

World History Key Verbs for Constructed Response Items

Some students write inadequate responses in examinations because they are unable to interpret the nature of the task expected of them. They may write a response according to what they think the question is rather than the one that is actually intended by the item writer. The difficulty may result from an incorrect interpretation of the task word used in the item. To help remedy this problem, the following task words are provided below. It should be noted that these words are arranged from the simple to the complex.

List

This verb merely requires the identification, cataloguing, or naming of elements in a concept. For example, “List the major steps to war between June 28 and August 4, 1914.” No explanation or description is necessary.

Similar verbs include *catalogue*, *name*, *identify*, and *label*.

State

This verb requires a short statement of a definition, principle, concept or relationship. For example, “State the purpose for creating the League of Nations.”

Illustrate

This verb is asking for the use of specific examples to clarify a point or idea. For example, “Illustrate the impact of World War II on the daily lives of citizens.”

Similar verbs are *show* and *demonstrate*.

Outline

Students are expected to give the framework of the main features of a thing, idea, or event. For example, “Outline the major events that led to the entry of the United States into World War II.”

A similar verb is *chart*.

Contrast

This verb asks for an account of the differences between two items, phenomena, ideas, or principles. For example, “Contrast the nature of war on the Eastern and Western Fronts.”

Similar verbs include *distinguish* and *differentiate*.

Compare

This verb requires an account of the similarities and differences between two items, phenomena, ideas, or principles. In responding to this task, students often give the similarities and not the differences; and/or provide two definitions. For example, “Compare socialism and communism.”

Describe

This verb requires a factual account, with no undertone, of the distinctive features of an event, situation, or phenomena; no explanation is necessary. Usually the aspects to be described are specified. For example, “Describe a domestic policy introduced by Mussolini to establish a totalitarian state.

Explain

This verb asks for an account of the make-up of something; how something works; or why something is the way it is. For example, “Explain how high tariffs on international trade was a major cause of the Great Depression.”

Similar verb phrases include “*Give reasons for...*”, “*Account for ...*”.

Discuss

Students only vaguely understand this verb although it is one of more commonly used ones. This verb is always used within a context. If an argument is presented, “discuss” means to present various points for and/or against the argument. For example, “The United Nations is ineffectual as a mediator of disputes.”

If a principle is stated, “discuss” would involve the extension of the meaning of the principle and how it applies to a given situation. For example, “The policy of appeasement held by Britain and France contributed to Hitler’s expansionist moves in the late 1930s. Discuss.”

Examine

Students are expected to “inquire into”, reflect, critically look at something and to present an analysis of an issue or situation. For example, “Examine the role of Winston Churchill in the British success in the Battle of Britain.”

A similar verb is *infer*.

Assess

This verb requires an examination of the value or validity of something according to some criteria; it involves making an informed judgement. This process may involve weighing the merit of two different points of view. Students could be asked, for example, to assess the validity of the statement, “Terrorist attacks against American assets are sufficient justification for U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.”

Similar verbs are *judge* and *evaluate*.

Support

In response to this verb, students are expected to defend a particular point of view with a well-reasoned argument with evidence and examples. This verb is often used after questions beginning with assess, judge, and evaluate.

A similar verb is *defend*.