

Centre for English Teaching Specialization

MOOC 4: Communication Skills for University Success

3.2c Understanding the question

Using key words

What is a key word?

There are two different types of key words: content words and function words.

Content words tell you “what” you have to write about.

Function words tell you “how” to write something.

Content words are the main words in a sentence. They give you the topic and any key ideas you should address. They are usually nouns or adjectives, but can be verbs as well.

In the examples below, content words have been **highlighted**.

Function words are the words in sentence that give instructions. See page 2 for a list of different function words and their general descriptions.

In the examples below, function words have been underlined.

Note: not all questions have function words, which is why looking at your assessment criteria is important.

1. In 2006, Mt Red High School, a public school in Sydney’s inner-west, ranked 1st in NSW for HSC Physics and Biology. Since 2013, however, there has been a sharp decline in Physics scores and this year only 3 students signed up for the course. A study was done that indicates students are losing interest in Science during year 9. Design a curriculum outline with the aim of increasing interest in Science. Your curriculum outline should include a rationale, the sequence of units, descriptions of each unit, and all assessments for the course.
2. In what ways will Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) fundamentally change the nature of how we learn?
3. Ildal, a Korean electronics manufacturer, has developed a new virtual and augmented reality enabled mobile phone. You are part of the marketing department, and are responsible for taking the phone to market in your country. Identify which parts of the market you will target, and explain how you will market the item.

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Common Function Words

Descriptive

Summarize: Explain the main ideas and connections between those ideas in brief without going into too much detail.

Illustrate: Give an example to help clarify an idea.

Define: Explain the meaning of something.

State: Write the main points or factors clearly.

Outline: Explain key points but do not give examples or evidence.

Calculate: Use mathematics to provide an answer.

List: write down main ideas or factors in a list.

Explain: Make something clear by detailing the features and the reasons for it.

Analytical

Compare: Take two things and explain the similarities and differences between them.

Analyse: Detailing features and reasons and critiquing them.

Contrast: Similar to compare, but focus much more on the differences.

Criticise: Generate and express your own opinion or judgement on a topic or theory.

Discuss: Explore an issue or idea by writing about the advantages and disadvantages or by comparing/contrasting multiple different views of the issue or idea.

Examine: Closely explore something; investigate it by looking specifically at small elements or features.

Describe: Report on something by recounting details, relating a sequence, outlining etc and in doing so give your own view on the phenomena being reported about.

Evaluate: Make a decision about the validity or plausibility of something using a particular objective or theoretical framework.

Account for: Give reasons for the occurrence of something, or for selecting or using some process.

Examine: Investigate something closely, and possibly identify good and bad points of a theory or idea.

Consider: Write and examine your observations and thoughts on a particular subject or issue.

Comment on: Present ideas for and against a certain point, and clearly state your position with reference to evidence and examples.

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Argue: Present the case for an idea, and defend it against possible counter-arguments.

Justify: Provide reasons for a conclusion or statement, and support your position with evidence.

Clarify: Make something clearer, and show the relationships between items and ideas.

Trace: Chronologically set out the historical development of a theory or practice, and in doing so give reasons for its emergence, decline or trajectory

Interpret: Translate or solve a problem or issue, or make its meaning clear.

Relate: Show the relationships, similarities and differences between ideas, facts or statements.

To what extent: Consider and/or compare both sides of an argument or issue, and give your own opinion.

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Assessment Criteria

Assessment criteria are designed to make the marking clear for both students and markers.

They can be as simple as the instruction to “show your working” on a maths test to a complex table of the different requirements for each section of an assignment.

Assessment criteria are also known as assessment rubrics, marking criteria or marking rubrics.

When understanding a problem, assessment criteria become very useful in order to define what you are going to be marked on and therefore what you need to include.

Take, for example, the following group assignment task:

In a group of 3 students, create a poster for a year 7 science classroom explaining Newtown's laws of motion.

Assessment Criteria

- *All three laws of motion clearly stated and explained*
- *Graphics and explanations are targeted at a year 7 audience*
- *Graphics and explanations clearly reflect Mallet's principles of poster design.*
- *Graphics are professional*
- *Poster is A2 in size*

If you are unsure how something will be marked, always ask your lecturer or tutor.

From this assessment criteria and the question, we can see that the students are required to create an A2 poster that: states and explains the three laws of motion, includes professional graphics, and is aimed at a year 7 audience.

Criterion 3 is the most interesting, as it specifically states that the poster should reflect “Mallet's principles of poster design” – an element that is not mentioned

at all in the question statement. Moreover, three of the four criteria mention the need for graphics – meaning that students cannot simply explain the problem in words, but would need to include images as well.

These might seem like relatively minor things, but when it comes to assessment they are often a great place to start.