UPSC Mains Directive Words

What every task word in a GS Mains question asks you to do

60 directives · 1,222 GS questions read · 2013 to 2026

THE GUIDE

Meaning · What the examiner expects · What it does not mean

01 **DISCUSS**

02 **EXPLAIN**

03 **EXAMINE**

04 **ANALYSE**

05 **COMMENT**

CRITICALLY EXAMINE	ELABORATE	DISTINGUISH
CRITICALLY EVALUATE	DO YOU AGREE	ILLUSTRATE
JUSTIFY	HOW FAR	IDENTIFY
SUGGEST	TO WHAT EXTENT	DESCRIBE
ELUCIDATE	ASSESS	EVALUATE

Guranchal Ma'am, Founder, UPSC Gurus

Read the task before the topic

A directive word tells you what to do with what you know. Discuss, Examine and Justify set different tasks. Sometimes the question itself carries the instruction through What, How or Why. These instructions are also called task words or keywords.

The topic supplies the content, but the directive shapes the answer: explain a process, test a claim, take a position or propose a solution. This handout examines how UPSC has used these instructions across GS Papers I to IV from 2013 to 2026, with real questions that show what each one demands.

Explain and unfold

Make an idea clear through its meaning, context, working, dimensions or examples, giving the reader a fuller understanding.

14 words

Weigh and judge

Break claims into parts, examine evidence and limitations, and offer a reasoned judgement when the directive calls for one.

13 words

Reason, defend and reflect

Judge the reach of a claim, defend a position with reasons and evidence, explain causes where required, or reflect on deeper values and responsibilities.

11 words

Pinpoint, compare and propose

Identify exactly what is asked, draw clear distinctions, trace developments or offer specific proposals where required.

16 words

When the question is the directive

Read the question form or shared quotation instruction as the task, even when no separate command word appears.

6 words

How each page works

THE GUIDE

Each directive gets four parts: what it means, what the examiner expects, what it does not mean, and the word it is most often confused with. Beside them is a box showing how often UPSC has used the word, in which paper and in which years. To see every directive applied to real questions from GS Papers I to IV, use the companion edition, UPSC Mains Directive Words: With PYQs.

How UPSC's directive words have changed

The two four-year periods, 2013 to 2016 and 2023 to 2026, contain 356 and 358 questions and parts respectively. Comparing their directive counts reveals changes in the relative frequency of particular instructions. These categories overlap because a single question can carry more than one instruction. The comparisons describe these two periods, not an uninterrupted year-by-year trend.

Questions using each directive, year by year (2013 to 2026)

	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	Total
What	33	29	18	16	20	17	20	20	22	34	19	39	29	15	331
Discuss	38	24	35	28	13	12	16	22	14	24	18	16	15	31	306
How	11	12	12	8	12	16	11	6	13	11	11	12	16	11	162
Explain	1	10	5	7	6	14	11	5	12	9	10	9	10	12	121
Examine	2	2	2	4	8	5	6	3	6	4	2	7	11	11	73
Is, Are, Can, Does	4	10	6	8	3	2	3	4	8	2	3	2	3	8	66
Suggest	1	4	5	5	7	1	4	4	3	6	3	8	2	4	57
Comment	4	1	1	3	1	4	3	4	2	4	7	5	2	4	45
Analyse	7	3	3	2	7		2	2	5	2	2	1	2	7	45
Why	2	7	3	4	1	7			1	3	5	3	3	1	40
Critically examine	3	3	4	1	2	1	1	3	3	5		1	2	2	31
Give reasons	2	1	2	3	6		2	2	2	2	7		1		30
Justify	3	1		2	3	1	2	4	2	3		1	3	4	29
Quotations (GS IV)	3		2		1	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3		29
Do you agree	1	2	4	1	3	3	4	3	1	2	2		1		27
Describe		1	1	2	3	1		1	4	5	2	3	2	2	27
Evaluate	4	4	2	1	1			2	3	1	3	2		1	24
Elaborate	2				1	1	5	3	3	1		2	4		22
Do you think			2	1	1	2	1	4	1	3	2	1	3	1	22
Elucidate	3		2	2	1	1	2	1		1		2	3	2	20
How far	2	1	2		3	3	1	1		1	1	2	1	1	19
Critically evaluate	1	2	6						2	4			3	1	19
Which, Who		1				3		2	1	2	1	1	4	2	17
Bring out	5	3		1		1	1		1		1	1		1	15
Identify	1		1	2		1	3	1	3		1	1		1	15
Assess	1	2				3	2		1		2		1		12
To what extent		1	2	2					3	1	1	1		1	12
Mention					1	1			2	2		1	3	2	12
Distinguish		1	1		1	1		1	1		1	2	1	1	11
Highlight			1	2	1		1	3			1			2	11

Read across a row to see a word rise or fall. A question with two task words counts under both. Words used fewer than 10 times are on their own pages.

Discuss has become less frequent

Discuss fell from 125 uses in 2013 to 2016 to 80 in 2023 to 2026. It remains common, but preparation should not treat every question as an invitation to write a general discussion.

What remains a constant

What moved only slightly, from 96 to 102. Questions framed directly around what is being asked deserve the same careful reading as those carrying an explicit command word.

Explain has gained ground

Explain rose from 23 to 41. Practise showing how something works, why it happens or how its parts connect, rather than merely listing relevant facts.

Examine has grown sharply

Examine increased from 10 to 31. Build the habit of probing a claim through its supporting evidence, different dimensions and limitations before arriving at a considered view.

Critical examination has declined

Critically examine fell from 11 to 5. The skill remains important, but read the exact instruction and recognise when explicit critical scrutiny is required.

Comment has doubled

Comment rose from 9 to 18. Practise expressing a clear, evidence-based observation, developing its significance and arriving at a concise, reasoned judgement.

Four GS papers, four directive patterns

Directive words are distributed differently across the four GS papers. Some appear in every paper while others have appeared in only some papers. These patterns help identify the kinds of answer-writing demands that recur in each paper, without treating any directive as permanently restricted to a subject or paper.

GS I: its 12 most used task words (295 questions and parts)

	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	Total
Discuss	11	4	8	5	2	4	5	4	3	5	4	2	6	2	65
How	2	5	4	1	4	3	4	2	3	4	4	5	7	1	49
What	3	2	1	1	4	2	4		3	1	3	8	2	1	35
Explain		3	2	4	1	5	2		3	2	2	1	3	2	30
Why	2	5	2	1	1	3			1	2	5	3			25
Comment	2	1	1	1		1		2	1		1	2	1	3	16
Is, Are, Can, Does				2		1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	14
Examine		1		2	1		1	1	2	1			1	3	13
Elaborate	2				1		2	3	1			1			10
Analyse	5									1				3	9
Elucidate			1	1		1	1			1			2	2	9
Give reasons		1			1		1			2	1		1		7

GS II: its 12 most used task words (285 questions and parts)

	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	Total
Discuss	12	10	11	9	5	5	5	5	3	9	4	4	6	5	93
What	3	4	2	6	2	5	3	2	2	2	1	3	2	3	40
Is, Are, Can, Does	3	5	3	3	2	1			5				1	6	29
Explain				2	2	3	5		6		3	4	2	1	28
Examine	1	1	1	1	3	3	2		2			1	5	5	25
Comment	2			1	1	1	2	2	1	4	2	2	1	1	20
Analyse	1	2	1		1			1	2	1	1	1	1	3	15
Critically examine	1	1	2	1	2			2	1	1			1	1	13
Suggest			1		1	1	1	1	1		1	3	1	2	13
How far	1	1	1		2	2		1			1		1	1	11
How	1	2	1		1	2			1	2			1		11
Do you think			2	1	1	1	1	3		1					10

GS III: its 12 most used task words (288 questions and parts)

	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	Total
What	14	10	8	4	9	6	3	10	5	10	6	13	10	5	113
Discuss	14	9	11	8	3	2	3	5	5	6	5	6	2	12	91
How	4	2	3	3	5	9	4	4	8	4	5	2	7	4	64
Explain	1	2			1	3	3	4	3	6	3	3	4	8	41
Examine	1		1	1	2	1	2			2	2	2	2	3	19
Suggest		1		3	3			2	1	2	2	2		2	18
Describe				2	2	1		1	3	1		3		2	15
Analyse	1			1	4		2	1	3		1			1	14
Is, Are, Can, Does	1	3	1	2	1					1	1	1			11
Give reasons	1		1	2			1		2		3				10
Elaborate						1	2		1	1		1	3		9
Why				2		1				1			3	1	8

GS IV: its 12 most used task words (354 questions and parts)

	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	Total
What	13	13	7	5	5	4	10	8	12	21	9	15	15	6	143
Discuss	1	1	5	6	3	1	3	8	3	4	5	4	1	12	57
How	4	3	4	4	2	2	3		1	1	2	5	1	6	38
Quotations (GS IV)	3		2		1	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3		29
Suggest	1	3	4	1	3		3		1	4		3	1		24
Explain		5	3	1	2	3	1	1		1	2	1	1	1	22
Justify	2	1			2	1	2	1	2			1	1	3	16
Examine					2	1	1	2	2	1		4	3		16
Which, Who		1				3		1	1	2		1	4	2	15
Is, Are, Can, Does		2	2	1				2	2		1		1	1	12
Evaluate	4	2	2								3				11
Critically examine						1	1		2	4		1	1		10

GS I: Explain the larger picture

Discuss leads with 65 uses, followed by How at 49 and What at 35. Prepare to connect events, processes and social or geographical patterns into coherent explanations. Practise moving beyond description to causes, relationships and significance, while keeping every discussion anchored to the question.

GS II: Build a reasoned argument

Discuss leads with 93 uses, followed by What at 40, Is, Are, Can, Does questions at 29, Explain at 28 and Examine at 25. Prepare to analyse institutions, policies and governance issues through their purposes, functioning, achievements and limitations. Build arguments from relevant evidence, give competing considerations their appropriate weight and reach a judgement where the question requires one. Discuss does not automatically demand equal treatment of opposing views or a separate verdict.

GS III: Connect concepts with mechanisms

What leads with 113 uses, followed by Discuss at 91 and How at 64. Practise defining the issue precisely, explaining how systems or processes operate, and connecting causes with consequences. Build the ability to move from technical understanding to workable responses when the question demands them.

GS IV: Make reasoning visible

What leads with 143 uses, followed by Discuss at 57 and How at 38. Quotation-based shared instructions appear 29 times, Suggest 24 times and Justify 16 times. Prepare to identify ethical concepts accurately, explain their practical implications, interpret quotations thoughtfully and develop feasible responses to administrative dilemmas. Where a question requires a defended position, make the ethical principles and reasoning behind it explicit.

FAMILY 1 OF 5

Explain and unfold

Make an idea clear through its meaning, context, working, dimensions or examples, giving the reader a fuller understanding.

Discuss

306 questions, 2013 to 2026

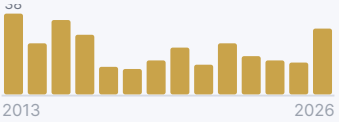
WHAT IT MEANS

To discuss is to **explore a subject through its relevant dimensions** and explain how those dimensions shape our understanding of it. The task is not simply to present different views, but to **develop a connected line of reasoning** using causes, consequences, relationships or competing considerations, as the question requires. A good discussion leaves the reader with a **considered understanding of the central issue**, not just a collection of information.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 65 | GS II 93 | GS III 91 | GS IV 57

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Discuss in 306 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **93 in GS II, 91 in GS III, 65 in GS I and 57 in GS IV**, making it prominent across all four papers.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the central issue** and select the dimensions needed to understand it.
- ✓ **Develop each major point** by explaining its causes, implications or connection to the issue.
- ✓ **Use relevant evidence or examples** to substantiate the discussion rather than merely naming facts.
- ✓ **Draw the strands together** into a reasoned understanding, giving greater weight to what matters most.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing **advantages and disadvantages** for every subject, especially when the question asks about causes, developments or ethical responsibilities.
- × It does not mean **listing every related fact** without explaining its relevance to the central issue.
- × It does not require **artificial balance** where evidence clearly supports one position.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Explain concentrates on making a reason, mechanism or relationship understandable. **Discuss** develops a fuller understanding by examining the relevant dimensions of the issue and how they fit together.

Examine calls for a close inspection of a claim, arrangement or problem to establish what it reveals. **Discuss** gives greater scope to developing the connected considerations that define the issue, although both can require scrutiny and a reasoned conclusion.

Critically discuss

5 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

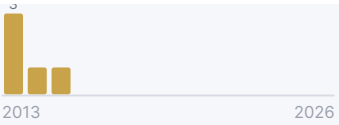
To critically discuss is to **explore an issue while testing its claims, assumptions and practical results**, rather than accepting the stated position at face value. It requires you to understand what an idea, policy or institution seeks to achieve, then **scrutinise its strengths, limitations and competing explanations** using reasoning or evidence.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 1 | GS III 3 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

The finished answer should produce a **qualified and defensible understanding** of how far the proposition holds, and why.



UPSC used **Critically discuss in 5 questions** from 2013 to 2026, all appearing in **2013 to 2015**, with 3 in GS III, 1 in GS I, 1 in GS II and none in GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Establish the proposition or objectives** before judging their merits or results.
- ✓ **Test the important claims** against evidence, practical experience or logical objections.
- ✓ **Identify strengths, weaknesses and qualifications** that genuinely affect the proposition.
- ✓ **Reach a reasoned conclusion** that reflects the relative weight of the arguments.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **finding faults alone** or assuming that criticism is the entire task.
- × It does not mean producing **two disconnected lists of pros and cons** without assessing their importance.
- × It does not mean **rejecting the proposition automatically** because the word critically appears.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Discuss develops understanding through the relevant dimensions of an issue. **Critically discuss** additionally requires sustained scrutiny of the claims, assumptions and limitations within those dimensions.

Critically evaluate places stronger emphasis on an overall judgement of merit, effectiveness or validity against suitable criteria. **Critically discuss** emphasises searching examination of the issue and its competing considerations, although a reasoned conclusion is still important.

