



STUDENT TIP SLIPS

EXAM PREPARATION: DECODING A QUESTION

Generally, a question has three parts: a key verb that tells you what you are supposed to do, an object which tells you on what you are to perform your task, and a limiting factor or factors that tells you how to go about it. Here is an example:

Explain the methods used to create humour in "The Champion of the World", by referring to events at the climax of the story.

Key verb:	explain
Object:	methods used to create humour
Limiting Factor:	refer to a specific part of the story - the events at the climax.

Notice how the question ties you down fairly specifically. Obviously, it would not do you any good to refer to a part of the story other than the climax. You would be wasting your time if you did. So before beginning your answer, make sure that you read the question carefully and don't do more or less than it tells you to do.

THE KEY VERB: The verb is the most important part of the question since it tells you what you must do. The following is a list of various verbs you will find in typical questions. Beside each is an explanation of its meaning and a suggestion concerning the length of response required.

- State:** means to be as clear and concise as possible in answering.
- Explain:** means to go into some detail that shows a logical continuity in what you are saying.
- Evaluate:** means to appraise the worth of something. This verb asks you to judge something, to give your opinion.
- Point out:** means to look specifically at some aspect. It implies that you should be precise.



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Summarize: means to take a larger work or concept and reduce it to its main ideas.

Describe: means to go into some detail about the object.

Illustrate: means to go directly to the work in question and by means of short, key quotations and/or specific references to come up with support for a point.

Note: unless writing an essay, do not use lengthy quotations. Often, a word or a sentence is sufficient to illustrate a point. If the question has two key verbs - for example, "**Describe and illustrate...**" - remember to do both.

List: (without any modifying expression, such as "in order") means to jot down at random.

Trace: means to arrange items in a meaningful sequence, such as chronological order, cause-and-effect relationship, or order of importance.

Outline: means to sketch a plan for a fully developed essay, perhaps with headings and subheadings.

Define: means to explain the meaning of a particular expression. A definition should be illustrated with at least one specific example.

Compare: means to make an idea clear by calling attention to similarities and differences. To be convincing, comparison requires specific examples.

Contrast: means much the same as compare, except that it focuses attention on the difference between items rather than on the similarities. It, too, requires specific examples.

Analyze: means to break down into parts and examine each part critically. To analyze a character, you might consider two or three important personality traits; then you would give concrete examples to illustrate each trait; finally, you would show the relationship between actions and personalities.

Discuss: means to formulate an idea or thesis about something. This requires a longer answer since you are expected to go into some detail.

