If … then … example sheet

This resource accompanies the article **Three ways to help students master decoding command words** in *Education in Chemistry* which you can view at: **rsc.li/4fC3AuB**

How to use

Use this resource to help learners decode command words in assessments and stay focused on answering questions accurately to fulfil mark scheme criteria.

Please note: the examples and definitions in this list are a subset of the list of command words specified by AQA for their science GCSE examinations. Other exam boards in the UK use similar command words but their exact definitions vary. Make sure to check definitions and evaluate the strategies for your own context and before you share with learners.

Command word	What the word means	Strategy
Calculate	Use numbers given in the question to work out the answer.	• Highlight all the quantities, values and units in the question. • Break down working into different steps. • Use a calculator. • Double-check answer. • If calculating the mean, check for anomalies and exclude them.
Compare	Describe the similarities and/or differences between things, don't just write about one.	• Draw a table with the similarities and differences. • Statements must be comparative e.g. X is cheaper than Y. • If comparing data, include value and mention the size/magnitude of the difference.
Define	Specify the meaning of something.	• Give the definition/say what the word means.
Describe	Describe what you see, what happened or what will happen. The question may ask you to recall some facts, events or a process in an accurate way.	• State the characteristics (use data and units if given). • If a diagram/graph, state what you can see. • No need to explain.

Evaluate	Use the information supplied, as well as your knowledge and understanding, to consider evidence for and against when making a judgement.	• Draw a table with the advantages and disadvantages. • If evaluating data, include value e.g. X is Y times cheaper/more efficient. • End with a conclusion stating which is the best option and say why. For example: I think _____ is the better option because _____
Explain	Make something clear or state the reasons for something happening.	• State the reasons why. • Use words such as 'because' and 'so'.
Justify	Use evidence from the information supplied to support an answer.	• Use data and units if given • Add value e.g. X is Y times cheaper/more efficient. • Use words such as 'because' and 'so'. For example: I think _____ because _____
Plan	Write a method.	• List the variables: 1 × independent variable 1 × dependent variable 3 (or more) × control variables. • List/draw and label the equipment. • Give a list of instructions. • Includes repeats and calculations – make sure to check for anomalies and exclude them.