

**Command words**

One of the first things to do when you look at an exam question is check out the command word. This tells you what the examiner wants you to do. This table gives you some of the most commonly used command words.

Command word	What it means	Example
Account for	Explain the reasons for – you get marks for explanation rather than description.	Account for the changes in Cornwall's employment structure.
Analyse	Identify the main characteristics and rate the factors with respect to importance.	Analyse the economic effects of Objective One funding in Cornwall.
Assess	Examine closely and 'weigh up' a particular situation, e.g. strengths and weaknesses, for and against.	Assess the success of coastal management schemes, using named examples.
Comment on	This is asking you to assess a statement. You need to put both sides of the argument.	Comment on the view that desertification is caused by human rather than physical factors.
Compare	Identify similarities <i>and</i> differences between two or more things.	Compare the causes and impacts of hazards in California and the Philippines.
Contrast	Identify the differences between two or more things.	Contrast the impacts of hazards in California and the Philippines.
Define	Give a clear meaning.	Define river discharge.
Describe	Say what something is like; identify trends.	Describe the trends shown in the graph.
Discuss	Similar to assess.	'Global warming is a myth.' Discuss.
Evaluate	The same as assess.	Evaluate the success of flood management schemes.
Examine	You need to describe <i>and</i> explain.	Examine the attempts by governments to control population growth.
Explain	Give reasons why something happens.	Explain, using examples, whether you think hazards are really 'natural'.
How far?	You need to put both sides of an argument.	How far is Kiribati a nation facing multiple hazards?
Illustrate	Use specific examples to support a statement.	Illustrate the ways that debt makes development difficult in some developing countries.
Justify	Give evidence to support your statements.	Suggest three ways in which Botswana could attempt to reduce poverty. Justify your suggestions.
List	Just state the factors, nothing else is needed.	List the different methods of coastal protection.
Outline	You need to describe <i>and</i> explain, but more description than explanation.	Use the graphs to outline the trends in global disasters.
To what extent?	The same as 'How far?'	'The Sydney Olympics – economic and environmental benefits, but at a social cost.' To what extent is this true?

**Interpreting the questions**

You have probably already been told by your teacher to read the exam question carefully and answer the question set – not the one you think it might be. That means you need to interpret it to work out exactly what it is asking. So, look at the key words. These include:

**Command words** – these have distinct meanings which are listed opposite.  
**Theme or topic** – this is what the question is about. The examiner who wrote the question will have tried to narrow the theme down, and you need to spot how so that you do not write everything you know about the theme.  
**Focus** – this shows how the theme has been narrowed down.  
**Case studies** – look to see if you are asked for specific examples.

Here is an example of a question that has been interpreted using the key words above.

