

Key words and terms

Interpreting and using them in exams

The ability to identify, interpret and use key words and terms in exam questions is fundamental to success. This column provides some guidance on how to make sense of key words and terms and on how to use them in your exam answers

Key words and terms crop up in three ways in exam questions: through the command stem (e.g. 'Assess the reasons...'); through themes (e.g. 'The development of government...'); through the topic being focused on (e.g. 'The Weimar Republic...').

The command stem

Different awarding bodies use different types of command stem in the questions they set (although many are similar in meaning and what they demand). You need to learn what these terms mean, how to link your understanding to other parts of the question and then develop an appropriate plan that combines understanding and application. Table 1 explains the meaning of some of the most common command stems.

Themes

A theme is a recurring topic, subject or idea that pervades a period in history. The most common themes are, broadly speaking, economic, political, social, military and religious. These themes can prove problematic in terms of meaning. (See Table 2 for a useful break-down.) Each theme contains sub-themes or concepts that you should learn definitions for (remembering that there may be some

disagreement over how they are interpreted). It is useful to build a glossary of such terms either in a notebook or on index cards.

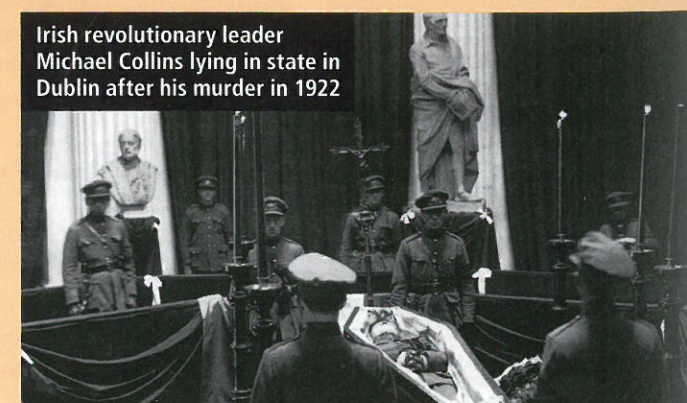
Topics

Topics are usually easy to identify and separate from command stems and key words/terms in questions. Consider the following exam question on the development of Irish nationalism.

Assess the view that the success of revolutionary nationalism in Ireland from 1791 to 1921 depended on the quality of its leadership.

The topic is clearly revolutionary nationalism in Ireland from 1791 to 1921, but some students, possibly due to a lack of careful reading and/or weak knowledge and understanding, might gloss over 'revolutionary' (as opposed to 'constitutional') and lose sight of the date parameters.

Always take note of words either side of the ones that you immediately recognise along with associated dates. Failure to do so might result in answers that lack focus, relevance and scope.



Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins lying in state in Dublin after his murder in 1922

Table 1 Common command stems

Command stem	Explanation
To what extent...	The level to which you agree or disagree with a view (high, middle or low).
How far do you agree... (often used following a statement)	As above but statements can be quite long and need careful analysis.
How successful...	The level to which an individual, group or nation achieved success in a particular venture (high, middle or low). Think about how 'successful' can be measured.
How effective...	As above, but 'effective' means producing a desired or intended result. Think about the evidence needed to show what a desired or intended result might have been (usually best viewed in terms of the aims and objectives of individuals or groups).
How important...	The level of importance of a particular action or event. This involves making a judgement (that is, expressing a balanced view based on fact).
Assess the reasons for...	The explanation of the causes of an event but with a judgement needed about relative importance (hence, 'assess').
Explain why...	A developed list of reasons for the occurrence of a particular action or event.
Why...	Similar to the above but suggesting only a list is required. This is not an especially useful command stem as it fails to steer you towards developing ideas, even though the implication is that you should do that.
Explain how far...	Similar to 'How far...' but with the suggestion that any judgements are justified.

Table 2 Understanding themes

Theme	What it is	What it is not
Economic	A theme that focuses on how the production, distribution and exchange of resources (land, labour and capital) has occurred given finite availability in the face of infinite demand. Therefore, quite a complex term.	Although connected to 'economical' the latter has a slightly different connotation. 'Economic' does not simply mean all things connected with money or finance.
Political	The acquisition, distribution and consolidation of power. Everyone has a degree of power (or 'free will') and therefore any human action is, in theory, political.	Political does not mean government (the way in which a state is organised and exercises power). Note that questions on government do not require discussion of economic and social developments (unless connected through arguments about policies).
Social	The study of the behaviour of groups of people (societies) in the past and present.	The study of how the mind affects the behaviour of individuals (psychology) or economic and political developments even though they may impinge on social trends.
Military (i.e. warfare)	A state of armed conflict between different nations, states or groups, or a campaign.	Wars are not battles, a common mistake made by students who follow courses in the history of war and warfare.
Religious	Concerned with and/or believing in a god.	'Religious' is not 'religiously' (the adverb meaning to be very careful and regular). Neither does it mean pertaining to a particular belief system. Also, some students get confused over different branches of the same religion (a common one being Catholicism as opposed to other branches of Christianity).

Analysis

You will often be asked to develop analytical arguments. But do you know what 'analysis' means? Imagine being asked to analyse how a bicycle works. A useful approach would be to:

- 'Unpack' the bicycle into its component parts: frame, wheels, pedals, handlebars, chain, saddle, gears etc.
- When unpacking, take note of how the parts are connected and the order in which you unpack them.
- Reflect on the unpacking process and decide the rank order of importance of the parts of the bicycle (e.g. frame-wheels-handlebars).
- Reassemble the bike to create the whole machine. Revise your judgement about the order of importance of the parts.

Having completed this it would be reasonable to assume that you have analysed how a bike works. You can model the same thought process

and apply it to historical problem solving. So, with reference to the article on Oswald Mosley on page 18, answer the following question:

Analyse the contribution of Oswald Mosley to developments in British politics during the interwar period (1918–39).

Conclusion

Words and terms need to be learnt like any historical fact, but with the proviso that they are more open to interpretation than most factual material. The more you persevere in keeping a glossary and reading widely, the more your knowledge and understanding of key words and terms will improve.

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