# Understanding essay questions

Understanding the essay question is the first and most important step you undertake with any assignment. Without fully understanding the task, you cannot respond to it.

Consider the key elements in the question:

‘Examine the role of women in Parliament since 1918, with reference to key Equality legislation’.

Now ask yourself:

* What is the main subject of the question? **Parliament**.
* Is there a particular aspect of that subject the question is asking you to consider? **The role of women**in Parliament**.**
* Does the question indicate any limits to your answer? The role of women in Parliament **since 1918**.
* What is the ‘instruction verb’ in the question asking you to do? **Examine** the role of women in Parliament since 1918.
* In addition, is the question asking you to demonstrate any specific areas of module knowledge? Examine the role of women in Parliament since 1918**, with reference to key Equality legislation.**

Identifying and understanding these different elements of your question will allow you to answer it confidently, directly and fully.

If a question is long and complicated break it down into its component parts and consider what each is asking you to do.

Above all, do what the instruction verb is telling you to do:

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| **Instruction** | **What you are asked to do** |
| Account for: | Give reasons for; explain (give an account of; describe). |
| Analyse: | Give an organised answer looking at all aspects. |
| Compare: | Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps conclude which is preferable. |
| Contrast: | Bring out the differences. |
| Criticise: | Give your judgement on theories or opinions or facts and back this by discussing evidence or reasoning involved. |
| Deduce: | Conclude; infer. |
| Define: | Give the precise meaning.  Examine the different possible or often used definitions. |
| Demonstrate: | Show clearly by giving proof or evidence. |
| Describe: | Give a detailed, full account of. |
| Determine: | Find out something; calculate. |
| Discuss: | Investigate or examine by argument; debate; give reason for and against; examine the implications of. |
| Elucidate: | Explain and make clear. |
| Estimate: | Calculate; judge; predict. |
| Evaluate: | Appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess and explain. |
| Examine: | Look at carefully; consider. |
| Explain: | Make plain and clear; interpret the account for; give reasons for. |
| Identify: | Point out and describe. |
| Illustrate: | Explain, clarify, and make clear by the use of concrete examples. |
| Infer: | Conclude something from facts or reasoning. |
| Interpret: | Expound the meaning; make clear and explicit, giving your own judgement. |
| Justify: | Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions and answer main objections likely to be made to them. |
| Outline: | Give a short description of the main points; give the main features or general principles; emphasise the structure, leaving out minor details. |
| Prove: | Show that something is true or certain; provide strong evidence (and examples) for. |
| Review: | Make a survey, examining the subject carefully. |
| State: | Present in a brief, clear form. |
| Summarise: | Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, leaving out details/examples. |
| Trace: | Follow the development of topic from its origin. |

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