Understanding Exam Questions

There are lots of different types of exam question, but there are three main steps to answering all of them.

1. Read the question **very carefully.**
2. Underline the **command term(s).**
3. Use the **marks** available to **plan** your answer.

What are command terms?

These are words in the question that tell you what to do. Here are some common ones and what they mean.

Outline	Give the key points but don't go into detail.
Describe	Give a detailed account of something.
Explain	Set outa detailed account that includes reasons and results; causes and effects.
Compare	Identify the similarities and differences between things in a balanced way.
Evaluate	Work out the value of something by weighing up its strengths and its limitations.

How do I plan my answer?

The marks for the question will show you roughly how many points to make (roughly 1 per mark) and how long to spend on it (roughly 1 minute per mark). That is a **rough** guide!

When you are practising writing exam answers against the clock, use the 'mark a minute' guidance to set the time limit you are writing too.

Usually, the questions that are worth the most marks on an exam paper involved extended answers – that means answers where you have to write quite a lot to explain your thinking.

Here are three more tips for dealing with extended answer questions.

4. Keep your answer **relevant** to the question.

5. **Connect** your points together with linking terms.

6. Use **paragraphs** to help to give your answer a clear structure.

Stay relevant

Every point you make should be **answering the question**. This is why it is so important to make sure you really understand what the question is asking, rather than plunging in and writing what you can remember about the topic. Keep referring back to the question throughout your answer.

Linking terms

Some exam answers are a mess of points all tangled together. You can avoid this by using links like 'Another reason is…' or 'However…' or 'A different explanation is…'. They signpost where your argument is going.