with some information. e.g. "Complete the table of results by calculating the average number of prickles on the holly leaves."
Describe...	These questions ask you to link together a series of facts or pieces of information in a logical order. Some "describe" questions will ask you to give an account of a process or experiment. Describe questions are often worth more than one mark – make sure you include at least enough pieces of information to cover the number of marks available. e.g. "Describe how sedimentary rocks are formed."
Suggest...	Asking you to apply your knowledge to a new situation. You need to think about what you already know about the topic and work out how this relates to the situation you're being asked about. e.g. "Suggest advantages that the Hubble Space telescope has over telescopes on Earth."

Explain...	You need to say how or why something happens. Answers to explain questions should link descriptions to the reasons behind what's happening. This means that "because..." will be an important part of your answer. e.g. "Explain why iron and aluminium are extracted from their ores by different processes."
Compare...	Your answer should give similarities and differences between the things being compared. Remember that a "compare" question needs to give information about all the things being compared. e.g. "Compare the properties of S-waves and P-waves."
Discuss...	Similar to a "compare" question, except that a "discuss" question requires you to explain some of the factors that you have compared, or to make a conclusion based on the comparison that you have made. Some discuss problems are more similar to "describe" questions, but require you to consider different areas of a topic. e.g. "Discuss the problems that can be caused by incomplete combustion of methane in a gas fire."
Evaluate...	These questions ask you to take ideas or evidence and use it to make a judgement or to justify your answer in some way. In many ways, this is similar to "discuss", except that you need to make sure that evidence is used to help you make the final judgement or conclusion. e.g. "Evaluate different methods that can be used to dispose of waste polymers."

Extended writing questions

The 6-mark extended writing questions will require longer answers than most of the questions on the paper.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that they are unlikely to have command words such as "State..." or "Give a reason...". It is more likely that these questions will use the command words "Describe...", "Discuss...", "Evaluate..." or "Explain...".