Explain

121 questions, 2013 to 2026

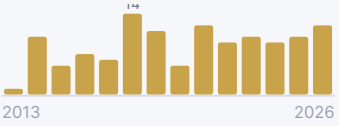
WHAT IT MEANS

To explain is to **make something understandable by revealing how or why it works**. You must move from identifying a concept, cause or condition to showing the **reasoning, mechanism or connection** that produces a particular result. A successful explanation allows the reader to **follow the logic from starting conditions to outcome**, rather than merely accepting a statement as true.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **30**	GS II **28**
GS III **41**	GS IV **22**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Explain in 121 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with the highest count in **GS III at 41 questions**, followed by 30 in GS I, 28 in GS II and 22 in GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify what needs explaining**, whether a concept, process, cause or relationship.
- ✓ **Show the mechanism or reasoning** linking the relevant factors to the result.
- ✓ **Make the sequence or causal connection clear** wherever the subject involves stages or interacting influences.
- ✓ **Use a focused example or application** when it helps demonstrate the explanation.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **repeating the question in different words** or offering only a definition.
- × It does not mean **naming causes or features** without showing how they produce the stated effect.
- × It does not require an **extended merits-versus-demerits debate** unless another part of the question asks for judgement.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Describe establishes what something is like, including its characteristics or forms. **Explain** establishes how it works or why a particular feature, event or outcome arises.

Explain makes a concept, cause or mechanism understandable through reasoning. **Elucidate** is especially concerned with revealing the meaning or underlying connection in a proposition that may otherwise remain unclear.

Elaborate

22 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To elaborate is to **take a briefly stated idea and develop its full substance** by unfolding the dimensions, details and implications that the original statement leaves compressed. The task is to show **what lies within the proposition and why its different parts matter**, using relevant connections and illustrations. A strong answer turns a short assertion into a **well-developed account with depth and breadth**, without losing sight of its central claim.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 10 | GS II 2 | GS III 9 | GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Elaborate in 22 questions** from 2013 to 2026, concentrated in **GS I with 10 and GS III with 9**, alongside 2 in GS II and 1 in GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the central proposition** and the specific aspects that need development.
- ✓ **Unfold its major dimensions** with substantive detail rather than restating the assertion.
- ✓ **Connect each dimension to the main idea** through reasons, implications or illustrative evidence.
- ✓ **Give the proposition sufficient depth** while keeping the expansion relevant and proportionate.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **making the answer longer** by repeating the same point in different forms.
- × It does not mean **adding unrelated background** simply because more detail is requested.
- × It does not mean **accepting an absolute claim without qualification** where the supporting facts require nuance.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Explain concentrates on making the mechanism or reasoning understandable. **Elaborate** develops the fuller content of an idea, including its dimensions, significance and implications, even when a single causal mechanism is not central.

Elucidate brings clarity to the underlying meaning or logic of a proposition. **Elaborate** gives that proposition greater breadth and substance by developing the relevant details and dimensions.

Elucidate

20 questions, 2013 to 2026

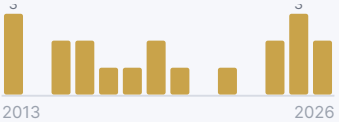
WHAT IT MEANS

To elucidate is to **bring clarity to the underlying meaning or logic of a proposition**, especially when its important connections are not immediately obvious. You must identify what the statement is really saying, then **unfold the reasoning or relationships that make it intelligible** through carefully chosen facts and examples. The finished answer should make a seemingly complex, compressed or contradictory idea **clear and convincing, with necessary qualifications**.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 9 | GS II 7 | GS III 3 | GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Elucidate in 20 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **9 in GS I and 7 in GS II**,

compared with 3 in GS III and 1 in GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the central relationship or proposition** that needs to be made clearer.
- ✓ **Uncover the underlying logic** connecting its main elements.
- ✓ **Use carefully chosen evidence or examples** to make the relationship understandable.
- ✓ **Resolve apparent tension or ambiguity** without concealing important qualifications.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **paraphrasing the statement** without revealing the reasoning behind it.
- × It does not mean **providing maximum detail on every related topic** when only the central connection needs clarification.
- × It does not require **uncritical endorsement of the proposition** if its validity depends on conditions or qualifications.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Elaborate expands an idea by developing its details and dimensions. **Elucidate** concentrates on making its essential meaning and the relationships within it especially clear.

Clarify resolves ambiguity about what a claim means or establishes. **Elucidate** goes further into the underlying reasoning that connects the elements of the claim and explains why the relationship matters.

Describe

27 questions, 2013 to 2026

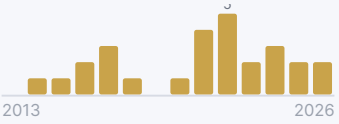
WHAT IT MEANS

To describe is to **present an accurate and organised picture of a subject** by setting out its defining characteristics, forms, features or identifiable aspects. Your answer must help the reader recognise **what the subject consists of and what distinguishes its important parts**, using precise categories and relevant details. A successful description provides **sufficient factual clarity and completeness** without turning an essentially descriptive task into an unnecessary argument.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 3 | GS II 3 | GS III 15 | GS IV 6

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Describe in 27 questions** from 2013 to 2026, most often in **GS III with 15 questions**, followed by 6 in GS IV and 3 each in GS I and GS II.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the subject accurately** and establish its relevant characteristics.
- ✓ **Organise the important features or types** into clear categories where appropriate.
- ✓ **Use precise distinguishing details** to show how the parts differ or what each contributes.
- ✓ **Keep the coverage relevant and proportionate** to the particular aspects requested.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **offering only a definition** when the question asks for characteristics, forms or multiple aspects.
- × It does not mean **explaining every underlying cause** when the immediate task is to establish features or details.
- × It does not mean **evaluating merits and shortcomings automatically** unless another instruction requires it.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Describe establishes what something is, what features it has and what forms it takes. **Explain** reveals how or why those features or outcomes arise.

Give an account presents a connected account of developments, arrangements or actions. **Describe** concentrates on accurately representing the relevant features, forms or characteristics of the subject.

Illustrate

8 questions, 2013 to 2026

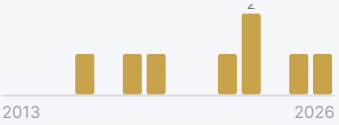
WHAT IT MEANS

To illustrate is to **make an argument, concept or relationship clear through well-chosen examples** that show how it operates in reality. The examples must perform an intellectual task: they should **demonstrate a specific claim, distinction or implication**, not merely decorate the answer. A strong illustration helps the reader see **why the argument holds, how it appears in practice and where its limits may lie**.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **2** | GS II **1** | GS III **0** | GS IV **5**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Illustrate in 8 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **5 in GS IV, 2 in GS I, 1 in GS II and none in GS III**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Establish the point** that each illustration is intended to demonstrate.
- ✓ **Choose specific, relevant examples** rather than broad or unrelated references.
- ✓ **Explain the link between example and argument** so the illustration actually proves or clarifies something.
- ✓ **Use contrasting or qualifying examples** where they are needed to support a fair conclusion.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **adding names, incidents or cases without interpretation**.
- × It does not mean **substituting examples for the central answer** or assuming that a collection of cases explains itself.
- × It does not mean **drawing universal conclusions from isolated examples** without recognising their limitations.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Explain establishes the reasoning or mechanism that makes a point understandable. **Illustrate** makes the point concrete by showing, through examples, how that reasoning or relationship appears in practice.

Substantiate asks for evidence sufficient to support a claim. **Illustrate** places particular emphasis on examples that make a claim visible and understandable, although those examples should still support the argument.

Clarify

2 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To clarify is to **remove uncertainty about what a statement means or why it is justified**. The task is to identify the point that might otherwise remain vague and use **precise facts, distinctions and relationships** to make it understandable. A successful answer leaves the reader with **a definite and properly qualified understanding** of the assertion, without unnecessary expansion into surrounding topics.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **1** | GS II **0** | GS III **1** | GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Clarify in 2 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **1 in GS I in 2017 and 1 in GS III in 2019**, and none in GS II or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the precise claim or uncertainty** that needs clarification.
- ✓ **Define or distinguish the essential elements** that make the claim meaningful.
- ✓ **Supply the facts and connections** that explain why the stated condition exists.
- ✓ **Resolve the ambiguity directly**, with qualifications where necessary.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **repeating an assertion more confidently** without supporting it.

- × It does not mean **providing broad historical or policy background** without resolving the specific issue.
- × It does not require a **full merits-versus-demerits assessment** when the main need is conceptual or factual clarity.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Elucidate unfolds the underlying meaning or relationships within an idea. **Clarify** focuses more directly on removing a particular ambiguity and establishing exactly what the proposition signifies.

Explain often follows a process or causal mechanism to show how or why something happens. **Clarify** may use such reasoning, but its central purpose is to resolve uncertainty about a specific statement or condition.

Write a note

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

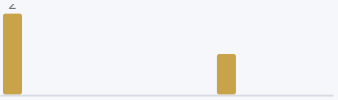
WHAT IT MEANS

To write a note is to produce a **compact, self-contained account of a specified subject** that gives the reader its essential meaning, relevant particulars and significance. The intellectual task is one of **selective completeness**: you must decide which information is necessary for understanding the subject without expanding into a full essay. The final note should be **coherent, economical and responsive to any qualifier**, such as short or critical, that changes the required treatment.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 0 | GS III 1 | GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **the Write a note, Write a critical note and Write short notes formulations in 3 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **2 in 2013 and 1 in 2022**, distributed equally across GS I, GS III and GS IV, and none in GS II.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Introduce the subject briefly** so the note makes sense on its own.
- ✓ **Select the most relevant facts, features or implications** within the available space.
- ✓ **Organise the content into a coherent account** rather than disconnected fragments.
- ✓ **Follow qualifiers and word limits precisely**, including any requirement for critical appraisal.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **writing everything known about the topic** regardless of relevance or space.
- × It does not mean **presenting an unconnected collection of facts** without a central focus.
- × It does not mean **ignoring words such as critical or short**, which materially alter what the note must achieve.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Describe specifies the intellectual task of presenting relevant features or characteristics. **Write a note** additionally calls for a compact, self-contained form of response whose content and depth depend on the stated subject and qualifiers.

Discuss develops the relevant dimensions and connections of an issue through reasoning. **Write a note** prioritises an economical account, although a critical note may also require a brief, reasoned appraisal.

Introduce

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

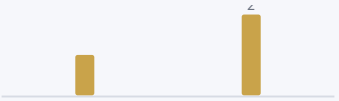
To introduce is to **establish the essential identity, purpose and basic elements of a subject** so that the reader knows what is being discussed. It requires a **clear first understanding** of a concept,

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 0 | GS III 2 | GS IV 0

programme or system, including the background or features necessary to orient the reader. A successful introduction **prepares the ground for further analysis or application** without attempting to perform every subsequent task at once.

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Introduce in 3 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **1 in GS I in 2016 and 2 in GS III in 2023**, and none in GS II or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the subject accurately** and explain what it fundamentally refers to.
- ✓ **State its core purpose or defining idea** in accessible terms.
- ✓ **Present the essential features or components** needed for initial understanding.
- ✓ **Provide only the necessary background**, leaving applications or evaluation to the relevant later tasks.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **writing a decorative opening paragraph** without identifying the substance of the subject.
- × It does not mean **covering every detail or technical complexity** before the reader understands the basic idea.
- × It does not mean **treating later application or evaluation tasks as optional** simply because the question first asks for an introduction.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Introduce establishes what a subject is, why it exists and what its basic elements are. **Explain** goes further into the reasoning or mechanism that shows how or why something works.

Describe presents the relevant characteristics or forms of a subject, often in greater detail. **Introduce** is more selective and foundational, giving the reader enough information to understand the subject before proceeding.

Give an account

2 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To give an account is to **present a connected factual explanation of what happened, what exists or what was undertaken** in relation to a subject. The answer must bring together the principal developments, arrangements or actions in an **order that makes the whole subject understandable**, using chronology where appropriate and functional organisation where more useful. A good account provides **a coherent picture supported by relevant particulars**, without adding evaluation unless the question separately requires it.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **1**	GS II **0**
GS III **1**	GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **the Give an account and Present an account formulations in 2 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **1 in GS I in 2016 and 1 in GS III in 2020**, and none in GS II or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Establish the relevant background or setting** needed to understand the subject.
- ✓ **Select the principal developments, provisions or actions** that form the account.
- ✓ **Organise them in a meaningful sequence**, chronological or thematic as appropriate.
- ✓ **Show how the main elements connect** to form a coherent factual picture.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **dumping facts in no particular order** or offering an unstructured list.
- × It does not mean **forcing a chronological narrative** onto a subject better explained through functions or arrangements.
- × It does not require **judging success or failure automatically** unless another directive calls for assessment.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Describe sets out the defining features or characteristics of a subject. **Give an account** connects facts, developments, arrangements or actions into a coherent account of the whole.

Trace concentrates on the progression of a subject through time, showing its stages and changes. **Give an account** may use chronology but can equally organise information around provisions, functions or actions.

Throw light

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To throw light on a subject is to **make its important meaning, relevance or implications clearer** by focusing on the aspects that best illuminate it. The task is not to cover everything, but to **select and explain what helps the reader understand the subject more deeply**, particularly its significance, present position or practical usefulness. A strong answer makes **a previously underexplained aspect of the issue visible and meaningful** through relevant context and evidence.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 1 | GS III 1 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Throw light in 3 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **1 each in GS I, GS II and GS III**, appearing in 2016, 2018 and 2026, and none in GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify the particular aspect** whose meaning, relevance or status needs illumination.
- ✓ **Select the most revealing facts or considerations** rather than attempting exhaustive coverage.
- ✓ **Explain why those details matter** to the interpretation of the subject.
- ✓ **Connect the selected evidence to a clear understanding** of the significance or implication requested.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **mentioning important points without explaining their relevance**.
- × It does not mean **writing an exhaustive account of the entire topic** when the question asks for one specific aspect.
- × It does not mean **repeating an earlier task** when Throw light follows another directive and identifies a distinct requirement.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Highlight singles out the most salient features or distinctions. **Throw light** uses selected information to make the meaning, relevance, status or implications of a subject clearer.

Elucidate concentrates on revealing the underlying logic or relationship within a proposition. **Throw light** more broadly illuminates an aspect of a subject, often its significance, implementation or practical usefulness.

