

In all Examiner's Reports, several consistent themes crop up almost every time. The most common complaint from examiners, across all three levels, is that students have **'failed to answer the question that was asked'**. There's a whole range of to not answer a question.

- Many students are determined to prove how much they've learned, regurgitating learned material and ignoring the question.
- Others answer only part of the question, even though the examiner may have required several things to be done to get full marks.
- Some answer the question they hoped would be there, rather than the one that is.

Whilst doing any of these will make it almost impossible to obtain a passing score, another very common reason for getting poor marks within the exam lies in misinterpreting or misunderstanding exactly what is asked.

The question requirements in most of the CS Exams are conversational. Your understanding of the role simulation, core activities and assessment outcomes (in the [Exams Blueprint](#)) will be extremely helpful to interpret and understand exactly what the examiner expects in your answer. Accordingly, you will have to deem the precise 'action' or the verb.

**Example 1:** See this requirement from a past Strategic CS Exam – 'I need your opinion on ...'. As a Senior Manager (the role you are expected to simulate at the Strategic level) you are supposed to 'advise', obviously, the Board for Directors.

**Example 2:** This requirement is from a past Operational CS Exam – 'What do the tables in the attachment tell us about ...?'. As a Finance Officer (the role you expected to simulate at Operational level), you are expected to 'explain' your findings from the tables in your response (to the person for whom you are writing the report, email etc.).

Sometimes, the verbs are explicit in the question requirements. For instance, the requirement may appear as 'discuss from a business perspective ...'. Therefore, in either situation, it will be extremely helpful for you to know the examiner's expectation when using these verbs.

Each verb implies the need for a different approach when answering a question that uses that verb. In some cases, the approach is obvious from the definition of the verb. In others, it is less so. Below are a couple of verbs that are commonly found in CIMA<sup>®</sup> CS Exams and the approach that you should take in each case.

**The verbs below are grouped under 'comprehension'. In the context of syllabus topics, these are what you are expected to understand,**

**Describe** – A straightforward 'what it is' statement. Think of it as the next step on from 'list' or 'state'. However, you might need a short paragraph, rather than a single sentence, depending on how complex or technical the issues are.

**Distinguish** – You can only distinguish *between* things, so there need to be two or more things given in the question. The trick here is not only to list the features of each of the things that make them *different* from each other but also to explain *why* these differences.

**Explain** – This looks easy but it's a tricky one. Quite often examiners ask you to explain something but instead get a description from students.

Think of it this way – if you are asked to describe a dog, it's easy: furry animal, four legs and goes 'woof'. What if you are asked to *explain* a dog? It's not possible to explain what a dog is, but it's easy to explain *why* people keep dogs as pets, or *how* a dog may be trained.

# Do exactly what examiner asks you to do!

If you are asked to explain something, use a paragraph. Write a sentence that makes your point (i.e., *what*), then write another to explain *why* the first sentence is so, or the consequences (or the impact or the causes) of the first sentence. If your point still isn't clear, write a third sentence that makes it clearer.

*'Explanations can quite often be improved by adding "because of ..." at the end of a sentence. Explanations should also utilise the information given to you within the pre-seen materials, especially financial information.'*

– Examiner

**Identify** – To do this, it's necessary to have a scenario. It's not an application of your knowledge, but a more selective use of it. Think of 'identify' as being like 'explain in this situation ...'. Go through what you've learned and pick out (from the pre-seen and unseen materials) only the bits that apply to the situation described in the question. (Sometimes, it may come with another higher-level verb – e.g., 'Identify and evaluate key project management issues ...')

**Illustrate** – Give a relevant example(s) from the pre-seen and/or unseen materials. If not, use an example from your industry analysis and make sure you relate it to the point you illustrate. Alternatively, you could do a quick and simple calculation by way of illustration.

