

Key Words On Essay Tests

These key words are commonly used in essay test questions. If you want to do well on an essay exam, learn these terms and make sure you understand the writing format for each. Underline these words on the exam, if you are allowed, to focus your attention.

Analyze: *Break question into parts and examine, interpret or discuss each part.*

Compare: *Look for similarities and differences between the things mentioned.*

Contrast: *Stress the dissimilarities.*

Criticize: *Evaluate, analyze and make judgements.*

Define: *Give a brief and accurate definition of the item.*

Describe: *Tell the primary characteristics of a situation, retell the important elements of a story, list qualities and parts.*

Diagram: *Represent an idea in "drawing form". Be sure to label your diagrams.*

Discuss: *Be analytical. Give reasons, pro and con. Write about conflict. Compare and contrast.*

Enumerate: *List several ideas, events, characteristics, reasons, etc.*

Evaluate: *Give both the positive and negative sides of the issue or topic. Give your opinion or cite an expert. Include evidence to support your evaluation.*

Explain: *Give reasons or causes for being as it is. Make an idea clear.*

Illustrate: *Use concrete examples or comparisons. If appropriate, draw a diagram.*

Interpret: *Describe, then evaluate. Explain meaning, describe relationships, or comment on.*

Justify: *Give your reasons for the conclusions you've reached.*

List: *Give an itemized, numbered list.*

Outline: *Describe main ideas, characteristics or events (not necessarily with number/letter divisions).*

Prove: *Give factual evidence, including logical or mathematical proof if appropriate. Especially use facts from class or text.*

Relate: *Show the connection between ideas or events.*

Review: *Give a summary and comment on important aspects of the question.*

State: *Explain precisely.*

Summarize: *Give a brief, condensed account. Avoid unnecessary details, comments or criticism.*

Trace: *Describe the progress or causes of a subject or event.*