

Decoding the question: Teachers' notes

Rationale Many of the common errors made by students in tests and exams occur not because of lack of knowledge or skills but because they are not clear about the nature of the task that has been set. This is particularly the case with essays and longer pieces of writing where the instructions are often quite open and general.

Working out the exact demands of a question by taking each part of it in turn and focusing on its exact wording is thus an important initial stage in constructing a successful answer.

How to use Students can complete this form when an essay has been set. They may need guidance on the exact meaning of *command* and *key* words and rewording the question is by no means a simple task. It may help to complete the form in pairs or groups so ideas can be shared.

Example

Title or question

'All citizens of the UK should have equal rights.' To what extent do some individuals and groups in the UK experience inequality and discrimination?

Command words are the instruction words that tell you what to do e.g. outline, describe, discuss, identify, assess.

In this question the command words are: To what extent ...

This means I should: Judge how much of something is occurring

Key words are the words in the question that tell you what your answer should include. They are often technical words used in the subject.

In this question the key words are: Citizens, equal rights, inequality, discrimination

I will use the following definitions of key words.

These definitions could be used in your answer, especially in the introduction

Citizens People who are members of a country

Equal rights Everyone in a country has the same freedoms and protections

Inequality People having different amounts of things such as money

Discrimination People being treated unfairly

Look at your answers above and use them to rewrite the question in your own words

Most people agree that everyone in the UK should have the same freedoms and protection but are some individuals and groups actually treated unfairly, leading to them having less?

Decoding the question

Decoding means working out exactly what a question is about and how it should be answered. This is the essential first step in producing a successful answer.

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Feedback