Bring out

15 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

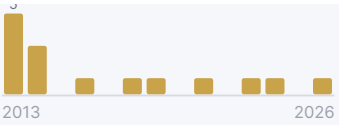
To bring out is to **make important features, effects or relationships clearly visible**, especially where their significance is not immediately apparent from a simple description. You must identify the relevant elements and **draw out what they reveal about the subject**, whether a consequence, contrast, contribution or state of affairs. A strong

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 6 | GS II 1 | GS III 4 | GS IV 4

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

answer makes the **specific significance of those elements unmistakable**, showing the reader what follows from them and why it matters.



UPSC used **Bring out in 15 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **6 in GS I, 4 in GS III, 4 in GS IV and 1 in GS II**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Identify exactly what must be brought out**, such as effects, importance, contrasts or preparedness.
- ✓ **Select the relevant facts or developments** that reveal those features.
- ✓ **Draw explicit connections or implications** instead of leaving the reader to infer their importance.
- ✓ **Establish the significance of each major point** in relation to the question's central concern.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **naming relevant points and leaving their significance unexplained**.
- × It does not mean **presenting broad background material** without drawing out the specific effects or relationships requested.
- × It does not require **a full critical evaluation in every question** unless another directive or qualifier asks for it.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Highlight concentrates attention on the most prominent features or distinctions. **Bring out** more explicitly develops the significance, consequences or relationships that those features reveal.

Explain focuses on how or why something happens. **Bring out** focuses on making the relevant effects, qualities, connections or implications apparent, using causal explanation wherever it helps.

Highlight

11 questions, 2013 to 2026

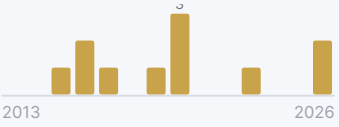
WHAT IT MEANS

To highlight is to **direct attention to the most significant features, distinctions or contributions** of a subject. The task requires judgement in selection: you must recognise **which points deserve prominence** and present them clearly enough for their importance to be understood. A successful answer gives the reader **a sharply focused picture of what matters most**, rather than an exhaustive treatment of every connected detail.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 4 | GS II 5 | GS III 2 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used **Highlight in 11 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **5 in GS II, 4 in GS I, 2 in GS III and none in GS IV**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Select the most salient points** that directly answer the question.
- ✓ **Make distinguishing features or contrasts visible** through clear organisation.
- ✓ **Explain briefly why each selected point matters** instead of merely naming it.
- ✓ **Prioritise significance over exhaustive coverage**, keeping less relevant details out.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **making a long list of every feature** without distinguishing the most important ones.
- × It does not mean **using headings or emphasis alone** without substantive explanation.
- × It does not mean **ignoring another directive** when the question separately asks for discussion, examination or explanation.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Bring out makes the relevant consequences, connections or significance explicit. **Highlight** places stronger emphasis on selecting and presenting the most distinctive or important points, without necessarily developing every underlying relationship.

Describe seeks a clear and sufficiently complete picture of the requested features or forms. **Highlight** is more selective, directing attention to the features or contrasts that are particularly significant.

FAMILY 2 OF 5

Weigh and judge

Break claims into parts, examine evidence and limitations, and offer a reasoned judgement when the directive calls for one.

Examine

73 questions, 2013 to 2026

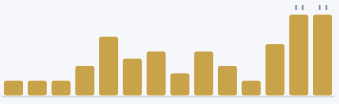
WHAT IT MEANS

To examine is to put a specific claim, issue or process under **close scrutiny**, asking what the evidence reveals about how it works, why it matters and whether its stated implications hold. The finished answer should move from **careful investigation** to a **supported finding**, making clear what closer inspection establishes rather than simply describing the subject.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **13** | GS II **25** | GS III **19** | GS IV **16**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Examine in 73 questions: 13 in GS I, 25 in GS II, 19 in GS III and 16 in GS IV, with 11 questions each in 2025 and 2026.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **precise claim or issue** requiring examination, including any distinct parts of the question.
- ✓ Investigate the relevant **evidence, mechanisms and relationships** to establish what is actually happening and why.
- ✓ Consider **qualifications, exceptions or limitations** that affect the strength or reach of the explanation.
- ✓ Present a **clear finding** that follows from the examination and directly addresses the question.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing a **general account** of everything known about the topic.
- × It does not mean automatically **finding faults** or rejecting the proposition.
- × It does not mean presenting evidence without explaining **what that evidence establishes**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Analyse primarily breaks a subject into components to explain how their relationships produce an outcome. **Examine** investigates a particular issue or claim more closely to establish what the evidence supports, including its implications and limits.

Both require scrutiny, but **Critically examine** makes the deliberate testing of **assumptions, counterarguments and weaknesses** more prominent. Examine still requires care and qualification, but does not necessarily demand the same intensity of adversarial testing.

Critically examine

31 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To critically examine is to investigate a proposition while **actively testing its foundations**: the evidence supporting it, the assumptions

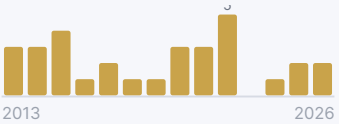
HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **6** | GS II **13**

it depends on, the objections it faces and the conditions under which it may not hold. The finished answer should give a **fair but searching judgement**, showing **how far the claim survives scrutiny** rather than treating either agreement or disagreement as the starting point.

GS III **2** | GS IV **10**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Critically examine in 31 questions: 6 in GS I, 13 in GS II, 2 in GS III and 10 in GS IV, with 5 questions in 2022.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **central proposition and its underlying assumptions**, separating distinct claims where necessary.
- ✓ Test the **supporting evidence and causal reasoning**, asking whether they adequately establish the proposition.
- ✓ Confront **counterevidence, alternative explanations and limitations** rather than presenting only one side.
- ✓ Reach a **qualified judgement** that specifies what is convincing, what remains doubtful and why.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **criticising everything** or treating the proposition as necessarily false.
- × It does not mean mechanically listing **advantages and disadvantages** without testing the central argument.
- × It does not mean allowing a balanced presentation to replace a **defensible conclusion**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Examine investigates an issue closely to establish what the evidence reveals. **Critically examine** places stronger emphasis on challenging assumptions, testing contrary evidence and exposing weaknesses before reaching a finding.

Critically analyse places particular weight on breaking down the relationships and mechanisms behind a proposition before testing them. **Critically examine** more directly investigates the strength of the claim, its evidence and its possible objections.

Analyse

45 questions, 2013 to 2026

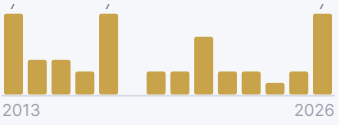
WHAT IT MEANS

To analyse is to **break a complex subject into its important parts** and explain how those parts interact, influence one another or combine to produce a particular outcome. The finished answer should reveal the **underlying causes, mechanisms and relationships**, enabling the reader to understand **why something happens or how it works**, rather than merely knowing its characteristics.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **9** | GS II **15** | GS III **14** | GS IV **7**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Analyse in 45 questions: 9 in GS I, 15 in GS II, 14 in GS III and 7 in GS IV, with 7 questions each in 2013, 2017 and 2026.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **principal components or factors** relevant to the outcome or issue in the question.
- ✓ Explain the **causal connections and mechanisms** through which those factors operate.
- ✓ Show **interactions, dependencies or trade-offs** where individual factors cannot adequately explain the outcome alone.
- ✓ Bring the analysis together into a **coherent explanation**, supported by relevant examples or evidence.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean simply **listing factors** without explaining how they influence the outcome.
- × It does not mean breaking a topic into headings while leaving the **relationships unexplained**.
- × It does not automatically require a **final verdict for or against** something unless the question also calls for one.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Analyse concentrates on explaining the internal structure, causes and relationships of a subject. **Examine** concentrates on investigating an issue or claim to establish what closer scrutiny reveals.

Discuss develops the relevant dimensions and arguments surrounding a question. **Analyse** demands a stronger explanation of how the components are connected and why those connections produce particular consequences.

Critically analyse

8 questions, 2013 to 2026

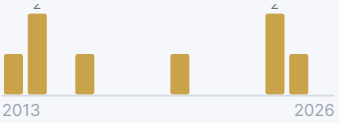
WHAT IT MEANS

To critically analyse is to **unpack a proposition into its component claims and relationships**, explain the mechanisms connecting them, and then investigate whether those connections are convincing. The finished answer must combine **causal or conceptual explanation** with **rigorous testing of assumptions, evidence and alternative explanations**, ending in a judgement that reflects both what the analysis establishes and what it cannot establish.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 2 | GS III 1 | GS IV 4

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Critically analyse in 8 questions: 1 in GS I, 2 in GS II, 1 in GS III and 4 in GS IV, with 2 questions each in 2014 and 2024.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Separate the proposition into **distinct claims, factors or relationships** that can be investigated.
- ✓ Explain **how the proposed mechanisms work**, showing the reasoning that connects causes, processes and outcomes.
- ✓ Test the explanation against **contrary evidence, competing causes and important exceptions**.
- ✓ Reach a **qualified conclusion** that reflects the strength and limitations of the relationships examined.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean presenting a **detailed breakdown** without evaluating whether the proposed connections are valid.
- × It does not mean **rejecting the proposition** simply because the instruction says critically.
- × It does not mean assuming that an observed **correlation proves causation** or that a plausible mechanism necessarily explains every case.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Analyse explains the components and relationships that produce an outcome. **Critically analyse** additionally requires testing the assumptions, validity and limitations of those relationships against competing evidence or explanations.

Critically examine tests the strength of a claim and its supporting evidence. **Critically analyse** gives greater emphasis to first explaining the proposition's internal mechanisms and relationships, then challenging their validity.

Evaluate

24 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

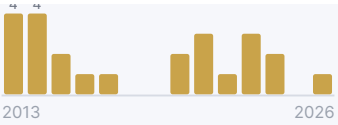
To evaluate is to **judge the value, effectiveness, success or impact** of something by asking what it was meant to achieve, what results it produced and how those results compare with relevant standards. The finished answer should make an **explicit evidence-based**

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 6 | GS II 7 | GS III 0 | GS IV 11

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

judgement, showing **how well, how far or for whom** the subject has delivered, rather than leaving the evidence to speak for itself.



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Evaluate in 24 questions: 6 in GS I, 7 in GS II, none in GS III and 11 in GS IV, with 4 questions each in 2013 and 2014.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Establish the **appropriate criteria for judgement**, drawn from the subject's purpose or the outcomes named in the question.
- ✓ Examine **actual achievements, effects or performance** against those criteria using relevant evidence.
- ✓ Weigh **limitations, costs, unintended effects and differences in outcomes** where they materially affect the evaluation.
- ✓ Give a **clear overall verdict** about effectiveness, impact or worth, supported by the preceding comparison.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean describing **objectives, features or activities** without judging their results.
- × It does not mean offering an **unweighted list of positives and negatives** while avoiding a conclusion.
- × It does not mean using **personal approval or disapproval** in place of identifiable criteria and evidence.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Assess primarily establishes the extent, importance or effectiveness of a role, condition or contribution. **Evaluate** more explicitly asks for a judgement of value, performance or success against suitable criteria.

Both require an evidence-based verdict, but **Critically evaluate** demands more deliberate testing of **weak assumptions, contrary evidence, risks and trade-offs** before deciding how favourable that verdict should be.

Critically evaluate

19 questions, 2013 to 2026

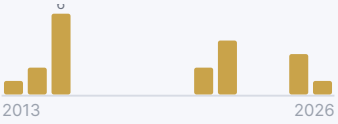
WHAT IT MEANS

To critically evaluate is to reach a **reasoned judgement of value, performance or desirability** while subjecting the available arguments and evidence to particularly demanding scrutiny. The finished answer should test **assumptions, counterevidence, adverse consequences and competing criteria**, then explain **whether, how far and under what conditions** the subject deserves a favourable judgement.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 3	GS II 6
GS III 3	GS IV 7

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Critically evaluate in 19 questions: 3 in GS I, 6 in GS II, 3 in GS III and 7 in GS IV, with 6 questions in 2015.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify **what is being judged and by which criteria**, including any competing objectives.
- ✓ Consider the **strongest supporting arguments and evidence** without overlooking genuine achievements or benefits.
- ✓ Test **limitations, contrary evidence, hidden costs and trade-offs**, including effects on different groups.
- ✓ Reach a **defensible, qualified verdict** that explains why some considerations carry greater weight than others.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean beginning with a **negative judgement** and searching only for reasons to support it.
- × It does not mean treating all **advantages and disadvantages as equally important** regardless of their consequences.
- × It does not mean avoiding a decision by saying that **both sides have merit** without determining what follows from that comparison.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Evaluate judges performance, value or success against relevant criteria. **Critically evaluate** applies more intensive scrutiny to the evidence, assumptions, counterarguments and risks before reaching that judgement.

Critically analyse prioritises explaining and testing the components and relationships underlying a proposition. **Critically evaluate** prioritises deciding the subject's **overall merit, value or desirability** after testing the relevant evidence and competing considerations.

Assess

12 questions, 2013 to 2026

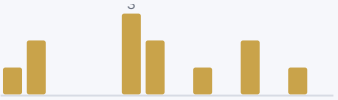
WHAT IT MEANS

To assess is to **determine the extent, significance or effectiveness** of a role, condition, problem or intervention by weighing the evidence that shows how much it matters. The finished answer should establish **the degree of contribution or influence**, recognise relevant limits, and offer a **measured judgement** about its actual importance rather than merely describing its existence.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 5 | GS II 6 | GS III 1 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Assess in 12 questions: 5 in GS I, 6 in GS II, 1 in GS III and none in GS IV, with 3 questions in 2018.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **specific role, contribution, condition or problem** whose significance must be established.
- ✓ Use **relevant evidence and examples** to determine its reach, influence, effectiveness or seriousness.
- ✓ Weigh **relative importance, limitations and variations**, including other factors that influence the outcome.
- ✓ Conclude with a **proportionate judgement** indicating how significant or effective the subject has been.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving a **descriptive account** of a subject without indicating its importance.
- × It does not mean crediting the subject with **every associated outcome** while ignoring other contributing factors.
- × It does not mean making an **absolute success-or-failure judgement** when the evidence supports a more limited conclusion.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Assess establishes how significant, extensive or effective something is. **Evaluate** more directly judges its performance, success or worth against defined criteria, often requiring a clearer verdict on overall value.

