Topic: Command words used in examination questions

Most 'questions' do not end with a question mark but instead use a word that tells the learner what they need to do. For example, 'Explain', Describe', 'State', 'Give' and 'Give two differences between'. These words, often called command words, need to be read carefully by the learner, who needs to become familiar with exactly what they mean.

Many command words or phrases are self-explanatory for example:

- draw a line
- convert
- calculate
- show your working
- write an algorithm
- locate errors and suggest corrections
- complete a trace table/query-by-example grid

Other command words may need to be explained to learners. You will need to provide learners with questions, throughout the course, that use these command words appropriately and give them feedback on their answers that will help them gradually to learn the meaning of each one.

Name this usually requires a technical term or its equivalent. For example 'name this type of signal.'

Describe Means no more than it says: 'Give a description of...'. So, 'Describe a type of data entry error' requires a description of an error for example 'a transcription error occurs when character(s) are mistyped by a person entering data'.

Explain This creates major difficulties for many candidates. A reason or interpretation must be given, not a description. The term '**Describe**' answers the question 'What?' the term 'Explain' answers the question 'Why?'. Using examples Answers to questions involving this type of phrase must follow the instructions. 'Describe, with an example, a type of data entry error.' requires a description of an error with an accompanying example; for example 'a transcription error occurs when character(s) are mistyped by a person entering data e.g. a date of birth is entered as 06/06/9002 instead of 06/06/2009'.

State/Give 'State' or 'give' fall short of describing and amount to no more than making bullet points e.g. 'State two differences between Flash memories and CD-RWs.' ...'Flash memory is solid state, CD/RW is optical.'

Benefit or drawback A benefit is simply the good outcome of an action or incident. A drawback is a bad outcome of an action or an incident.

Advantage or disadvantage
When asked to give an advantage or disadvantage, you will need to go a little further than just stating a good/bad outcome and offer some explanation as to why, providing an opposite that you can compare it

to. For example, in answer to the question 'Give one advantage of writing code in high-level language', you might answer that 'It is easier for a programmer to understand than code written in a low level language'. This helps define the advantage more clearly and gives it a context. Of course the same principle will apply if you are stating a disadvantage.

What learners can do in the examination

1. Read the question.

2. Understand the type of instruction you are being given.

3. If the question makes use of a specific scenario then make sure that all your answers are relevant to that scenario.

4. Decide on the information required but remember that many answers will require more than just a single word or a short phrase. If you have finished your examination well before the time allotted, you may have fallen into this trap.

5. Always use correct technical terms and avoid the use of brand names. Write about using a database management system to solve a problem rather than using 'Access'.

6. Decide how much information is required.

– use the instructions for example 'declare two variables.'
– look at the marks awarded. For example, 'Describe how the sensors and the microprocessor are used to maintain the correct conditions in the fish tank.' [4], will require 4 points.