



nebosh

**Guidance on command words used
in learning outcomes and question
papers – Certificate qualifications**

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1. Introduction

This document is only relevant if enrolled on, and still studying for, an older, *legacy* version of a Certificate qualification. If you are in any doubt, talk to your Learning Partner, who can easily clarify whether *command words* are relevant for you.

Command words are used in *legacy* Certificate-level qualifications – in the learning outcomes, assessment objectives and assessment questions. By *legacy* we mean ‘old version’; that is where the qualification has been superseded by a new version (which becomes the *current* version). Newer versions of the Certificates do not use command words. But if you were enrolled on a legacy version that does use command words, and you are still studying for legacy assessments, you will find this document useful.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance on the use and definition of command words used in education and assessment. The guidance will help learners and tutors gain a better understanding of the role of command words in teaching, learning and assessing. The outcome is that learners understand and know what to do when asked, for example, to ‘describe’ as opposed to ‘explain’.

The phrase ‘command word’ is used to refer to the words specifically associated with the learning outcomes and assessment objectives of a qualification. Since learning outcomes are concerned with what learners can do at the end of a learning activity, command words are action (active) verbs. The command words used follow Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives and as such are instructional terms that indicate the level of thinking and type of performance that is required of learners.

2. Learning outcomes

NEBOSH produces a guide, which includes the syllabus, for each qualification. The syllabus is broken down into individual units and each unit into elements. Each element has clear learning outcomes. In some qualifications, command words are used in the learning outcomes to indicate what is required of students in relation to each item of content.

Example learning outcome:

Unit FC1: Fire safety and risk management

Learning outcome 1.6

Explain the purpose of, and the procedures for, investigating fires in the workplace.

3. Questions

Only questions that assess the learning outcomes established in the syllabus can be set. Questions are written to discover not only how much of a subject a learner knows but also the associated skills that they are expected to demonstrate. Marks are then based on how effectively these skills are demonstrated. Command words are the guides in the question as to what assessment skill is being targeted by that question. Certificate questions containing command words will predominantly assess knowledge, comprehension and application.

Knowledge requires an ability to recall or remember facts without necessarily understanding them. Command words used in knowledge-based questions include identify.

Comprehension requires an ability to understand and interpret learned information. Command words used in comprehension-based questions include explain.

Application is the skill of being able to take knowledge and apply it in different contexts and circumstances in order to understand why and where problems and issues arise. The important thing to remember is that whatever the context, eg a transport company, a communications centre or an oil refinery, the principles being assessed are the same, but will have different implications given the different industry or issue being considered. Command words used to assess application include outline and explain.

Command words are used very carefully and each question has a certain order of words to try to enable learners to understand what Examiners are looking for. In every question the skills required by the specific command words are also reflected in the marks allocated for the question. In general there are going to be more marks available for application and comprehension skill questions than for knowledge-based questions.

Understanding the command words in a question is the key to success in answering it. The command word indicates the nature of answer and the skills being assessed.

4. NEBOSH Certificate qualification command words

The following definitions are included for a common understanding of the command words used in the compilation of some Certificate question papers.

Command word	Definition
Identify	To give reference to an item, which could be its name or title. NB: normally a word or phrase will be sufficient, provided the reference is clear.
Give	To provide short, factual answers. NB: normally a single word, phrase or sentence will be sufficient.
Outline	To indicate the principal features or different parts of. NB: an exhaustive description is not required. What is sought is a brief summary of the major aspects of whatever is stated in the question.
Describe	To give a detailed written account of the distinctive features of a subject. The account should be factual, without any attempt to explain. When describing a subject (or object) a test of sufficient detail would be that another person would be able to visualise what you are describing.
Explain	To provide an understanding. To make an idea or relationship clear. NB: this command word is testing the learner's ability to know or understand why or how something happens. Is often associated with the words 'how' or 'why'.

Learning Partners are strongly advised to make command word lists available to both tutors and learners to ensure a common understanding. Consistent and regular use of command words during teaching and revision will help learners develop confidence in taking examinations.

5. Responding to command words in questions

It is important to read the whole question and to understand what the question requires as the command word on its own will need to be reinforced by the remainder of the question.

Many learners miss out on gaining marks because they do not read the question carefully enough and do not think about their answer thoroughly before writing it down.

Learners need to think about each question.

- What is the command word?
- What do I need to say to gain marks?
- What is or is not relevant to the question?

In many cases a brief answer plan is an essential aid to ensuring that answers are well thought out and structured.

NEBOSH applies a 'positive marking' approach; that is, marks are awarded for correct material in learners' answers, rather than being deducted for incorrect or missing material.

In order to give further direction as to the detail of information required by the command word in a question, examples are given below both for general knowledge and for the syllabus.

Identify

Applying **identify** to a non-syllabus related common subject:

Q1. **Identify FOUR** kitchen appliances.

Q2. **Identify FOUR** types of bicycle.

Sufficient answers would include:

A1. Toaster
Electric kettle
Microwave cooker
Dishwasher

A2. Mountain bike
Racing bike
Penny-farthing
Tandem

Note that giving only one or two word answers provides a clear reference and therefore is sufficient to satisfy an **identify** question.

Applying **identify** to syllabus subjects:

Q3. **Identify FOUR** hazards associated with excavations.

Q4. **Identify FOUR** mechanical hazards associated with machinery.

Q5. **Identify FOUR** types of safety sign.

Sufficient answers would include:

A3. Collapse of the sides

- Water ingress
- Falling materials
- Underground services

A4. Entanglement

- Drawing in and trapping
- Friction or abrasion
- Stabbing or puncture

A5. Prohibition signs

- Warning signs
- Mandatory signs
- Emergency or safe condition signs

Again, answers are limited to a brief phrase or in some cases just two words but do give clear reference.

