

Cambridge A-Level – Command Words

What each command word asks you to do . :

State / Give / Name

express in clear terms. One short sentence, no reasoning, no example. If the question says ‘state’, do not explain – you are spending time on marks that do not exist.

Define

give the precise meaning. Use the syllabus wording, and include the quantities it relates: ‘work done per unit charge’, not ‘a kind of energy’.

Describe

state the features of something, without saying why. For a graph: shape, direction, where it changes. For a process: the sequence of what happens.

Explain

set out purposes or reasons – the mark is on the BECAUSE, not on the what. Every explain answer should contain a linking word: because, so, therefore, which means that.

Suggest

apply knowledge to a situation the syllabus does not cover directly. There is no single right answer; there is a right kind of reasoning. Say what you would expect AND why.

Calculate

work out a numerical answer, showing your working. Quote the formula, substitute with units, then evaluate.

Determine

calculate, but the question expects you to extract the data yourself – from a graph, a table, or an earlier part.

Compare

identify similarities AND differences. Both sides in one sentence: ‘X has ..., whereas Y has ...’. Two separate paragraphs describing X then Y usually scores half.

Discuss

write about the issue from more than one side, and reach a position. An answer with only one side caps at partial marks whatever its quality.

Evaluate / Assess

judge, with criteria and a conclusion. Say what the judgement depends on, then commit: ‘in the short run ..., but if demand is elastic ...’.

Justify

support a statement with evidence. Name the evidence; do not gesture at it.

Sketch

a shaped, labelled drawing – not to scale, but the shape, intercepts and asymptotes must be right, because that is where the marks are.

Show that

work FORWARD to the printed answer and write more steps than feel necessary. The printed answer earns nothing; the working earns everything.