Appraise places particular emphasis on determining the **value of a contribution or role**. **Assess** is broader and can judge the extent or seriousness of a problem, the influence of a factor, or the effectiveness of an institution.

Critically assess

1 question, 2013 to 2026

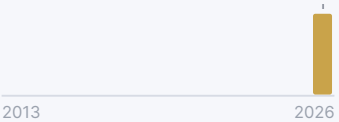
WHAT IT MEANS

To critically assess is to **determine how far a proposition or contribution is valid, significant or effective**, while rigorously testing the assumptions and evidence on which that judgement depends. The finished answer should establish **the actual degree of support for the claim**, weigh competing explanations and limitations, and state a **qualified finding** that neither accepts nor dismisses the proposition without justification.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 1 | GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



Used once, in **GS II in 2026**, through the equivalent instruction **'Make a critical assessment'**; it

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **precise claim and the standard** by which its validity or significance can be judged.

has not appeared in GS I, GS III or GS IV.

- ✓ Examine the **supporting evidence and practical mechanisms** that would make the proposition credible.
- ✓ Test **assumptions, contrary considerations and limitations** that may weaken or qualify the claim.
- ✓ State a **measured judgement about how far the proposition holds**, specifying the conditions or areas in which it is strongest.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **accepting the proposition as established** without testing its assumptions and supporting evidence.
- × It does not mean **rejecting every claimed benefit or contribution** merely because weaknesses, uncertainties or limitations are present.
- × It does not mean replacing a focused assessment with a **broad descriptive account** of the surrounding subject.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Assess weighs the extent, significance or effectiveness of something. **Critically assess** makes the testing of the proposition's assumptions, evidence, limitations and counterarguments an explicit part of reaching that judgement.

Critically evaluate primarily judges overall merit, success or desirability against competing criteria. **Critically assess** can focus more narrowly on **how far a particular claim is valid or a stated contribution is significant**, without necessarily delivering a broad verdict on policy desirability.

Appraise

1 question, 2013 to 2026

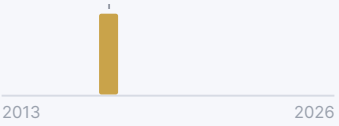
WHAT IT MEANS

To appraise is to make a **considered judgement of the value or importance of a contribution**, examining what it has added and why that contribution matters in its particular setting. The finished answer should distinguish **meaningful influence from mere participation**, weigh the reach and limitations of that influence, and establish its **overall significance** through relevant evidence.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **0** | GS II **1** | GS III **0** | GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Appraise in 1 question, in GS II in 2017, and in no questions in GS I, GS III or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **principal contributions** directly relevant to the subject and its stated context.
- ✓ Explain **why those contributions matter** to the affected economy, society, institution or process.
- ✓ Weigh their **reach, relative importance and limitations**, recognising differences across settings where relevant.
- ✓ Offer a **supported judgement of overall significance** rather than merely acknowledging the subject's presence.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean producing an **inventory of activities** without explaining their value.
- × It does not mean offering **unqualified praise** simply because the question refers to an important role.
- × It does not mean treating a **broad global contribution** as proof of equivalent importance in the specific region or context asked about.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Assess determines the extent, significance or effectiveness of a role, condition or contribution. **Appraise** focuses more specifically on judging the **value and importance of a contribution** within its context.

Evaluate can judge the success, performance or desirability of policies, outcomes and interventions against criteria. **Appraise** places the emphasis on understanding and judging **what a person, group or institution has**

contributed and how much that contribution matters.

Review

1 question, 2013 to 2026

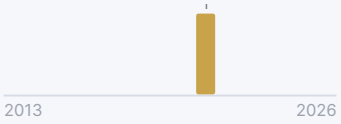
WHAT IT MEANS

To review is to **take stock of a subject's actual working, development and present position**, examining what has happened, what has been achieved and what remains unsatisfactory. The finished answer should provide an **organised assessment of the record**, using relevant evidence and illustrations to show **where the subject now stands**, rather than repeating its formal design or original purpose.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 1 | GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Review in 1 question, in GS II in 2021, and in no questions in GS I, GS III or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Establish the **relevant scope and period** of the subject whose record is to be reviewed.
- ✓ Examine **actual functioning, developments and outcomes**, not merely constitutional or administrative provisions.
- ✓ Identify **achievements, shortcomings and variations**, using suitable examples to illustrate the evidence.
- ✓ Present a **measured account of the present position** and the most important findings from the review.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean reproducing the **formal rules or structure** without examining actual functioning.
- × It does not mean offering a **chronological list of events** with no assessment of their significance.
- × It does not mean treating the **original purpose of an institution as proof of its present performance**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Examine investigates a particular claim or issue to establish what the evidence reveals. **Review** takes stock of a subject's record, functioning, developments and current position, often across several dimensions.

Evaluate directly judges effectiveness, success or value against relevant criteria. **Review** gives greater emphasis to examining **what has happened, how something has worked and where it currently stands**, while still allowing a measured judgement about the findings.

Estimate

1 question, 2013 to 2026

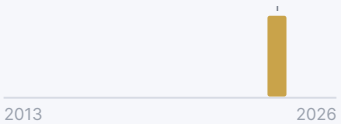
WHAT IT MEANS

To estimate is to make a **reasoned approximation of the magnitude or significance** of something when its full value may not be directly measurable. In historical and cultural questions, this means using representative evidence to **gauge the scale, influence and lasting importance of a contribution**, producing a **proportionate judgement** rather than merely describing achievements.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 0 | GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Estimate in 1 question, in GS I in 2024, and in no questions in GS II, GS III or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **specific fields of contribution** whose importance must be estimated.
- ✓ Select **representative achievements and supporting evidence** that reveal the contribution's reach and quality.
- ✓ Judge its **relative significance and lasting influence**, distinguishing attributable contributions from wider developments.

✓ Present a **reasoned estimate of importance** that matches the strength and scope of the available evidence.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not necessarily mean performing a **numerical calculation** when the subject calls for qualitative historical judgement.

× It does not mean listing **famous achievements** without gauging their significance.

× It does not mean making an **exaggerated claim of unique or total credit** where a contribution forms part of a broader historical process.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Assess weighs the importance, extent or effectiveness of a subject more broadly. **Estimate** places particular emphasis on gauging **how substantial a contribution is**, using the available evidence even when a precise measurement is impossible.

Quantify asks for a magnitude expressed numerically, using appropriate measures or data. **Estimate** asks for a reasoned approximation and may also require a qualitative judgement when numerical measurement is unsuitable. In the Pallavas question, the task is to gauge historical and cultural significance, not to invent numerical values.

Comment

45 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To comment is to offer an **informed and reasoned position** on a specific statement, development or issue, making clear what you think the evidence allows you to conclude. The finished answer should combine **a clear judgement with supporting explanation**, acknowledge necessary qualifications and show **why that position is justified**, rather than simply repeating the proposition or surveying the entire topic.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **16** | GS II **20** | GS III **8** | GS IV **1**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Comment in 45 questions: 16 in GS I, 20 in GS II, 8 in GS III and 1 in GS IV, with 7 questions in 2023.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

✓ Identify the **exact claim or issue** on which a reasoned view is requested.

✓ State a **clear position** that responds directly to that claim rather than remaining indefinitely neutral.

✓ Support the position with **relevant reasoning, evidence and examples**, not unsupported opinion.

✓ Recognise **important qualifications or limits** and finish with a judgement consistent with the reasoning.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not mean expressing a **casual personal opinion** without evidence.

× It does not mean **paraphrasing the statement** and treating agreement as a complete answer.

× It does not mean writing a **general discussion of every related dimension** while leaving the requested position unclear.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Discuss explores the important dimensions, arguments and implications surrounding a subject. **Comment** more directly asks the writer to **take and defend a reasoned position** on a particular claim or issue.

Comment requires an informed, supported judgement with appropriate qualifications. **Critically comment** adds a stronger obligation to test the claim's **assumptions, factual basis, weaknesses and alternative explanations** before stating that judgement.

Critically comment

1 question, 2013 to 2026

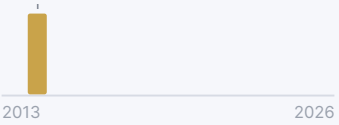
WHAT IT MEANS

To critically comment is to **take a reasoned position on a proposition after testing whether its claims deserve acceptance**, including the factual assumptions and causal explanations on which it rests. The finished answer should expose **weak or incomplete reasoning**, consider credible alternatives and deliver **a clear, qualified judgement** that explains which parts of the claim are convincing and which are not.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0	GS II 0
GS III 1	GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used Critically comment in 1 question, in GS III in 2014, and in no questions in GS I, GS II or GS IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Separate the proposition into **testable factual and causal claims**, rather than accepting its framing as established.
- ✓ Examine the **evidence supporting each claim**, distinguishing observed developments from explanations offered for them.
- ✓ Consider **counterevidence, competing causes and overlooked factors** that might change the interpretation.
- ✓ State a **clear, qualified position** about the credibility and explanatory strength of the proposition.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean assuming that the **problem described in the statement is an established fact**.
- × It does not mean accepting the **proposed causes as the only possible explanation**.
- × It does not mean replacing an evidence-based judgement with **general criticism or personal dissatisfaction**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Comment asks for a supported position on a specific issue or statement. **Critically comment** requires more deliberate examination of the **truth of the premise, the strength of its reasoning and the adequacy of its proposed explanation** before forming that position.

Critically examine focuses on investigating the validity of a claim through supporting and opposing evidence. **Critically comment** similarly scrutinises the claim but gives particular prominence to presenting **the writer's clear, reasoned position** on what should be accepted, rejected or qualified.

FAMILY 3 OF 5

Reason, defend and reflect

Judge the reach of a claim, defend a position with reasons and evidence, explain causes where required, or reflect on deeper values and responsibilities.

How far

19 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

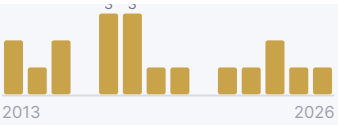
Determine **how much of a claim actually holds** when tested against evidence, rather than treating it as wholly true or false. The task is to establish the claim's **valid reach and its limits**, then give a clear judgment about its accuracy, explanatory strength or practical

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 3	GS II 11
GS III 4	GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

success. A good answer shows not merely that exceptions exist, but whether those exceptions materially change the overall conclusion.



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'How far' in 19 questions**, with **11 in GS Paper II**, 4 in GS Paper III, 3 in GS Paper I and 1 in GS Paper IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **precise claim or outcome** whose validity or success must be assessed.
- ✓ Establish **where and why it holds**, using relevant evidence, mechanisms or examples.
- ✓ Test its **limits and competing explanations**, distinguishing substantial qualifications from minor exceptions.
- ✓ Give a **calibrated final judgment** that makes the degree of validity or success unmistakable.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing a **yes-or-no answer** followed by a general description of the topic.
- × It does not require **equal space for both sides** when the evidence supports one side more strongly.
- × It does not mean identifying a few limitations and leaving the **degree of validity** unresolved.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Both demand a qualified judgment. **How far** often tests how successfully a particular proposition or initiative holds up, while **To what extent** more explicitly invites assessment of the scope, degree or contribution involved; in practice, their central requirement of an evidence-based judgment substantially overlaps.

To what extent

12 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

Establish **the degree and scope of a contribution, relationship, achievement or claim** by examining how strongly the available evidence supports it. The answer must distinguish what the stated factor genuinely explains or accomplishes from what lies **beyond its influence or reach**. Its conclusion should tell the reader how significant the contribution is, not simply whether some contribution exists.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **4** | GS II **6** | GS III **2** | GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'To what extent' in 12 questions**, comprising **6 in GS Paper II**, 4 in GS Paper I, 2 in GS Paper III and none in GS Paper IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Specify **what is being measured or judged**, whether influence, responsibility, contribution or achievement.
- ✓ Demonstrate the **strength and scope** of the stated relationship using evidence and examples.
- ✓ Separate its contribution from **other causes, actors or conditions** that also shape the outcome.
- ✓ Reach a **proportionate judgment** about how substantial, limited or conditional the contribution is.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean proving merely that a factor **played some role** without judging its importance.
- × It does not mean assigning **exclusive credit or blame** when several forces contributed to an outcome.
- × It does not require a **numerical percentage** when a reasoned qualitative assessment is more appropriate.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Both ask for an evidence-based assessment of degree. **To what extent** particularly encourages you to establish the **scope and relative significance** of a contribution or effect, while 'How far' often frames the same intellectual task as a test of how well a claim holds.

Do you agree

27 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

You are given an identifiable proposition and must **take a defensible position** on whether it is correct. Your answer should test the proposition against relevant evidence, principles or examples and explain **why you accept, reject or partly accept it**. The finished response must make your position clear while qualifying any part of the claim that is exaggerated, incomplete or conditional.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 5 | GS II 8 | GS III 5 | GS IV 9

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Do you agree' in 27 questions**, with **9 in GS Paper IV**, 8 in GS Paper II and 5 each in GS Papers I and III.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ State a **clear position** on the precise proposition, preferably near the beginning.
- ✓ Build the case for that position using **relevant reasons, evidence or principles**.
- ✓ Examine **serious counterarguments or qualifications** that could alter the verdict.
- ✓ Finish with a **consistent judgment** that follows from the reasoning rather than contradicting it.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **automatically agreeing** because the question presents a statement confidently.
- × It does not mean remaining **neutral throughout** without answering whether you agree.
- × It does not mean treating **partial agreement as indecision**; a qualified position can be the strongest conclusion.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Do you agree asks you to assess and respond to an existing claim. **Do you think** can demand a wider independent judgment about a possibility, choice, comparison or future outcome without first requiring acceptance or rejection of a stated proposition.

