IGCSE Computer Science Command Words Guide

This guide by **FutureLogic Education** helps students understand exactly what each command word is asking for in IGCSE Computer Science exams. Knowing the difference between *State*, *Describe*, and *Explain* is one of the most effective ways to gain marks.

Why Command Words Matter

Command words tell you **how** to answer a question — not just what to write about. Many students lose marks not because they lack knowledge, but because they answer at the wrong depth. A student who writes a full explanation for an *Identify* question gains no extra marks. A student who gives a one-word answer to an *Explain* question loses most of them.

The Command Words

IDENTIFY

What it means:	Name something only.
Examiners want:	A short, direct answer — one word or a short phrase.
Common mistake:	Students add unnecessary explanation, wasting time and gaining no extra marks.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
A printer because it prints things onto paper.	Laser printer.

EXAM TIP: If it says IDENTIFY, don't explain — just name it.

Teacher note: Use this to illustrate the cost of over-writing. A student who explains loses no marks here, but wastes time they need for higher-mark questions.

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STATE

What it means:	Give a fact only — no explanation needed.
Examiners want:	A direct technical statement.
Common mistake:	Students write long explanations when a short fact is all that is needed.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
Magnetic storage is useful because it stores files.	Uses magnetic fields to store data.

EXAM TIP: STATE = short fact only. One sentence maximum.

Teacher note: Pair with EXPLAIN questions to show students the difference in expected depth. State is often worth 1 mark — one clear point is enough.

DESCRIBE

What it means:	Say what happens — give features, steps, or characteristics.
Examiners want:	A clear account of a process, feature, or characteristic.
Common mistake:	Answers are too vague or simply repeat the question.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
It works well.	Data is broken into packets and each packet is transmitted independently across the network.

EXAM TIP: DESCRIBE the process — include steps, features, or how it works.

Teacher note: Encourage students to use sequencing words: first, then, next, finally. Describing a process as a sequence of steps tends to earn full marks.

EXPLAIN

What it means:	Say what happens AND why — give cause and effect.
Examiners want:	A linked statement showing cause and effect.
Common mistake:	Students state what happens but forget to give the reason.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
Cache improves performance.	Cache improves performance because frequently used data is stored closer to the CPU, reducing access time.

EXAM TIP: EXPLAIN = what happens + why. Always use: because, therefore, so, which means.

Teacher note: Train students to spot the missing "because". Mark their work and highlight every answer that states without reasoning — this single habit is worth several marks per paper.

COMPARE

What it means:	Give similarities and/or differences between two things.
Examiners want:	Linked comparisons — both sides must be addressed.
Common mistake:	Students describe only one side rather than making a direct linked comparison.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
RAM and ROM are different.	RAM is volatile, whereas ROM is non-volatile, meaning ROM retains data when power is lost.

EXAM TIP: COMPARE = link both sides. Use: whereas, however, unlike, in contrast.

Teacher note: Give students a comparison frame: "X is [property], whereas Y is [property]." This structure reliably earns full marks and is easy to practise.

DEFINE

What it means:	Give the precise technical meaning of a term.
Examiners want:	A complete, accurate technical definition using Cambridge terminology.
Common mistake:	Definitions are incomplete — students give partial meanings or use informal language.

✗ Bad answer	✓ Good answer
RAM is memory.	RAM is volatile primary storage used by the CPU to temporarily store data and instructions currently in use.

EXAM TIP: DEFINE = learn the Cambridge definition exactly. Vague definitions lose marks.

Teacher note: Build a class glossary of key definitions students must memorise verbatim. Cambridge mark schemes are very specific — informal phrasing is often not credited.

CALCULATE

What it means:	Work out a numerical answer, showing your method.
Examiners want:	Correct working shown step by step, with a final answer.
Common mistake:	Students write only the answer with no working — losing all method marks if the answer is wrong.

✗ Bad answer
Writing only the final answer.

✓ Good answer
Showing binary conversion steps clearly: 45 ÷ 2 = 22 r1, 22 ÷ 2 = 11 r0… = 00101101.

EXAM TIP: CALCULATE = always show working. Method marks are awarded even if the answer is wrong.

Teacher note: Reinforce this with every binary/hex question. A correct method with a wrong final answer can still earn 2 out of 3 marks — working shown is never wasted.

GIVE

What it means:	Provide a valid example or fact from memory.
Examiners want:	A relevant, specific example or fact — no explanation needed.
Common mistake:	Students over-complicate answers or give examples that are too broad.

✗ Bad answer
Writing unrelated or vague points.

✓ Good answer
SSD (Solid State Drive).

EXAM TIP: GIVE = one focused, relevant example or fact. Do not over-explain.

Teacher note: Pair with IDENTIFY practice. Both require brevity — students who over-write on these questions are losing time on higher-mark questions.

How Many Marks = How Much to Write

Marks	What is expected
1	One clear, accurate point.
2	Two distinct points, or one point with brief development.
3	A developed explanation — what happens and why, with an example if relevant.
4	Two developed points, each with explanation. Cover both sides if comparing.
6	Multiple linked explanations. Structure your answer clearly — examiner is looking for depth and breadth.

Teacher note: Marks guides help students self-regulate their answer length. Train them to look at the mark allocation before writing — it tells them exactly how much is needed.

FutureLogic Examiner Advice

✔ **Use technical vocabulary.**
Cambridge mark schemes reward precise terminology. Words like "volatile", "bandwidth", and "packet" earn marks — vague words like "good" or "fast" do not.

✔ **Read the command word first.**
Before reading the rest of the question, identify the command word. It tells you the depth of answer required.

✔ **Develop explanations fully.**
Never assume the examiner knows what you mean. Write cause AND effect, especially for Explain and Describe questions.

✔ **Avoid vague language.**
Words like "better", "faster", or "more efficient" are not credited unless you say why. Always qualify your statements.

FutureLogic Exam Checklist

☐	Did I read the command word before answering?
☐	Did I answer at the right depth for the marks available?
☐	Did I use technical vocabulary?
☐	Did I give cause AND effect for any Explain question?
☐	Did I link both sides for any Compare question?
☐	Did I show all working for any Calculate question?
☐	Did I check my answer makes sense?