

Essay and Paragraphs: Command Questions

There are four [4] basic types of command questions in final exams. Command questions *oblige you to organize your paragraphs and essays in a certain manner*. Once you understand these terms, you will be able to organize your paragraphs and essays quickly and effectively.

1. **Explanation**
2. **Compare and Contrast**
3. **To What Extent**
4. **Evaluation**

1. The simplest command phrase is the **explanation**-style question. Here you must explain or (which is slightly less demanding) describe a time period, event(s), concept(s) or piece of writing with as much relevant detail as possible. Your challenge is to have language that is succinct and compact. Words that indicate explanatory writing include:

- *Explain*
- *Summarize*
- *Describe*
- *Discuss*
- *Illustrate*
- *Define*
- *Analyze*
- *Demonstrate*

Organizational Strategies:

How to organize a response: The four main organizational response strategies for essays and paragraphs are *thematic or topical, chronological, geographical* and *pro/con* [a version of which is *similarities/differences*]. For more detail about these organizational typologies, click [here](#). The most common response strategies for explanation questions are thematic and chronological. For example, if you were asked to **explain** the causes of World War One, you could approach it thematically (e.g. alliances, imperialism, militarism, nationalism). Alternatively, you could explain it as a chronological sequence of events starting well before 1900 right up to the autumn of 1914.

Similarly, you might be asked to **discuss** a poem in English. If it's a narrative poem, you could explain the events of the poem in chronological order, or, if you have a lyrical poem, describe the different thematic issues raised by the poet.

2. Another basic type of command phrase is the **compare and contrast** question. Here you might compare two or more historical events, concepts, leaders or pieces of literature. The people who make the provincial exams are looking for good judgment as you weigh each side. Words and phrases that indicate comparative questions include:

- *Compare and contrast* - Discuss both similarities (*compare*) and differences (*contrast*).
- *Compare* - Oddly, this is the same as above. "Compare" is used in a broad sense, and implies both similarities and differences.
- *Contrast* - Focus on the differences.

How to organize a response: The most common organizational strategy for this question type is the similarities/differences approach. When you are comparing and contrasting, you want to show what is similar between the compared items, and what is different between them. This means you have at least two body paragraphs, but you may want to break them down further. For example, if you're comparing the causes of World War One to the causes of World War Two, you might start with their similarities and then talk about their differences. Alternatively, you could break it down thematically by having, say, three thematic paragraphs (e.g. military similarities and differences, economic similarities and differences, and geographical similarities and differences).

In compare and contrast responses, you should provide a hard thesis that states which side is more significant or historically important. Since the order of the body paragraphs depends on your thesis, differences therefore go after similarities *if* you are arguing that the differences are more historically significant. If your thesis says that the similarities are more important, then the similarities go last. Rhetorically speaking, you should always put your most pro-thesis examples *closest* to the concluding paragraph.

Common Problems In "Compare and Contrast" Writing:

- In this type of essay, transition phrases are critical. You shouldn't move from one idea to another - especially if it's a contrasting idea - unless you indicate this to the reader. Otherwise, moving back and forth between your ideas can be very confusing.
 - The anti-thesis body paragraph (i.e. BP1) should start with a concession transition, and the second, pro-thesis body paragraph (i.e. BP2) should start with a contrast transition.
- Use *specific* examples; bland generalities stick out like a sore thumb when you're analyzing one example in the light of another.
- Your conclusion is the clincher. In addition to summarizing your body paragraphs, you must explain **why** the similarities are more important than the differences (or vice versa). This is where you show historical judgment. You need to explain why you weighted one set of examples more than another set.

3. A third type of command phrase is the **to what extent** question. In this command type, you are being asked to measure along a sliding scale, or the degree by which something is true or involved (*or isn't*). For example, you might face a question like, "To what extent was the United States responsible for the failure of the League of Nations?" It is similar to a compare and contrast question because you if you respond, "*To a large extent*" or "*To a partial extent*" or even "*To a small extent...*" you are implying at least two aspects - the extent to which the United States *is* and the extent to which it *isn't* responsible, and this implies a comparison. Here's another example: "*To what extent is Ralph responsible for the destruction of civilization in Lord of the Flies?*" If your thesis is that Ralph is only minimally responsible (*To a small extent...*), then the first body paragraph (i.e. the anti-thesis) discusses how he *is* responsible, and the 2nd (and possibly 3rd) body paragraph(s) explains why he *isn't*. Here you might also discuss who or what else *is* largely responsible.

Common Problems In "To What Extent" Writing:

- In this type of essay, transition phrases are critical. You shouldn't move from one idea to another - especially if it's a contrasting idea - unless you indicate this to the reader. Otherwise, moving back and forth between your ideas can be very confusing.
 - The anti-thesis body paragraph (i.e. BP1) should start with a concession transition, and the second, pro-thesis body paragraph (i.e. BP2) should start with a contrast transition.
- In the final paragraph, you must generalize as to **why** your subject is largely or minimally responsible. Why *is* America largely responsible? Why *is* Ralph largely absolved of blame? This is where you show historical or literary judgment. You need to explain why you weighted one set of arguments more than another.

4. The final command phrase type is **evaluation**. Here you are given a specific historical assertion and asked to evaluate it. For example, you might face a topic like, "Evaluate: Ronald Reagan was responsible for the end of the Cold War." Except as indicated below, it is often a good idea to ask if the statement is even true. In other words, ***don't be afraid to disagree with the statement!*** Moreover, a hard thesis is imperative! This is the most explicit type of argumentative writing, so don't be shy. Words that indicate evaluative questions include:

- Evaluate
- Assess
- Criticize/Prove/Support/Justify (these terms imply you shouldn't disagree with the question)

How to organize a response: Depending on the type of issue addressed, you may use all of the above organizational strategies.