Do you think

22 questions, 2013 to 2026

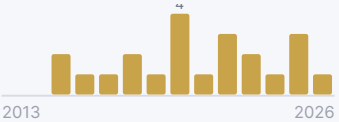
WHAT IT MEANS

Form an **independent, reasoned judgment** about a possibility, proposition, comparison, prediction or preferred course of action. Decide what criteria should govern the answer, examine the evidence or principles against those criteria, and explain **why your conclusion is more convincing** than plausible alternatives. Unlike a request for personal preference, the finished answer must be intellectually defensible to a reader who may initially disagree.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 4 | GS II 10 | GS III 1 | GS IV 7

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Do you think' in 22 questions**, including **10 in GS Paper II**, 7 in GS Paper IV, 4 in GS Paper I and 1 in GS Paper III.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **exact decision or judgment** the question asks you to make.
- ✓ Apply **relevant criteria and evidence** rather than relying on intuition or personal preference.
- ✓ Consider **realistic alternatives, limitations or uncertainties** that affect the conclusion.
- ✓ Express a **clear, supported verdict** and complete any additional tasks separately.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean offering an **unsupported personal opinion** simply because the wording asks what you think.

× It does not require **agreement with a given statement** when the question asks you to assess a possibility or choose between alternatives.
× It does not mean making an **absolute prediction** when the available evidence supports only a conditional conclusion.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Do you think allows a more independent assessment, including a prediction, comparison or choice. **Do you agree** specifically asks you to accept, reject or qualify an identifiable statement already placed before you.

Justify

29 questions, 2013 to 2026

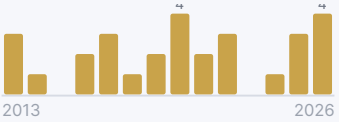
WHAT IT MEANS

Establish **why a particular claim, decision, principle or course of action deserves acceptance** by building a defensible case for it. Identify the proposition that needs support, supply reasons and evidence that genuinely establish its validity or appropriateness, and address objections that could undermine it. The finished answer should show **why the proposed position can be defended**, not simply repeat what the position says.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 5 | GS II 5
GS III 3 | GS IV 16

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Justify' in 29 questions**, with **16 in GS Paper IV**, 5 each in GS Papers I and II and 3 in GS Paper III.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

✓ Identify the **specific claim or action requiring justification**, including any qualification in its wording.
✓ Build a **logical defence** using the most relevant evidence, examples, principles or mechanisms.
✓ Respond to **substantial objections or apparent contradictions** without losing the central argument.
✓ Show **why the supporting grounds are sufficient** and complete any separately requested explanation or recommendation.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not mean **blindly endorsing** every word of a proposition without examining its scope or assumptions.
× It does not mean providing **unconnected examples** that fail to establish the claim.
× It does not mean treating a **moral or constitutional defence** as identical to proving a purely factual statement.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Substantiate chiefly asks whether a claim has sufficient evidence behind it. **Justify** asks why the claim, decision or course of action is defensible, which may require factual evidence, ethical principles, institutional reasoning or a combination of these.

Giving reasons identifies the grounds supporting an answer or explaining an outcome. **Justify** goes further by using those grounds to establish **the validity or appropriateness** of a particular position or action.

Substantiate

6 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

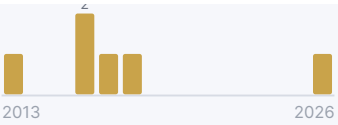
Demonstrate that a claim or interpretation has a **solid evidential foundation** by presenting facts, examples and reasoning that directly support it. Each piece of evidence must be connected to the specific part of the proposition it helps establish, so the answer becomes **a demonstrated argument rather than an asserted conclusion**. Where

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 6 | GS II 0
GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

the proposition is broad or contested, credible substantiation also recognises evidence that qualifies its reach.



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Substantiate' in 6 questions**, all in **GS Paper I**, with 2 in 2016 and 1 each in 2013, 2017, 2018 and 2026.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Break the proposition into **specific claims that can be supported**.
- ✓ Choose **directly relevant historical, social or other evidence** rather than general background information.
- ✓ Explain **how each example supports the proposition**, making the link between evidence and conclusion explicit.
- ✓ Recognise **significant exceptions or contrary evidence** where they affect the strength of the original claim.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **repeating the statement in different words** and treating repetition as proof.
- × It does not mean offering **examples without explaining their relevance** to the claim.
- × It does not require **uncritical acceptance of an absolute claim** when the evidence supports only a qualified interpretation.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Substantiate concentrates on establishing that a proposition is supported by adequate evidence. **Justify** concentrates on establishing why a claim or action is valid or defensible, sometimes through ethical or conceptual reasoning that goes beyond empirical proof.

Argue

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

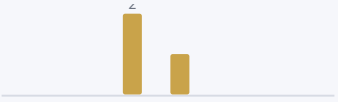
WHAT IT MEANS

Construct and defend **a coherent line of reasoning** on a proposition, contested explanation or institutional choice. Your answer should move logically from a clear position through supporting grounds, relevant illustrations and engagement with objections towards **a persuasive, reasoned conclusion**. The examiner is testing not merely what evidence you know, but whether you can use it to make an argument that holds together.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 2	GS II 1
GS III 0	GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Argue' in 3 questions**, with **2 in GS Paper I and 1 in GS Paper II**, all appearing in 2018 and 2020.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Establish a **clear central position or contention** that the answer will defend.
- ✓ Develop **connected reasons** showing how each point strengthens the overall case.
- ✓ Engage with **important alternative explanations or objections** rather than ignoring them.
- ✓ Use **illustrations as evidence** and close with a conclusion that follows logically from the argument.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean taking an **aggressive or one-sided tone** or dismissing opposing views.
- × It does not mean presenting a **disconnected list of advantages and disadvantages** without a defensible position.
- × It does not require **absolute certainty** when the best argument supports a qualified conclusion.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Argue primarily requires building and defending a coherent position, even while considering objections. **Debate** places competing positions and their relative merits more explicitly at the centre of the examination before a judgment is reached.

Argue emphasises the construction and defence of a connected case on a contested issue. **Justify** emphasises establishing the validity or defensibility of the particular claim, action or principle under consideration.

Debate

1 question, 2013 to 2026

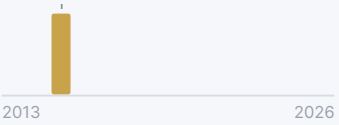
WHAT IT MEANS

Bring **competing interpretations or positions into direct examination** rather than discussing an issue from only one angle. Establish what each side claims, test the strength of its evidence and assumptions, and identify where the positions conflict, overlap or depend on particular conditions. A successful answer reaches **an informed judgment after weighing the disagreement**, without assuming that every position deserves equal acceptance.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **1** | GS II **0** | GS III **0** | GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Debate' in 1 question**, which appeared in **GS Paper I in 2015**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **central disagreement** and the distinct positions involved.
- ✓ Present the **strongest relevant reasoning** supporting each major position.
- ✓ Test **assumptions, evidence, limitations and implications** through direct comparison.
- ✓ Arrive at a **reasoned resolution or qualified judgment** that reflects the relative strength of the arguments.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean listing **pros and cons mechanically** without examining how the arguments challenge one another.
- × It does not require **false equivalence** when one position has substantially stronger support.
- × It does not mean avoiding **a reasoned conclusion** merely to appear impartial.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Discuss calls for an organised examination of relevant dimensions, which may not involve explicit disagreement. **Debate** makes the clash between competing claims and the assessment of their relative merits the organising principle of the answer.

Argue centres on defending a position through connected reasoning. **Debate** requires more sustained examination of **opposing positions** before deciding which interpretation is stronger or how they can be reconciled.

Give reasons

30 questions, 2013 to 2026

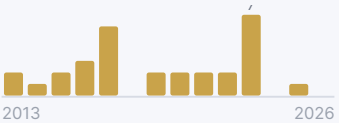
WHAT IT MEANS

Provide the **specific grounds that explain an outcome or support a conclusion**, making the logical connection between each reason and what the question asks. When the question asks why something happened, identify the factors and mechanisms responsible; when it asks for a judgment, present arguments that **make the chosen position credible**. A complete answer shows why the reasons matter, how they operate and which ones carry the greatest explanatory or persuasive weight.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **7** | GS II **6** | GS III **10** | GS IV **7**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Give reasons/arguments' in 30 questions**, including **10 in GS**

Paper III, 7 each in GS Papers I and IV and 6 in GS Paper II.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Determine whether the task seeks **causal explanations or supporting arguments**, or both.
- ✓ Identify the **most relevant factors or grounds** instead of collecting every possible point.
- ✓ Explain the **cause-and-effect or logical connection** between each reason and the outcome or position.
- ✓ Use **evidence and examples selectively** and link the reasoning to any further task, such as proposing remedies.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving a **bare list of factors** without showing how they explain or support the answer.
- × It does not mean repeating the **question's claim as its own evidence**.
- × It does not mean using **generic arguments** that could support almost any conclusion.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Give reasons/arguments asks for the explanatory or supporting grounds behind an answer. **Justify** specifically asks you to establish why the resulting claim, decision or action deserves acceptance as valid or defensible.

Account for focuses on explaining why an observed outcome, trend or discrepancy has arisen. **Give reasons/arguments** is broader because it can also demand logical support for an opinion, prediction or judgment that does not concern an already observed outcome.

Account for

7 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

Explain **why an observed outcome, pattern, change or discrepancy has occurred**, identifying the forces that produced it. Begin with the specific phenomenon that needs explaining, then trace the relevant causes and show **how they combine to produce the result**, distinguishing decisive drivers from background conditions. The finished answer should make an otherwise surprising or unexplained outcome intelligible.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 5 | GS II 1 | GS III 1 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Account for' in 7 questions**, with **5 in GS Paper I**, 1 each in GS Papers II and III and none in GS Paper IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Define the **specific observed pattern or change** that requires explanation.
- ✓ Identify the **underlying causal factors** rather than merely describing the phenomenon.
- ✓ Show **how the causes operate and interact**, explaining their relative importance where relevant.
- ✓ Connect the explanation to **appropriate evidence or examples** and address any separately requested remedies.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving a **descriptive account or chronology** without explaining why the outcome occurred.
- × It does not mean listing **general characteristics of the subject** that do not cause the observed pattern.
- × It does not mean jumping to **suggested solutions before establishing the causes** when the question asks for both.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Explain can ask you to clarify a concept, demonstrate a process or establish a causal relationship. **Account for** more specifically begins with an observed result, pattern or discrepancy and requires you to identify why it came about.

Both can require causal reasoning. **Account for** emphasises a complete explanation of the **particular outcome or change**, whereas 'Give reasons' can also ask for supporting grounds behind an opinion or judgment.

Reflect

1 question, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

Think beyond the surface meaning of an idea or role and offer **a considered interpretation of its deeper significance, responsibilities and implications**. Examine the principles and tensions within the subject, connect them to practical conduct, and develop **an ethically grounded understanding** of what the idea demands. The finished answer should reveal thoughtful judgment, not merely familiarity with definitions or accepted virtues.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 0 | GS III 0 | GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, UPSC used **'Reflect' in 1 question**, which appeared in **GS Paper IV in 2019**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Begin with the **essential meaning or underlying purpose** of the idea or role.
- ✓ Examine its **values, obligations and deeper implications** rather than stopping at description.
- ✓ Consider **important tensions or competing responsibilities** that arise in practice.
- ✓ Show **what the reflection means for real decisions and conduct**, arriving at a coherent ethical understanding.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving only a **dictionary definition or list of desirable qualities**.
- × It does not mean expressing **unexamined personal feelings** without grounding them in relevant principles.
- × It does not mean offering **abstract moral statements** without connecting them to practical responsibilities and choices.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Discuss requires an organised examination of relevant aspects, arguments or dimensions of a topic. **Reflect** specifically asks for a considered interpretation of the subject's **meaning, values and practical implications**, with greater attention to thoughtful ethical judgment.

Comment generally calls for a concise, reasoned observation or assessment of a proposition. **Reflect** calls for deeper consideration of the underlying responsibilities, values or tensions and what they imply for conduct.

FAMILY 4 OF 5

Pinpoint, compare and propose

Identify exactly what is asked, draw clear distinctions, trace developments or offer specific proposals where required.

Suggest

57 questions, 2013 to 2026

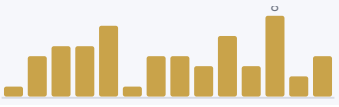
WHAT IT MEANS

To suggest is to move from understanding a situation to **designing a useful response** to it. The answer must offer **specific, feasible measures** that address the problem's actual causes, constraints or institutional gaps, and make clear what could change in practice. A strong suggestion is not merely desirable; it has a **credible route to implementation**.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 2 | GS II 13 | GS III 18 | GS IV 24

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Problem-linked proposals** that respond to the causes or gaps identified in the question.
- ✓ **Concrete actions** explaining what should be done, rather than naming broad goals.
- ✓ **Implementation clarity**, including responsible institutions, mechanisms or practical conditions where relevant.
- ✓ **Workable choices** supported by brief reasoning, with a coherent model when one is explicitly requested.

2013 2026

From 2013 to 2026, **Suggest appeared in 57 questions**, with the largest shares in **GS Paper IV (24 questions)** and **GS Paper III (18 questions)**, and its highest annual count was **8 questions in 2024**.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean offering **generic solutions** such as improving awareness or strengthening coordination without explaining how.
- × It does not mean **repeating the problem** in the language of recommendations.
- × It does not necessarily mean selecting **one best solution** when several complementary measures are appropriate.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Both ask for action, but **Suggest opens up workable measures**, while **Recommend places greater weight on choosing and justifying** a preferred course. Suggest can accommodate several complementary proposals without ranking them.

