

Understanding exam questions

When you read the questions in your exam papers you should make sure you know what kind of answer you are being asked for. The list below explains some of the common words you will see used in exam questions. Make sure you know what each word means. Always read the question thoroughly, even if you recognise the word used.

Calculate

Work out your answer by using a calculation. You can use your calculator to help you. You may need to use an equation; check whether one has been provided for you in the paper. The question will say if your working must be shown.

Describe

Write a detailed answer that covers what happens, when it happens, and where it happens. The question will let you know how much of the topic to cover. Talk about facts and characteristics. (Hint: don't confuse with 'Explain')

Explain

You will be asked how or why something happens. Write a detailed answer that covers how and why a thing happens. Talk about mechanisms and reasons. (Hint: don't confuse with 'Describe')

Evaluate

You will be given some facts, data or other information. Write about the data or facts and provide your own conclusion or opinion on them.

Outline

Give only the key facts of the topic. You may need to set out the steps of a procedure or process – make sure you write down the steps in the correct order.

Show

Write down the details, steps or calculations needed to prove an answer that you have been given.

Suggest

Think about what you've learnt in your science lessons and apply it to a new situation or a context. You may not know the answer. Use what you have learnt to suggest sensible answers to the question.

Write down

Give a short answer, without a supporting argument.

Top tips

Always read exam questions carefully, even if you recognise the word used. Look at the information in the question and the number of answer lines to see how much detail the examiner is looking for.

You can use bullet points or a diagram if it helps your answer.

If a number needs units you should include them, unless the units are already given on the answer line.