Outline

To gain the marks for the **outline** example questions below, the same breadth of answer is required as for an **identify** answer, but now, additional information will be required to satisfy the depth of an **outline**.

Applying **outline** to the same non-syllabus subjects:

Q6. **Outline FOUR** kitchen appliances.

Q7. **Outline FOUR** types of bicycle.

Sufficient answers would include:

A6. **Toaster**

Accommodates slices of bread, ejects as toast when ready.

Electric kettle

1 to 2 litre capacity, boils water. Can be cordless.

Microwave cooker

- Heats food rapidly using short wavelength radio waves.

Dishwasher

- Dirty tableware placed in baskets. Mixture of high pressure water and detergent automatically cleans.

A7. **Mountain bike**

- Robust bicycle with deep tread tyres, suspension and several gear choices.

Racing bike

- Lightweight frame with drop handlebars and maybe fixed gearing.

Penny-farthing

- Vintage device with very large front wheel and small rear wheel.

Tandem

- Bicycle designed for two people with two seats and two sets of pedals.

Applying **outline** to the same syllabus subjects:

- Q8. **Outline FOUR** hazards associated with excavations.
Q9. **Outline FOUR** mechanical hazards associated with machinery.
Q10. **Outline FOUR** types of safety sign.

Sufficient answers would include:

A8. Collapse of the sides

- Unsupported trench or incorrect angle of the sides.

Water ingress

- Through heavy rain or burst water main.

Falling materials

- Spoil dug from excavation or materials and tools stored at ground level could fall in.

Underground services

- Contact or rupturing of electricity, gas or water utilities.

A9. Entanglement

- On rotating parts.

Drawing in and trapping

- Between counter rotation rollers, or pulley belts and wheels.

Friction or abrasion

- Contact with fast moving surfaces.

Stabbing or puncture

- From ejected objects or flying objects.

A10. Prohibition signs

- Circular with red border, red diagonal bar and black symbol.

Warning signs

- Triangular, yellow background, black border and symbol.

Mandatory signs

- Circular, blue background, white border and white symbol.

Emergency or safe condition signs

- Rectangular, green background, white border and white symbol.

Again, the **identify** answer (shown in bold) gives the breadth required and the additional information given in the bullet point satisfies the required depth for an **outline**.

Describe

Applying **describe** to the non-syllabus subjects:

- Q11. **Describe** a microwave cooker.
Q12. **Describe** a penny-farthing bicycle.

Sufficient answers would be:

- A11. An oblong box shaped object, approximately 30cm tall, 30cm deep and 60cm long. There is a single hinged door at the front, typically see through. The door opens outwards and inside there is a space to place a plate or dish and a microwave transmitter is located above. Outside, on the front there will be normally two controls to set the power and cooking time.
- A12. A manually propelled vintage bicycle consisting of a very large wheel at the front and a much smaller wheel at the back. The wheels are connected by a frame that supports a seat above the front wheel and handlebars to steer. Pedals are connected directly to the centre of the front wheel.

Applying **describe** to a syllabus subject:

- Q13. **Describe** the mechanical hazards associated with a bench grinder.

A sufficient answer would be:

- A13. An entanglement hazard would be associated with the rotating spindle that the abrasive wheel is mounted on. Drawing in and trapping is associated with the gap between the tool rest and the rotating abrasive wheel. Friction or abrasion hazards would be associated with the surface of the rotating abrasive wheel and stabbing or puncture hazards could be created by flying fragments or pieces of ejected broken wheel.

In all of the **describe** answers above, no attempt is made to explain how a microwave cooker heats food, why the front wheel of a penny-farthing is so much larger than the rear wheel or how a person could be injured using an abrasive wheel.

Explain

Applying **explain** to a non-syllabus subject:

- Q14. **Explain** how a microwave cooker heats up food.
- Q15. **Explain** why there is a very large front wheel on a penny-farthing.

Sufficient answers would include:

- A14. The frequency of microwaves used in a microwave cooker is sufficient to cause water molecules in food to vibrate. Vibrating molecules hit other water molecules and put them into the same vibration and therefore this vibration of molecules is converted into heat.
- A15. By having a large front wheel, the peripheral (rim speed) of the wheel is much faster than the rotation of the pedals at the centre. This results in faster forward speed per pedal rotation. Also a larger wheel is more suitable for riding on cobbled streets or rough ground.

Applying **explain** to a syllabus subject:

- Q16. **Explain** how sensitive protective equipment (trip device) can reduce the risk of contact with moving parts of machinery.

A sufficient answer would be:

A16. Sensitive protective equipment is designed to identify the presence of a person or body part within the danger zone of machinery. Examples of such devices include pressure mats and light beams that are connected to the machine controls and would stop the machine rapidly should a person or body part be detected.

Give

Applying **give** to a non-syllabus subject:

Q17: **Identify FOUR** European cities **AND give** an example of a tourist attraction in **EACH**.

Sufficient answers would include:

A17. London – eg Buckingham Palace
 Paris – eg Eiffel Tower
 Pisa – eg Leaning Tower
 Rome – eg Colosseum

Applying **give** to a syllabus subject:

Q18. **Identify FOUR** types of safety sign **AND give** an example in **EACH** case.

Sufficient answers would include:

A18. Prohibition signs – eg No smoking
 Warning signs – eg Caution hot surface
 Mandatory signs – eg Wear ear protection
 Emergency or safe condition signs – eg first-aid box

6. Document control

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