Identify

15 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To identify is to **recognise and isolate the specific elements** that satisfy the question's description or arise from its facts. The intellectual task is one of **accurate selection and classification**: deciding what genuinely belongs in the answer, rather than presenting everything known about the subject. The finished answer should leave no doubt about **which factors, issues, features or choices** matter in the stated context.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 4 | GS III 1 | GS IV 9

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



2013 2026

From 2013 to 2026, **Identify appeared in 15 questions**, including **9 questions in GS Paper IV**, and its highest annual counts were **3 questions each in 2019 and 2021**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Relevant selection** of factors, traits or issues that directly match the question's scope.
- ✓ **Precise naming** of each element, avoiding vague or overlapping labels.
- ✓ **Clear separation** between distinct factors, categories or ethical dimensions.
- ✓ **Completion of accompanying tasks**, such as discussing the identified factors or justifying their inclusion.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean providing an **unfiltered catalogue** of everything associated with the topic.
- × It does not mean **retelling the background** instead of recognising the requested elements.
- × It does not mean that **naming alone completes** a question that also asks for discussion, justification or suggestions.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

List focuses on presenting requested items, whereas **Identify emphasises recognising which items genuinely qualify** in the particular situation. Identification therefore requires careful relevance and accuracy even when the final presentation is brief.

Distinguish

11 questions, 2013 to 2026

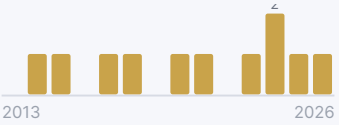
WHAT IT MEANS

To distinguish is to establish **where and how related things differ** by examining them against meaningful common criteria. The answer should make their **conceptual, functional or operational boundaries** unmistakable, especially when they appear similar at first glance. Its purpose is to produce **clarity through direct contrasts**, not two independent descriptions.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **2** | GS II **1**
GS III **5** | GS IV **3**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Distinguish appeared in 11 questions**, including **5 in GS Paper III** and **3 in GS Paper IV**, with **2 questions in 2024**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Common comparison criteria** that allow differences to be examined directly.
- ✓ **Decisive contrasts** that explain what separates the concepts, institutions or processes.
- ✓ **Technical and contextual accuracy**, including qualifications where boundaries are not absolute.
- ✓ **Illustrative examples or additional analysis** when the question expressly requires them.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing **two separate descriptions** and expecting the examiner to infer the differences.
- × It does not mean focusing mainly on **similarities** while leaving the boundaries unclear.
- × It does not mean forcing **false oppositions** between ideas that share some features.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Compare examines relevant similarities and differences, whereas **Distinguish concentrates on the differences** needed to separate related items. Similarities may establish context, but they should not dominate a distinction.

In UPSC answer writing, **Distinguish and Differentiate have essentially the same practical demand**. Both require **direct contrasts on relevant common criteria**. Neither imposes an exclusive answer format; the question's subject and accompanying instructions determine the appropriate presentation.

Differentiate

4 questions, 2013 to 2026

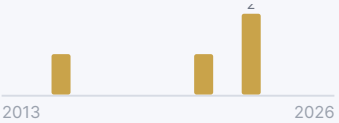
WHAT IT MEANS

To differentiate is to **make the meaningful differences visible** between related concepts, situations, processes or causes. The answer must place them on **shared, relevant criteria** and explain the contrasts that change how each should be understood. Its success lies in **clear separation without artificial differences**, supported by examples when necessary.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **1** | GS II **0**
GS III **0** | GS IV **3**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Differentiate appeared in 4 questions**, with **3 in GS Paper IV** and **1 in GS Paper I**, including **2 questions in 2023**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Direct comparative structure** using criteria relevant to the particular subject.
- ✓ **Specific distinguishing features**, not merely differences in wording.
- ✓ **Accurate treatment of overlaps** without presenting related ideas as complete opposites.
- ✓ **Contrasting examples or conditions** when they help demonstrate how the difference operates.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving **isolated definitions** without showing their relationship.
- × It does not mean inventing a **rigid distinction** where two concepts substantially overlap.
- × It does not mean treating **every difference as equally important** rather than selecting decisive ones.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Both demand **direct, meaningful contrasts**, and UPSC usage does not establish a reliable technical difference between them. Apply **the same disciplined comparison method** to either word, adapting the criteria to the question.

Differentiate foregrounds differences, while **Compare also gives deliberate attention to similarities** where they help answer the question. A differentiation answer need not devote equal space to common features.

Compare

6 questions, 2013 to 2026

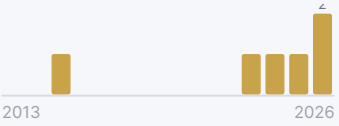
WHAT IT MEANS

To compare is to examine two or more subjects through **the same relevant lenses** so that their relationship becomes clear. The answer should reveal **meaningful similarities and differences**, showing which characteristics are shared, which are distinctive and why those observations matter. The finished comparison must offer **one integrated understanding**, rather than parallel accounts that never meet.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 2 | GS II 4 | GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Compare appeared in 6 questions**, with **4 in GS Paper II** and **2 in GS Paper I**, including **2 questions in 2026**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Common criteria** applied consistently to every subject being compared.
- ✓ **Relevant similarities** that establish shared characteristics or functions.
- ✓ **Significant differences** that clarify variations in nature, operation or consequences.
- ✓ **Balanced coverage** of all named subjects and any specifically prescribed dimensions.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing **one full description followed by another** without direct comparison.
- × It does not mean searching only for **differences** while ignoring important common ground.
- × It does not mean imposing **false equivalence** between subjects with substantially different contexts.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Distinguish primarily establishes differences, whereas **Compare deliberately examines common ground as well as contrasts**. The exact dimensions named in a comparison question take precedence over a generic format.

Contrast concentrates on differences. When UPSC writes **Compare and contrast**, it explicitly asks for both the shared features and the significant differences.

Enumerate

7 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To enumerate is to **set out the relevant points systematically**, covering the categories, reasons, provisions or developments that answer the question. It asks for **disciplined completeness**, with

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 3 | GS II 1 | GS III 3 | GS IV 0

distinct items arranged logically and briefly clarified where their relevance is not self-evident. The result should give the examiner **a clear and sufficiently comprehensive account** without turning every point into a lengthy discussion.

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Enumerate appeared in 7 questions**, including **3 each in GS Papers I and III**, with **1 question in each year from 2016 to 2021**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Systematic coverage** of the main items required by the question.
- ✓ **Distinct and non-repetitive points** arranged through numbering, grouping or another clear structure.
- ✓ **Brief clarifications** where necessary to establish each item's meaning or relevance.
- ✓ **Correct treatment of categories, exceptions and follow-up tasks** expressly included in the question.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean presenting a **random collection of facts** without clear coverage.
- × It does not mean developing **a lengthy essay for every item** when compact treatment is sufficient.
- × It does not mean ignoring **exceptions or parallel categories** that the question explicitly requests.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

List generally permits concise naming, whereas **Enumerate calls for a more systematic and sufficiently complete presentation**, often with a short explanation of each point. Neither automatically demands detailed evaluation.

Enumerate establishes what the relevant points are, whereas **Discuss develops their meaning, connections and implications**. When both appear, the structured set of points must support a fuller discussion rather than replace it.

List

4 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To list is to **provide the requested items directly**, using clear, concise and individually identifiable entries. It places the emphasis on **correct selection, number and coverage**, not on developing a detailed argument for each entry. A good list lets the examiner verify **every required item quickly** while leaving space for any additional tasks.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0	GS II 0
GS III 2	GS IV 2

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **List appeared in 4 questions**, divided equally between **GS Paper III (2 questions)** and **GS Paper IV (2 questions)**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Accurate naming** of the items, factors or considerations requested.
- ✓ **The specified number of entries**, where the question imposes a numerical limit.
- ✓ **Distinct and relevant items** without repetition or unnecessary overlap.
- ✓ **Concise presentation** that preserves room for accompanying explanation or analysis.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean providing **lengthy explanations** for every item unless separately requested.
- × It does not mean adding **more entries than specified** when the question asks for an exact number.
- × It does not mean including **loosely related facts** merely to make the list longer.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

List prioritises concise identification, while **Enumerate more often calls for systematic coverage with brief clarification**. The question's scope, specified number and other directives determine how much detail is appropriate.

Identify emphasises recognising the qualifying elements within a topic or situation, while **List emphasises presenting those elements directly**. A List question still requires accurate selection, but does not by itself demand a detailed explanation of why each entry qualifies.

Mention

12 questions, 2013 to 2026

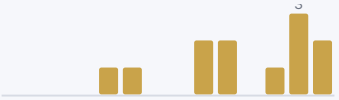
WHAT IT MEANS

To mention is to **bring the specifically requested information into the answer briefly and clearly**. It requires selecting the **most relevant facts, features, reasons or contributions** without developing each into a complete explanation. When used alongside a stronger analytical instruction, Mention establishes **the essential points that must be covered**, while the other instruction determines where deeper reasoning is needed.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **4** | GS II **0**
GS III **8** | GS IV **0**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Mention appeared in 12 questions**, with **8 in GS Paper III** and **4 in GS Paper I**, including **3 questions in 2025**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Direct inclusion** of the information or features the examiner has asked for.
- ✓ **Priority to defining or salient points**, especially when the question uses those qualifiers.
- ✓ **Brief, accurate statements** instead of unnecessarily extended descriptions.
- ✓ **Proportionate space allocation** when Mention accompanies Explain, Discuss or another substantial task.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean offering **every available detail** about the subject.
- × It does not mean giving **vague references** that leave the requested information unidentified.
- × It does not mean allowing a **brief mention task to displace** the question's main analytical demand.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Both seek direct information, but **Mention particularly signals brief inclusion** of relevant points. **State emphasises clear and explicit formulation** of each requested fact, objective, principle or measure.

Mention identifies the important point, while **Explain develops how or why that point works or matters**. When both appear, the answer should not treat a brief mention as sufficient explanation.

State

5 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To state is to **express the requested information explicitly and without ambiguity**. The answer should formulate the relevant facts, objectives, measures, principles or values so that **each stands as a clear proposition**, rather than being buried inside a lengthy discussion. State establishes **what must be known or asserted**, leaving further reasoning to accompanying directives when present.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **0** | GS II **0**
GS III **4** | GS IV **1**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **State appeared in 5 questions**, with **4 in GS Paper III** and **1 in GS Paper IV**, across **five separate years**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Clear and explicit statements** of every required point.
- ✓ **Accurate terminology** suited to the concept, policy or professional context.
- ✓ **Separation of requested categories**, such as objectives and measures.

✓ **Observance of specified numbers and follow-up instructions** without unnecessary expansion of the stating task.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not mean offering **vague hints** from which the examiner must infer the answer.

× It does not mean developing **lengthy causal explanations** when only direct statements are requested.

× It does not mean **merging distinct categories** that the examiner has expressly separated.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

State makes the point explicit, whereas **Explain develops how or why it is true, operates or matters**. A statement can be complete in one sentence, while an explanation usually requires supporting reasoning.

Mention gives brief attention to relevant information, whereas **State requires the requested proposition to be clearly formulated**. The distinction is one of emphasis, not a fixed difference in answer length.

Indicate

6 questions, 2013 to 2026

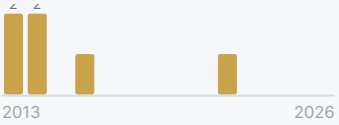
WHAT IT MEANS

To indicate is to **direct attention to the particular provisions, issues, circumstances or options** that matter in the stated situation. It requires **selective and accurate specification**, often without the depth of explanation demanded by Discuss or Analyse. The finished answer should make the **relevant possibilities or elements clearly visible**, so that any subsequent evaluation can proceed from them.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **2** | GS II **0** | GS III **0** | GS IV **4**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Indicate appeared in 6 questions**, including **4 in GS Paper IV** and **2 in GS Paper I**, with **2 questions each in 2013 and 2014**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

✓ **Clear identification** of the provisions, issues or alternatives directly relevant to the question.

✓ **Selective coverage** that gives priority to the most pertinent elements.

✓ **Accurate contextual placement** of each provision, issue or possible action.

✓ **Separation of options from evaluation** when the question asks for both.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not mean making **indirect allusions** without identifying the requested items.

× It does not mean providing an **unrelated catalogue** of laws, problems or possible actions.

× It does not mean presenting **one preferred option as the only available choice** when alternatives are requested.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Mention briefly presents requested information, while **Indicate emphasises pointing to the elements most pertinent to a specific context**. The difference is especially useful when the question asks for possible options, applicable provisions or particular issues.

Indicate can ask the writer to identify available choices, whereas **Suggest asks the writer to formulate useful measures or courses of action**. Indicating options does not by itself amount to evaluating or recommending them.

Point out

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To point out is to **bring particular facts, consequences, measures or roles into clear focus** because they answer the specific issue raised.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **2** | GS II **1**

The writer must select **what deserves attention in that context** and state it directly, adding supporting explanation when the question requires it. A successful answer makes the **relevant result or contribution unmistakable** without drifting into an account of the entire subject.

GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Point out appeared in 3 questions**, with **2 in GS Paper I** and **1 in GS Paper II**, in **2021, 2023 and 2024**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Direct identification** of the particular results, measures or roles requested.
- ✓ **Close relevance** to the proposition, event or problem in the question.
- ✓ **Clear distinction between causes, actions and outcomes** where the question separates them.
- ✓ **Supporting explanation or evidence** proportionate to any additional wording.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean offering a **general overview** of everything associated with the topic.
- × It does not mean **repeating preceding information** when the question asks for its consequences.
- × It does not mean limiting the answer to **bare names** when the wording requires detail or substantiation.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Mention briefly includes relevant information, while **Point out foregrounds the particular results, measures or roles** that need to be noticed in the stated context. Both can be concise, but Point out often carries a stronger emphasis on the specific significance of the selected points.

Both direct attention to important material. **Highlight stresses significance and prominence**, while **Point out stresses clearly identifying the particular matter requested**; UPSC usage does not justify treating them as rigidly separate methods.

Define

3 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

To define is to establish **what a term or concept precisely means** by stating its essential characteristics. A strong definition identifies the **features that make the concept what it is** and, where necessary, separates it from related ideas. The finished definition should provide **a reliable conceptual starting point** for any further explanation, application or analysis demanded by the question.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 0
GS III 2 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Define appeared in 3 questions**, with **2 in GS Paper III** and **1 in GS Paper I**, in **2018, 2019 and 2020**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Precise conceptual meaning** expressed in accurate subject-specific language.
- ✓ **Essential defining characteristics** rather than secondary details or consequences.
- ✓ **Clear conceptual boundaries** that prevent confusion with related terms.
- ✓ **A concise foundation for subsequent tasks**, such as explaining causes, determinants or applications.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean replacing a definition with **an example or illustration alone**.
- × It does not mean giving a **vague description** that could apply equally to several concepts.
- × It does not mean allowing **extended background discussion** to obscure the exact meaning.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Define establishes what the concept is, whereas **Explain shows how or why it works, arises or matters**. When

combined, the definition should be accurate but concise, leaving room for the substantive explanation.

