

Student Success Program

South Campus

Words to Watch for in Essay Questions

The following words are commonly found in essay test questions. Understanding them is essential to success on such questions. If you want to do well on essay tests, study this page thoroughly. Know these words backward and forward. To heighten your awareness of them, underline the words when you see them in a test question.

Analyze: Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part. Then give your opinion.

Compare: Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences.

Contrast: Show differences. Set in opposition.

Criticize: Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Criticism often involves analysis.

Define: Give the meaning, usually one that is specific to the course or subject. Explain the exact meaning. Definitions are usually short.

Describe: Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.

Discuss: Consider and debate or argue the pros and cons of an issue. Write about any conflict. Compare and contrast.

Evaluate: Emphasize positive and negative aspects. Include opinions and support these with some kind of proof, information, or examples.

Examples: Use brief stories, analogies, relevant events, or similar instances to support general statements and main ideas.

Explain: Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event.

Interpret: Cover existing understandings of a topic. Paraphrase, translate, condense, simplify, and/or diagnose as you write.

Justify: Present rationale, reasons for conclusions, recommendations, or results. Use proof, research, examples, or quotes to support justifications.

List: Record topics in numerical, developmental, or chronological order. Many times a brief description or explanation is expected, but the question will usually request it if desired. If in doubt, ask your instructor.

Outline: Present your answer in terms of major points followed by clarifying details or facts. Elaboration is *usually* unnecessary. It is wise to find out if your instructor wishes for you to outline by listing only main and subordinate points in short numbered phrases or to use the narrative format with complete sentences and paragraphs.

Prove: Support with facts (especially facts presented in class or in the text).

Relate: Show the connections between ideas or events. Provide a larger context.

Review: Mention important ideas, major points, and/or list topics from lectures or the textbook. Sometimes review means critically evaluate and/or give your opinion.

State: Explain precisely.

Summarize: Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions. Avoid unnecessary details.

Trace: Show the order of events or the progress of a subject or event.

If any of these terms is still unclear to you, go to your comprehensive dictionary. Thorough knowledge of these words helps you answer essay questions in ways that best demonstrate your understanding of the course content.

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