

Understanding Essay Exam Questions

Did you know that almost all questions on exams and quizzes contain words that tell you how to answer each question? These words are called **Direction Words**.

Direction words help make writing essay answers easy.

Once learners can identify **Direction Words**, essay tests have even become their favorite kind of test. **Direction Words** also tell learners what to say 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. and what to include in the answer to get an A. There is also more that I bet you didn't know about **Direction Words**. They tell learners when they have said enough and can stop writing! No more writing everything you know about a subject **hoping** to hit the right answer. Most people don't like to write more than you have to and teachers don't want to read more than they have to when grading exams.

Think of the 4 kinds of **Direction Words** as the different parts of a fancy hamburger. When you know what each part is and what each part does, you can become a gourmet cook when it comes to making a great "burg"!

Before reading further, write down as many parts of this **skee-rump-tious** looking hamburger as you can see on a piece of paper and include what you think each part does. Don't worry about getting the "right" answers. There aren't any but there are good answers. Do this now before reading on.

Compare what you wrote to this list:

1. **Bun – something to hold the other stuff**
2. **Lettuce – adds a fresh taste**
3. **Pickles – adds a tangy taste**
4. **Tomato – adds flavor**
5. **Ground beef – gives the meaty flavor**
6. **Onion – more flavor**

Seeing **Direction Words** on a test as if they were the parts of a hamburger makes them easier to understand and learn. Since the bun holds the other parts of the "burg" together, let's look at the term **Direction Words** as the bun that holds all the parts together that tell you how to write an essay answer. There are 4 parts in our **Direction Words** bun. They are:

1. **Subject words**
2. **Aspect words**
3. **Qualifying words**
4. **Presentation words**

To help you remember the 4 types of **Direction Words**, we will use a memory device called a mnemonic (pronounced "nuh-mon-ick"). A **mnemonic** is a **memory device that makes learning**

and remembering things easier. One way to write a mnemonic is to take the 1st letters of words or ideas you want to remember and write them in a line. In some cases, you may even rearrange the letters if it helps you come up with a word mnemonic. If the 1st letters of each type of **Direction Word** are written in a line, we get: **S A Q P**

I see the phrase “**Say Q P.**” The letters S and A together can be pronounced “say” and Q and P are pronounced as letters. It is a good idea to include the word “direction” in our phrase so we remember that S A Q P stand for **Direction Words** and not something else. So, to make remembering the 4 types of **Direction Words** easier, we can create the sentence mnemonic of:

“Follow directions and Say Q P.”

If you want to rearrange the letters to form some other word mnemonic using the letters S A Q P, go ahead and *congratulations to you for your creativity!* Otherwise, use this mnemonic and *congratulations to you for your open-mindedness* to add another learning tool to your toolbox of learning skills! **Mnemonics make learning and remembering easier.**

The 4 Types of Direction Words

1. Subject Words

The purpose of **Subject Words** is to **tell the test taker what to write about.** **Subject Words** used on exams will vary with each class that you take. For example, a biology class will use subjects like "cell", "osmosis" and "mitosis." On the other hand, examples of **Subject Words** for a history class are "age", "period" and "event."

Here is a 1st chance to practice identifying **Subject Words.** Don't worry if you aren't an expert in spotting the **Subject Words** in the sample essay test question below. Learning something new takes a little time. Here is a hint that may help you spot **Subject Words.** Ask yourself,

"What is the main idea, topic, or issue in this question?"

Sample essay test question: In modifying behavior, what are the 4 techniques that use positive reinforcement?

The **Subject Words** in this question are "**modifying behavior.**" This is the specific subject the question asks you to write about in this essay answer.

Sample essay test question: In **modifying behavior**, what are the 4 techniques that use positive reinforcement?

Subject Words tell the test taker what to write about in an essay answer.

2. Aspect Words

These are words that **identify which aspects of the subject you are asked to write about**. Examples of **Aspect Words** are "stages", "characteristics," and "proof."

Locate the **Aspect Words** in the same sample exam question below by asking yourself the question,

"What aspects of the subject am I asked to write about in this answer?"

Sample essay test question: In modifying behavior, what are the 4 techniques that use positive reinforcement?

In this case, ask yourself "What *aspects* of behavior modification (subject) am I asked to write about?"

The **Aspect Words** in this question are "techniques that use positive reinforcement". The question asks you to write about the "techniques" (aspect) of "behavior modification" (subject).

Sample essay test question: In modifying behavior, what are the 4 **techniques that use positive reinforcement?**

You are not asked about other aspects such as traits, steps, stages, characteristics, etc. in this question. Therefore, if you wrote about any aspect other than techniques, you risk writing a vague answer or writing an answer to a question that is not asked. A correct answer to this sample essay question consists of a list of "techniques." A correct multiple or matching answer will contain one or more of the basic techniques.