Define identifies the essential meaning and boundaries, while **Describe presents the characteristics or features** of the subject, potentially in greater detail. A description may contain a definition but is not necessarily a precise definition.

Outline

1 question, 2013 to 2026

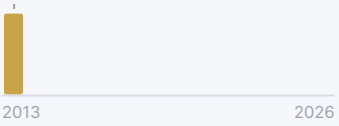
WHAT IT MEANS

To outline is to present **the main contours of a subject in an organised overview**. It calls for identifying the **major categories, features or dimensions** and showing how they fit within the larger topic, without pursuing every detail. A strong outline gives the reader **a complete structural picture at the appropriate level**, making the subject intelligible through careful selection and arrangement.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 0
GS III 1 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Outline appeared in 1 question**, in **GS Paper III in 2013**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Major categories or dimensions** that collectively capture the subject's scope.
- ✓ **Logical organisation** that shows the relationship between the principal elements.
- ✓ **Brief explanatory substance** sufficient to make each element understandable.
- ✓ **Proportionate coverage** without excessive detail or illustrative digressions.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean producing **a single vague summary sentence** that leaves out major dimensions.
- × It does not mean attempting **an exhaustive treatment** of every subtopic or example.
- × It does not mean replacing a **structured overview with a random list** of facts.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Outline presents the principal contours and structure, whereas **Describe can provide a fuller account of the subject's characteristics**. An outline should be informative enough to stand independently without becoming exhaustive.

Enumerate systematically presents the requested points, while **Outline organises the major dimensions into an overall picture**. An outline may use numbered points, but the relationship between categories matters as much as their inclusion.

Trace

2 questions, 2013 to 2026

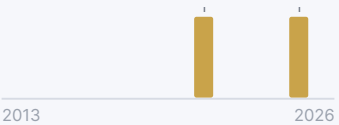
WHAT IT MEANS

To trace is to **reconstruct how a development unfolded over time**, from its origins through significant stages to the period specified in the question. The answer must connect **turning points, changes and their consequences**, explaining how one stage contributed to the next rather than merely arranging dates chronologically. A successful trace reveals **the process of transformation**, not just its beginning and final condition.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 2 | GS II 0
GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Trace appeared in 2 questions**, both in

GS Paper I, in **2021 and 2025**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **A clear chronological framework** with the appropriate starting point and endpoint.
- ✓ **Major stages and turning points** selected for their importance to the development.
- ✓ **Connections between stages** showing continuity, change or cumulative effects.
- ✓ **Coverage of specified dimensions** within the overall sequence of development.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean providing **an unconnected timeline** of names, dates and events.
- × It does not mean describing **only the initial and final states** while skipping the intervening process.
- × It does not mean giving **separate static descriptions** when the examiner asks how a process developed.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Describe presents what a subject is or was like, while **Trace follows how it emerged and changed through successive stages**. Chronology and meaningful development are essential to Trace.

Explain establishes how or why something happened, whereas **Trace follows its development over time**. A strong trace often incorporates explanation, particularly at turning points, but retains the chronological progression.

Underline

1 question, 2013 to 2026

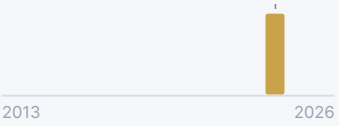
WHAT IT MEANS

To underline is to **bring the most significant features or changes into sharp focus** so that the central point of the question stands out. The answer must **select and emphasise the developments that matter most**, using precise contrasts or relevant evidence rather than a comprehensive narrative. When the question concerns two periods, the finished answer should make **the direction and substance of change** unmistakable.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 1 | GS II 0 | GS III 0 | GS IV 0

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Underline appeared in 1 question**, in **GS Paper I in 2024**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **Selection of the most important changes or features** rather than exhaustive coverage.
- ✓ **Direct contrasts** where the question concerns different periods or conditions.
- ✓ **Concrete supporting facts** that demonstrate the significance of the highlighted points.
- ✓ **Coverage of all named dimensions** with clear emphasis on the central transformation.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **physically underlining words** or merely formatting an answer.
- × It does not mean giving **a complete historical narrative** in which the important changes become difficult to find.
- × It does not mean offering **unsupported claims of change** without identifying what actually became different.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Underline and Highlight both emphasise significant points, and UPSC usage does not establish a reliable technical distinction between them. Both require **selecting and substantiating the most important features or changes** rather than providing an undifferentiated account of the subject.

Trace reconstructs the stages of development, whereas **Underline concentrates on the most important differences or features**. When two historical periods are named, Underline may be answered through direct contrasts without narrating every intervening stage.

Show

1 question, 2013 to 2026

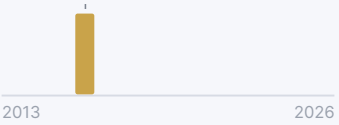
WHAT IT MEANS

To show is to **demonstrate that a particular relationship, difference or proposition is valid**, rather than merely asserting it. The answer must use **clear reasoning, relevant evidence or concrete illustrations** that allow the examiner to see how the point operates. A successful response makes **the claimed distinction or connection observable and convincing** through the material presented.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 0 | GS III 0 | GS IV 1

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



From 2013 to 2026, **Show appeared in 1 question**, in **GS Paper IV in 2016**.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ **A clearly established proposition or difference** that the answer is demonstrating.
- ✓ **Relevant evidence or examples** chosen specifically to establish that point.
- ✓ **Reasoning that connects the illustration to the claim**, rather than leaving the example unexplained.
- ✓ **Visible demonstration of the relationship or contrast** requested in the question.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **asserting a difference** without showing how it operates.
- × It does not mean providing **examples without interpretation** of what they demonstrate.
- × It does not mean replacing **a focused demonstration with broad descriptive material**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

Explain develops the reasoning behind a point, while **Show emphasises demonstrating the point through an illustration, evidence or a clear contrast**. A strong Show answer often includes explanation, but the demonstration must remain visible.

Illustrate uses examples to make an idea understandable, while **Show uses reasoning or examples to establish a particular claim or relationship**. When the question explicitly says Giving examples, concrete illustrations become part of the required demonstration.

FAMILY 5 OF 5

When the question is the directive

Read the question form or shared quotation instruction as the task, even when no separate command word appears.

What

331 questions, 2013 to 2026

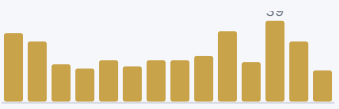
WHAT IT MEANS

A 'What' question asks you to **identify the precise thing being sought**, whether it is the meaning of a concept, the principal causes of a problem, the provisions of a law or the ethical challenges in a situation. The intellectual task is to **recognise the kind of answer required** and supply the relevant information with enough explanation to establish its significance, without drifting into a

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 35 | GS II 40 | GS III 113 | GS IV 143

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



general account of the topic. A strong answer leaves the examiner with a **clear and specific response** to the question actually asked.

2013 2026

UPSC used 'What' in **331 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with the largest numbers in **GS Paper IV (143) and GS Paper III (113)**, compared with 35 in GS Paper I and 40 in GS Paper II.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **object of the question**: a definition, set of causes, legal provisions, consequences, challenges or possible actions.
- ✓ For 'What is', establish the **essential meaning and distinguishing features** of the concept before moving to any additional task.
- ✓ For 'What are', select the **principal relevant items** and briefly establish how each relates to the problem or situation.
- ✓ When another instruction follows, **complete both tasks distinctly** rather than allowing the initial identification to consume the answer.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean writing **everything known about the subject** without identifying what the question specifically seeks.
- × It does not mean that every 'What' question requires only a **dictionary definition**; some seek causes, provisions, consequences or ethical judgements.
- × It does not mean that **naming items is always sufficient**; their relevance or function may need to be established, especially when another task follows.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

'What' primarily establishes **what something is or which elements are involved**. 'How' establishes **the process or mechanism** through which something happens, works or produces an outcome.

'What' can request the **identification or specification of a subject** across several possible kinds of information. 'Which/Who' more directly requires identifying **particular eligible persons, categories or choices** under stated conditions.

How

162 questions, 2013 to 2026

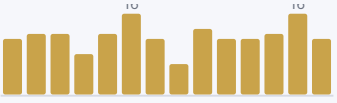
WHAT IT MEANS

'How' asks you to reveal **the working connection between a cause, action or condition and its result**. Instead of merely establishing that something happens or is desirable, you must show the **mechanism, sequence, channels or practical means** through which it happens or can be achieved. The finished answer should make the relationship intelligible enough for the reader to understand **how the stated outcome follows**, or how a proposed course of action could realistically produce it.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **49**	GS II **11**
GS III **64**	GS IV **38**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



2013 2026

UPSC used 'How' in **162 questions** from 2013 to 2026, most often in **GS Paper III (64) and GS Paper I (49)**, followed by GS Paper IV (38) and GS Paper II (11).

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **starting condition and intended outcome**, then establish the connection between them.
- ✓ Explain the **specific mechanisms or channels** through which the effect is produced, rather than merely naming contributing factors.
- ✓ For 'How would you' or 'How can', provide **feasible steps or strategies** and show how they advance the stated objective.
- ✓ Where several outcomes or additional tasks are named, **address each distinctly** and complete accompanying instructions such as 'Discuss' or 'Suggest'.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean simply listing **why something happens** without explaining the process connecting causes to results.
- × It does not mean describing **features, advantages or desirable goals** as substitutes for mechanisms or practical methods.
- × It does not mean proposing **general recommendations without showing how they would work**.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

'Why' establishes **the reasons behind an outcome or judgement**. 'How' follows the **mechanism or process** through which the outcome emerges or the objective can be achieved; a factor identified under 'Why' may need a further explanation under 'How'.

'Suggest' asks you to **propose suitable measures**. 'How' requires explaining **how those measures would operate or achieve the objective**, especially when the question asks how a future course of action should be undertaken.

Why

40 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

'Why' asks you to uncover **the reasons that explain a situation or support a judgement**, rather than merely describe what is happening. The task is to identify the **underlying causes, conditions or grounds** and demonstrate why they produce the observed pattern, make a particular institution valuable or support an ethical position. A convincing answer should establish **explanatory or justificatory connections**, so that each reason genuinely advances the answer rather than appearing as an unrelated fact.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **25** | GS II **2** | GS III **8** | GS IV **5**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used 'Why' in **40 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **25 in GS Paper I**, compared with 2 in GS Paper II, 8 in GS Paper III and 5 in GS Paper IV.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **central outcome, pattern or proposition** whose reasons must be established.
- ✓ Present the **principal explanatory factors or grounds**, giving priority to those most relevant to the question.
- ✓ Show **why each factor matters**, connecting it to the specified outcome, institutional value or ethical conclusion.
- ✓ Match the reasoning to the subject: **causal explanation** for physical and social outcomes, or **reasoned justification** for institutional and ethical judgements.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean **restating the situation** in different words or providing background information without explaining its causes.
- × It does not mean offering an **unconnected list of possible factors** without showing their contribution to the outcome.
- × It does not mean treating an **ethical or institutional judgement as self-evident** when the question specifically asks for its grounds.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

'Why' asks for **the factors or reasons responsible** for something. 'How' asks for **the process through which those factors operate**; a question may require both when identifying causes alone does not explain their effects.

'Why' may seek either **causal explanation or grounds for a judgement**, depending on the question. 'Justify' specifically requires a **reasoned defence of a position or claim**, normally with supporting arguments and attention to relevant objections.

Which, Who

17 questions, 2013 to 2026

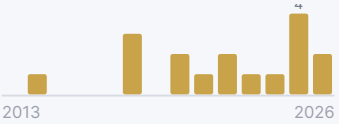
WHAT IT MEANS

'Which/Who' asks you to move from a general subject to **a specific identification or selection**: who qualifies, which requirements apply or which available option is most appropriate. 'Who' commonly requires identifying persons or categories under **defined eligibility conditions**, while 'Which' may require choosing between alternatives using relevant legal, procedural, practical or ethical criteria. A complete answer must **make the identification or choice explicit** and, where the question asks for judgement, establish why that choice is preferable.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 0 | GS II 2
GS III 0 | GS IV 15

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used 'Which/Who' in **17 questions** from 2013 to 2026, with **15 in GS Paper IV and 2 in GS Paper II**, and none in GS Papers I or III.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Determine **exactly what must be identified or selected**, including whether the question concerns persons, eligible groups, procedures or alternatives.
- ✓ Apply the **relevant eligibility rules, conditions or decision criteria** rather than relying on broad impressions.
- ✓ Where alternatives are involved, **compare them against the situation's requirements** before making a clear selection.
- ✓ When justification is required, **defend the selected answer** and separately address any additional task in the question.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean providing a **general description of the topic** without identifying the persons, categories or choices requested.
- × It does not mean selecting an option through **personal preference or convenience** when legal, factual or ethical criteria are relevant.
- × It does not mean that **identifying an option completes the answer** when the question also asks for reasons, assessment or comparison.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

'What' can ask for **a concept, set of factors or other information** without necessarily requiring a choice. 'Which/Who' directs attention to **particular eligible persons, categories or selected alternatives**, often under explicit conditions.

'Should' asks whether **a proposed action ought to be taken**. 'Which' asks **which option ought to be selected** when alternatives must be considered, so comparative suitability becomes central to the judgement.

Is, Are, Can, Does

66 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

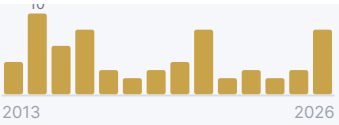
A yes/no question asks you to **test a particular proposition and reach a reasoned position** on whether it is true, possible, justified or advisable. The intellectual task is to examine the proposition against **relevant evidence, conditions, legal rules or ethical principles**,

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I 14 | GS II 29
GS III 11 | GS IV 12

QUESTIONS PER YEAR

recognising qualifications that genuinely affect the judgement. The finished answer must communicate **an identifiable conclusion**, even when the defensible response is conditional, and then satisfy any accompanying instructions.