**These are a collection of verbs that test your application skills – how you are expected to apply your knowledge (in different contexts) acquired in the three pillar subjects.**

**Apply** – This verb is used quite a lot in the learning outcomes, but rarely in exam questions. In a learning outcome, it means that you'll have to do it for real, not just talk about it in theory. For example, 'I can identify and apply value management techniques to enhance value'. (Management CS Exam Blueprint – Core Activity: C)

*'Demonstrating good technical understanding is not enough on its own to pass. You need to demonstrate technical understanding in the context of the scenario and the particulars of the issue being addressed. Information given to candidates as part of the task is there for a reason and should be, as far as possible, incorporated into answers, along with relevant information from the pre-seen. **Application to the scenario is key to achieving a passing score.***

– Examiner

**Conduct** – Using appropriate examples from the pre-seen/unseen materials, explain the exact course of actions that you would take to organise and carry out an activity or task. ('conduct an analysis of stakeholder needs' (Strategic CS Exam Blueprint – Core Activity: B))

**Demonstrate** – You need to prove something to be true, beyond any doubt, or show that it applies in the situation described, by giving evidence. This verb is most likely to be used in situations where there is one correct answer, rather than where you are expressing an opinion. Think of it as an explanation with an illustration.

**Prepare** – Take the relevant data or information appropriately from the pre-seen and unseen materials, process it and then provide it in a particular format (e.g., 'Prepare a report ...'). If it's numerical data, then you will have to calculate or (often) just rearrange the data. Importantly, you should 'tell your story' using the numbers in the context of the question requirement and the (CS Exam level specific) role you are simulating.

**The verbs below test your analytical skills, so you will be expected to analyse the detail of what you have learned and the information provided in the scenario.**

**Analyse** – This is asking for a series of detailed explanations, often opinions rather than facts, each with an illustration (if appropriate). Think about 'analyse the published accounts ...': Calculate some ratios, explain what you think they mean, relate them to each other, relate them to the context of the question. Alternatively, what about 'analyse the variances ...'? follow the same set of steps.

# Do exactly what examiner asks you to do!

**Compare and contrast** – Fairly obvious – an explanation of the similarities and differences between two (or more) things.

**Construct** – Like ‘prepare’, but possibly with an explanation as to why you put things where you did.

**Discuss** – To discuss something, there needs to be an ‘argument’. In other words, you need two or more differing or opposing viewpoints. Also, any discussion should, if possible, end in a conclusion.

Examiners often ask you to ‘discuss the advantages of’. (e.g., ‘discuss the advantages of project management tools’). Does that mean you have to give the disadvantages as well? Certainly Not. Simply go through the advantages, saying whether they apply in this situation, or whether they are each a major advantage or a relatively minor or mere theoretical advantage.

You may be required to ‘discuss’ one viewpoint?

In that case, think about; advantages, disadvantages, conclusion. Or; reasons why, reasons why not, conclusion.

**Interpret** – Literally, translating from one form of words to another, where the latter is more understandable than the former. ‘Interpret’ is often the second stage of ‘analyse’. Think about variances again. To produce a ‘variance analysis’, first, you calculate the variances, then you interpret them.

**Prioritise** – Normally you will be asked to prioritise a series of issues/problems or options/actions. What you need to do is to use one or more appropriate ranking criteria (such as ‘financial impact’ or ‘urgency’) to put the items into what, to you, seems a logical sequence for attention. You need to explain, unless it’s obvious from the question, or earlier parts of your answer, what criteria you have used, and why. You’ll also have to explain, for each item, why you put it where you did in the list of ‘priorities’.

**Produce** – This is creative stuff. You start with very little (or nothing) and end up with the finished article. (e.g., ‘produce a report ...’)

**Evaluation is the highest intellectual skill level tested in CIMA CS Examinations. Here, you are expected to demonstrate how you use your learning and information from the scenario to appraise, make decisions or recommendations.**

**Advise** – Tell them what *you* think they could, or should, do. Construct a good, comprehensive, argument that leads to one or more options for the owners or managers (normally) to consider pursuing.

**Evaluate** – Think of *evaluate* as a higher-level *discussion*. It might mean calculations, but it might not. You can say how valuable something is in qualitative terms, as well as monetary.

**Assess** – This verb is similar to evaluate, so what you should do here is estimate the nature, ability or quality of something. (e.g., ‘assess the impact of ... on our share price ...’)

**Recommend** – Just that. Tell them what to do (or, not to do). It will be helpful to think as if you were asked to do a series of things; identify, explain, discuss or evaluate and then recommend. This means, first, identify and explain any reasonable options, evaluate each, conclude and recommend. Make sure you provide the justification or reasoning for your recommendations because the decision-makers generally need to know why a particular course of action has been proposed.