Aspect Words **tell you which aspect of the subject you are expected to write about**.

3. Qualifying Words

Qualifying Words are words that **define or limit the scope of answers**. Examples of **Qualifying Words** are "never", "always", "all" and "few" or they may be numbers such as "5" and "three".

Identify the **Qualifying Word(s)** in the sample question below by asking yourself the question,

"What words limit what I am to write about?"

Sample essay test question: In modifying behavior, what are the 4 techniques that use positive reinforcement?

In this example, the number "4" is a **Qualifying Word** that tells you that 4 techniques are required for a complete answer.

Sample essay test question: In modifying behavior, what are the 4 techniques that use positive reinforcement?

Identify the **Qualifying Words** in the sample exam statement below:

Circle all steps that are not part of glycolysis.

In this example, the **Qualifying Words** are "all" and "not". "All" suggests that you are looking for all the steps that are part of glycolysis. But the **Qualifying Word** "not" is the clue that the correct answer consists of all the steps that are not part of glycolysis.

Circle **all** steps that are **not** part of glycolysis.

Notice what happens when the **Qualifying Words** are omitted from the exam statement below.

Circle the steps that are part of glycolysis.

In this statement, you are looking for steps that **are** included in glycolysis. It is **very important** to be alert for **Qualifying Words**. They **significantly affect** exam answers because they **define or limit the scope of answers**.

4. Presentation Words

These are words in exam questions that **indicate how an instructor wants to see information presented** in answers. Examples of **Presentation Words** are "compare", "explain", "trace", and "List". **Presentation Words** are often seen with the 5 W's, H and I. They are:

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? If?

Examples: Describe when... Explain where... Define what... Justify why... Analyze how... List those who...

Often 5 W's, H and I are used with verbs as **Presentation Words**:

Examples: Who is...? What is...? Where does...? When did...? Why does...? How does...? If we changed...

Identify the **Presentation Words** in the exam question below by asking yourself the question,

"How does my instructor want to see information presented in answers?"

Sample essay test question: In **modifying behavior**, what are the **4 techniques that use positive reinforcement**?

The **Presentation Words** in this sample exam question are "what are." The **Presentation Words** "what are" tell the test taker to list and no more.

Sample essay test question: In **modifying behavior**, what are the **4 techniques that use positive reinforcement**?

Practice

Some test takers label the **Direction Words** in a test question BEFORE they begin an answer. Here is an example of how one test taker labeled the parts of an essay question:

Example: What are 3 major uses for computers?

The **Subject Word (S)** “computer” tells the test taker to *write about computers*.

The **Aspect Words (A)** “major uses” tells the test taker to write about *major uses* of computers.

The **Qualifying Word (Q)** “3” tells the test taker that only 3 major uses are asked for.

The **Presentation Words (P)** “what are” tell the test taker to present the answer by only telling *what the 3 major uses are* and that’s it.

Quiz on Labeling Direction Words

Label the **Direction Words** in questions 1 – 3 in the test item below. Also, fill in the quiz answers. When you are done, compare what you have done to the key on the next page. Pat yourself on the back for what you got correct and remember, learning something new takes time. Use scrap paper and retake this practice quiz as often as you need to get all the labels correct. Draw brackets and label the **Direction Words** in below.

1. List the 6 steps in setting and achieving goals in college.
2. Contrast the views of North and South on slavery before 1860.
3. Explain how AZT works to prevent AIDS virus from reproducing.

Quiz on Direction Words

1. What do **Direction Words** do in essay questions?
2. What are the 4 types of **Direction Words**? What does each type of direction do to help you write an essay answer?
3. Write down the mnemonic for helping you remember the 4 types of **Direction Words**. You may write your own mnemonic if you developed one.

Key (Labeling Direction Words):

1. **List** the **6 steps** in **setting and achieving goals in college**.
2. **Contrast** the views of North and South **on slavery** before 1860.
3. **Explain** how AZT works to **prevent AIDS virus from reproducing**.

Key (Quiz on Direction Words):

It's okay if your answers aren't exactly like those below so long as they contain the same main ideas.

1. What do **Direction Words** do in essay questions?

Direction words tell me exactly how to write an answer to an essay question.

2. What are the 4 types of **Direction Words**? What does each type of direction do to help you write an essay answer?

One type of direction word is subject words. Subject words tell me what to write about in an essay answer. A second type of direction words is aspect words. They identify which aspect of the subject I am asked to write about. A third type of direction words is qualifying words. Qualifying words define or limit the scope of my answers. The fourth type of direction words is presentation words. Presentation words tell me how the instructor wants to see information presented in my answers.

3. Write down the mnemonic for helping you remember the 4 types of **Direction Words**. You may write your own mnemonic if you developed one.

The mnemonic I use to help me remember the 4 types of direction words is "Follow directions and Say Q.P."