UPSC used yes/no questions in **66 questions** from 2013 to 2026, most frequently in **GS Paper II (29)**, followed by GS Paper I (14), GS Paper IV (12) and GS Paper III (11).

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **exact claim or proposed action being tested** before deciding how to answer.
- ✓ State a **clear position**, which may be yes, no or a carefully qualified conclusion supported by reasoning.
- ✓ Examine the **decisive evidence, conditions or competing considerations** that determine whether the proposition holds.
- ✓ Complete additional tasks such as **Illustrate, Discuss, State or Suggest** instead of treating the initial judgement as the entire answer.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

- × It does not mean giving a **one-word answer** or an unsupported declaration of agreement or disagreement.
- × It does not mean presenting **both sides without reaching a position** when the question expressly asks whether something is true or appropriate.
- × It does not mean forcing an **absolute yes or no** where the evidence or ethical conditions require a precise qualification.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

'Discuss' requires a **reasoned examination of relevant dimensions and arguments**. A yes/no question additionally requires a **recognisable judgement on the proposition**, even when 'Discuss' appears as a second instruction.

'Assess' asks for an **evidence-based judgement of merit, extent or performance**. A yes/no question centres that judgement on **whether a stated proposition can be accepted**, although the reasoning may involve assessment.

Quotations (GS IV)

29 questions, 2013 to 2026

WHAT IT MEANS

A quotation question asks you to **interpret the ethical idea conveyed by a statement**, including the deeper distinction, tension or insight expressed through its language. You must move beyond literal paraphrasing to explain **what moral principle the statement communicates and why it matters**, while developing a thoughtful understanding of its relevance to contemporary life and public service. The finished answer should bring together **accurate interpretation, reasoned reflection and meaningful application**, particularly when the shared instruction asks what the quotation means to you in the present context.

HOW UPSC HAS USED IT

GS I **0**	GS II **0**
GS III **0**	GS IV **29**

QUESTIONS PER YEAR



UPSC used the quotation-based shared instruction in **29 questions** from 2013 to 2026, **all in GS Paper IV**, with none in GS Papers I, II or III.

WHAT THE EXAMINER EXPECTS

- ✓ Identify the **central ethical insight** of the quotation, paying attention to contrasts, metaphors or qualifications in its wording.
- ✓ Explain **the moral reasoning behind the statement**, not merely its literal meaning or the reputation of the person quoted.
- ✓ Connect the principle to **recognisable contemporary situations**, especially choices, duties and dilemmas in public life.

✔ Where the instruction asks what it means to you, develop **a considered personal interpretation** supported by ethical reasoning and relevant examples.

WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN

× It does not mean offering only a **literal paraphrase or literary interpretation** without identifying the ethical principle.

× It does not mean writing a **biography of the thinker** or listing philosophical theories that do not illuminate the quotation.

× It does not mean replacing interpretation with **general moral statements or unrelated examples** that could fit almost any quotation.

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH

An ordinary 'Explain' question primarily requires **clarifying a concept, relationship or process**. A quotation question requires **interpreting the ethical insight within a particular statement**, including its wording and relevance to the present context.

'Comment' usually invites **a reasoned observation or judgement on a statement or issue**, which may include agreement, qualification or criticism. A quotation question under the shared GS IV instruction primarily asks you to **bring out its meaning and contemporary ethical significance**, rather than treating agreement or disagreement as the main task.

When one question sets two tasks

Of 1,222 GS questions and parts, 445 contain more than one task word. The most common consecutive combinations show how UPSC builds layered demands. Identify every instruction and the relationship between them, then give each task appropriate attention. The order of words helps reveal the question's structure, but it does not prescribe a fixed sequence or proportion for every answer.

What then How: 43 questions

The first task establishes what something is or identifies its features. The second asks how it works, happens or produces an effect. Make the identification precise, then explain the process, mechanism or consequences requested. Allocate space according to the actual scope of each task rather than assuming the definition must always be shorter.

What then Discuss: 25 questions

First identify or explain the subject of the question. Then open it up for a fuller discussion of the relevant dimensions, arguments or implications. Use the first task to establish the foundation and the second to develop the substantive answer.

What then Explain: 20 questions

What asks you to establish the concept, issue or facts. Explain asks you to make the reasons, working or relationships clear. Separate the initial identification from the explanation that follows, using examples or evidence to illuminate the latter.

Is, Are, Can, Does then Discuss: 17 questions

First determine whether the proposition can be accepted, rejected or accepted with qualifications. Then examine the evidence, relevant dimensions and competing considerations that inform that judgement. Make the position recognisable and support it through a reasoned discussion. Give each consideration the weight warranted by the evidence rather than imposing an artificially balanced argument.

What then Suggest: 16 questions

First identify the problem, requirement or situation specified in the question. Then propose measures that respond directly to it. Establish the issue accurately enough to make the recommendations meaningful, and ensure that each suggestion is specific, feasible and relevant. Give the two tasks space according to their actual scope rather than following a fixed allocation.

How then Discuss: 12 questions

How asks you to explain a process, relationship or manner of working. Discuss asks you to explore the wider dimensions of that process or issue. Establish the mechanism first, then develop the relevant arguments, implications or qualifications without repeating the explanation.

Quick reference: every directive on one page

Directive	Uses	What it asks you to do
Explain and unfold		
Discuss	306	To discuss is to **explore a subject through its relevant dimensions** and explain how those dimensions shape our understanding of it.
Critically discuss	5	To critically discuss is to **explore an issue while testing its claims, assumptions and practical results**, rather than accepting the stated position at face value.
Explain	121	To explain is to **make something understandable by revealing how or why it works**.
Elaborate	22	To elaborate is to **take a briefly stated idea and develop its full substance** by unfolding the dimensions, details and implications that the original statement leaves compressed.
Elucidate	20	To elucidate is to **bring clarity to the underlying meaning or logic of a proposition**, especially when its important connections are not immediately obvious.
Describe	27	To describe is to **present an accurate and organised picture of a subject** by setting out its defining characteristics, forms, features or identifiable aspects.
Illustrate	8	To illustrate is to **make an argument, concept or relationship clear through well-chosen examples** that show how it operates in reality.
Clarify	2	To clarify is to **remove uncertainty about what a statement means or why it is justified**.
Write a note	3	To write a note is to produce a **compact, self-contained account of a specified subject** that gives the reader its essential meaning, relevant particulars and significance.
Introduce	3	To introduce is to **establish the essential identity, purpose and basic elements of a subject** so that the reader knows what is being discussed.
Give an account	2	To give an account is to **present a connected factual explanation of what happened, what exists or what was undertaken** in relation to a subject.
Throw light	3	To throw light on a subject is to **make its important meaning, relevance or implications clearer** by focusing on the aspects that best illuminate it.
Bring out	15	To bring out is to **make important features, effects or relationships clearly visible**, especially where their significance is not immediately apparent from a simple description.
Highlight	11	To highlight is to **direct attention to the most significant features, distinctions or contributions** of a subject.
Weigh and judge		
Examine	73	To examine is to put a specific claim, issue or process under **close scrutiny**, asking what the evidence reveals about how it works, why it matters and whether its stated implications hold.
Critically examine	31	To critically examine is to investigate a proposition while **actively testing its foundations**: the evidence supporting it, the assumptions it depends on, the objections it faces and the conditions under which it may not hold.

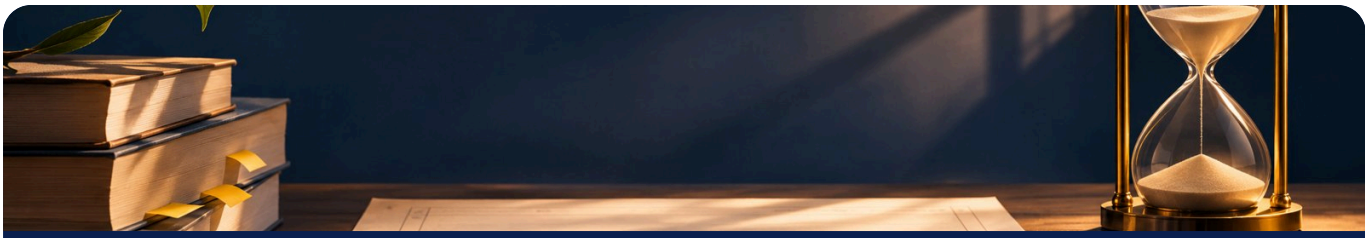
Analyse	45	To analyse is to **break a complex subject into its important parts** and explain how those parts interact, influence one another or combine to produce a particular outcome.
Critically analyse	8	To critically analyse is to **unpack a proposition into its component claims and relationships**, explain the mechanisms connecting them, and then investigate whether those connections are convincing.
Evaluate	24	To evaluate is to **judge the value, effectiveness, success or impact** of something by asking what it was meant to achieve, what results it produced and how those results compare with relevant standards.
Critically evaluate	19	To critically evaluate is to reach a **reasoned judgement of value, performance or desirability** while subjecting the available arguments and evidence to particularly demanding scrutiny.
Assess	12	To assess is to **determine the extent, significance or effectiveness** of a role, condition, problem or intervention by weighing the evidence that shows how much it matters.
Critically assess	1	To critically assess is to **determine how far a proposition or contribution is valid, significant or effective**, while rigorously testing the assumptions and evidence on which that judgement depends.
Appraise	1	To appraise is to make a **considered judgement of the value or importance of a contribution**, examining what it has added and why that contribution matters in its particular setting.
Review	1	To review is to **take stock of a subject's actual working, development and present position**, examining what has happened, what has been achieved and what remains unsatisfactory.
Estimate	1	To estimate is to make a **reasoned approximation of the magnitude or significance** of something when its full value may not be directly measurable.
Comment	45	To comment is to offer an **informed and reasoned position** on a specific statement, development or issue, making clear what you think the evidence allows you to conclude.
Critically comment	1	To critically comment is to **take a reasoned position on a proposition after testing whether its claims deserve acceptance**, including the factual assumptions and causal explanations on which it rests.
Reason, defend and reflect		
How far	19	Determine **how much of a claim actually holds** when tested against evidence, rather than treating it as wholly true or false.
To what extent	12	Establish **the degree and scope of a contribution, relationship, achievement or claim** by examining how strongly the available evidence supports it.
Do you agree	27	You are given an identifiable proposition and must **take a defensible position** on whether it is correct.
Do you think	22	Form an **independent, reasoned judgment** about a possibility, proposition, comparison, prediction or preferred course of action.
Justify	29	Establish **why a particular claim, decision, principle or course of action deserves acceptance** by building a defensible case for it.

Substantiate	6	Demonstrate that a claim or interpretation has a **solid evidential foundation** by presenting facts, examples and reasoning that directly support it.
Argue	3	Construct and defend **a coherent line of reasoning** on a proposition, contested explanation or institutional choice.
Debate	1	Bring **competing interpretations or positions into direct examination** rather than discussing an issue from only one angle.
Give reasons	30	Provide the **specific grounds that explain an outcome or support a conclusion**, making the logical connection between each reason and what the question asks.
Account for	7	Explain **why an observed outcome, pattern, change or discrepancy has occurred**, identifying the forces that produced it.
Reflect	1	Think beyond the surface meaning of an idea or role and offer **a considered interpretation of its deeper significance, responsibilities and implications**.

Pinpoint, compare and propose

Suggest	57	To suggest is to move from understanding a situation to **designing a useful response** to it.
Identify	15	To identify is to **recognise and isolate the specific elements** that satisfy the question's description or arise from its facts.
Distinguish	11	To distinguish is to establish **where and how related things differ** by examining them against meaningful common criteria.
Differentiate	4	To differentiate is to **make the meaningful differences visible** between related concepts, situations, processes or causes.
Compare	6	To compare is to examine two or more subjects through **the same relevant lenses** so that their relationship becomes clear.
Enumerate	7	To enumerate is to **set out the relevant points systematically**, covering the categories, reasons, provisions or developments that answer the question.
List	4	To list is to **provide the requested items directly**, using clear, concise and individually identifiable entries.
Mention	12	To mention is to **bring the specifically requested information into the answer briefly and clearly**.
State	5	To state is to **express the requested information explicitly and without ambiguity**.
Indicate	6	To indicate is to **direct attention to the particular provisions, issues, circumstances or options** that matter in the stated situation.
Point out	3	To point out is to **bring particular facts, consequences, measures or roles into clear focus** because they answer the specific issue raised.
Define	3	To define is to establish **what a term or concept precisely means** by stating its essential characteristics.
Outline	1	To outline is to present **the main contours of a subject in an organised overview**.
Trace	2	To trace is to **reconstruct how a development unfolded over time**, from its origins through significant stages to the period specified in the question.

Underline	**1**	To underline is to **bring the most significant features or changes into sharp focus** so that the central point of the question stands out.
Show	**1**	To show is to **demonstrate that a particular relationship, difference or proposition is valid**, rather than merely asserting it.
When the question is the directive		
What	**331**	A 'What' question asks you to **identify the precise thing being sought**, whether it is the meaning of a concept, the principal causes of a problem, the provisions of a law or the ethical challenges in a situation.
How	**162**	'How' asks you to reveal **the working connection between a cause, action or condition and its result**.
Why	**40**	'Why' asks you to uncover **the reasons that explain a situation or support a judgement**, rather than merely describe what is happening.
Which, Who	**17**	'Which/Who' asks you to move from a general subject to **a specific identification or selection**: who qualifies, which requirements apply or which available option is most appropriate.
Is, Are, Can, Does	**66**	A yes/no question asks you to **test a particular proposition and reach a reasoned position** on whether it is true, possible, justified or advisable.
Quotations (GS IV)	**29**	A quotation question asks you to **interpret the ethical idea conveyed by a statement**, including the deeper distinction, tension or insight expressed through its language.



YOUR NEXT STEP

Now read a whole paper word by word.

A directive becomes a habit only when you read real papers with it. Take one GS paper, mark the task word in every question, decide what each one asks you to do, and then write the paper in three hours.

1. **Mark every task word in one paper**
2. **Check them against this handout**
3. **Write the paper in three hours**
4. **Have it evaluated**

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