



What are they?

Keywords help you unlock what your essay questions are asking you to do. Following the clues written into the questions helps you give the marker exactly what they want.

There are 3 types of keywords to look out for.

1. **Directive** words – these tell you what you must do.
2. **Topic** words – these tell you what subject you must write about.
3. **Limiting** words – these constrain what you can do. They are like boundaries.

Directives

Directives inform you of what you should be doing in your answer. Below are a few directives that you could regularly encounter and an indication of what they ask of you. Remember there are many more than this brief list. Follow [this link for some more](#).

- **Analyse**
- **Compare**
- **Contrast**
- **Describe**
- **Evaluate (critically)**
- **Explain**
- **Illustrate**

Each directive shows you what the lecturer wants you to *do*. And you must make sure you do what is being asked to get marks. If a question asks you to compare and you simply describe, the lecturer will not be able to award you marks. Consequently, it is important to know these words mean and what exactly are you supposed to do when you encounter them? The following provides a short explanation of common directives.

1. **Analyse:** strictly speaking analysis refers to breaking down something to understand its parts or what it is made up of. In terms of your answer, you must break down the subject of the question into all its fundamental and relevant parts to show how, and if, it works together.
 - a. Example, analysing a text: Smith's book presents us with a series of examples of poor practice in fieldwork. She opens with examples from her own experience and then offers others from around the world. Each fits together with some success but the links could be accused of being tenuous and dated.
2. **Compare:** requires you to show similarities (often between just 2 things or events). When you create a comparison essay, you might also have to demonstrate the relevance of the similarities.
 - a. Example: Cat owners feel similarly about the food they feed their pets. Everyone I spoke to agreed they would prefer to spend more to get

good quality food. Brands such as X and Y were pricey but were thought best because they both seemed rich and meaty. Both brands, therefore, offered value for money.

3. **Contrast:** requires you to find and indicate differences. This means you need to show what sets them apart.
 - a. Example: Gala apples are red and sweet while Granny Smith apples are green and tend to be tart.

NOTE: When you are asked to **compare and contrast**, you must do both in your answer. That means you must give equal time to showing similarities and indicating differences.

4. **Describe:** description needs a clear picture without any meaning attached. In other words, you simply say what's there, without trying to work out why or judging it. If you describe a painting, you detail what it looks like and what was used to create it (eg: water colours or oil paints). You don't say why the artist created it. If you are describing a battle, object, political event, feature in the landscape, you must simply recount the facts as you see them, rather than a wider social meaning or interpretation.
5. **Evaluate:** the word 'value' is in this directive, which tells you that you must seek to explain the value or worth in your answer. Therefore, you must conclude or arrive at a verdict using evidence to support what you are claiming.
6. **Explain:** if a question asks you to explain it is asking you to clarify a subject or topic. Clarification makes something clearer. Your answer should make the subject clear to the reader. They should know and understand all the relevant details by the end of reading it. This means you should provide a lot of detail – the whys and hows. It is helpful to imagine the reader knows nothing of the subject when you are explaining.
7. **Illustrate:** when asked to illustrate you must provide examples to 'prove' the argument or points you are making. This is often done with graphs, tables, pictures etc.

Topics and Limits

Topic keywords tell you what subject(s) you should be writing about. Typically, deviation away from the question's topic means marks cannot be awarded...so beware not to stray into other territory.

Example essay question: what is the topic? What are the limits?

'Explain the meaning of 'nature' in Descola's (2013) book *Beyond Nature and Culture*.'

Looking at the question above it is obvious that the topic is 'nature'...but you are being asked to look at and clarify Descola's understanding of nature not provide a discussion about the term 'nature' generally. Therefore, one of the limits is associated with the author (in this case, Descola). However, there are other limits. You are asked to focus specifically on *Descola's* representation of nature, and only from his 2013 book. If an answer explored the meaning of nature in another author's book or even in a different book written by Descola, it would have deviated and gone off topic.

If the question asked, '**Compare** the meaning of 'nature' in Descola's (2013) book *Beyond Nature and Culture* with other anthropological works,' then I would be expected to bring in other authors.