

Practice Activity 6: The Command Verb Table

What do your exams actually ask you to do?

We've worked with students who despite revising hard, aren't fully clear on what to expect on the day of the exam. As a result they often have a meltdown or go blank. But this doesn't have to be you!

We've gathered together nearly a hundred command verbs from different GCSE and A level exam boards, then considered a further fifty command verbs used in professional work-place exams.

Then we've put them all together and tried to group them depending upon the types of things they want from us. We're not saying our groups are perfect, and we're not arguing that any of these groups are 'easier' or 'harder' than each other. But we're pretty sure most sections of your exams will be summarised in here somewhere, regardless of which subjects you take.

Exams want us to be able to...

1. Define and describe things

This could be history dates, people or places, parts of processes, complex vocabulary in full sentences a foreign language, subject-specific terms, one or two-step processes to solve a sum and so on.

2. Explain how things work, and show that we can use them to solve problems

This could be saying how the water cycle works, how the heart beats or breathing works, or how something is built, like a poem or novel, or a business. It might be showing we understand something by *using* it successfully - like arriving at an answer in a maths class by following a particular method, showing you know how stories work by writing your own, or using grammar correctly in translating a passage from French or German.

3. Zoom into detail, analysing why things work the way they do

Here you might be pulling something apart to zoom in on it – the images in a poem or the shape of a river valley in geography; you might be translating and discussing a difficult passage, assessing a big table of data in science and comparing it to what you already know, or solving a complicated problem in maths using a number of steps. Often you've got two things to handle at once; comparing two advertising campaigns in media or two businesses, or exploring why two characters from a book are similar or different.

4. Make judgements about things and justifying opinions

In these questions you're asked to offer an original opinion of your own. You use what you know to justify your opinion; you might be using evidence to argue a particular point of view in history or geography. You might be adopting a point of view that isn't yours in sociology, and arguing it through. You may be predicting 'what will happen if...' in psychology or economics or making recommendations about increasing profit in business studies or making judgements about the success or impact of novels or plays.

OK... how did we do and what have we missed? A great activity would be to go through these descriptions and check them against a standard exam paper. Have we covered some, most or all of the questions? If we're not covering everything in this model, what are we missing? What's your fifth or even sixth category?

Each one of these groups tends to come with its own command verbs – words used in the exam that make it clear what type of question it is. We’ve listed lots that we found here – but you’ll find plenty of others you can add to our list...

Define and describe things Label Annotate List Define Describe Select State/Relate Outline Summarise Illustrate (with examples...)	Explain how things work, and show we can use them Explain Comment on Determine Demonstrate Identify/Infer Calculate Show/Prove/Set out Verify/Give reasons for/ Consider Translate Correct
Zoom into detail, analysing why things work the way they do Analyse Examine Explore Compare and contrast/Differentiate between/Distinguish between Survey Review Investigate Solve	Make judgements about things and justify our opinions Discuss/“To what extent...” Evaluate Assess Argue Justify Criticise Suggest/Propose/Make a case for Predict Recommend

Four Ways of Using the Command Verb Table

1. Take a subject you’re studying and read a whole exam paper from beginning to end. Make a note of what every single question is asking you to do. Then see what types you’ve got. Is it mostly one type? A scattering of types? Is there one area of questions you don’t have to worry about at all?
2. Have a look at the distribution of marks. Do certain question types seem to have more marks attached to them? This might tell you what the exam board thinks is important in your answers... and what skills they’re less concerned about.
3. Once you’ve done step one and two, you can set yourself better tests. You don’t need to chase down every exam paper ever published, you can create your own exam that follows the rough shape of other papers. Set and complete your own papers.
4. RAG-rate the question types you’re going to face – red for question-types you find really hard, amber for those in the middle, and green for the type of question you can breeze through. Then adjust your revision so you’re spending more time on red question types.

How will you apply this idea in your own revision / study?