

IMPORTANT WORDS IN ESSAY QUESTIONS

Here are some of the words that provide the critical instructions for answering essay questions. Observe which verb is used and do only what is required of you. Low grades are caused by ignoring these key words. We've provided a brief definition, summary and example for some of the key words that you are likely to come across.

KEY TERMS

1. **Identification Terms:** These direct you to present the bare facts such as a name, a phrase, a date, etc.

Examples: define, enumerate, identify, list, state, give, indicate, mention, name, cite.

DEFINE Give a concise and accurate definition of what is called for.

“Define social stratification”

ENUMERATE List of outline your reply.

“Enumerate upon the reasons for the downfall of the Roman Empire.”

IDENTIFY Show recognition

“Identify each picture by its title and name of the artist.”

LIST Provide an itemized list. Present a group of names or items in a category in concise form.

“List the musical instruments used in a symphony.”

STATE Identify briefly. No discussion required.

“State the law of gravitation.”

2. **Description Terms:** These ask you to tell about a topic with some detail.

Examples: describe, discuss, summarize, outline, trace, illustrate, review, develop, diagram, sketch.

DESCRIBE

Mention the chief characteristics or specific features of the topic. Show how it is different from similar or related items. Give an account of, tell about, give a word picture of.

“Describe Baroque art.”

“Describe the life cycle of the butterfly”

DISCUSS

Present various sides or points, talk over, consider the different sides. Usually longer than an explanation of the same subject.

“Discuss the factors to be considered in choosing a career.”

Discuss:

- 1. Select or think of relevant factors or issues related to the topic. State them. Perhaps state also causes, influences, effects, etc.**
- 2. State the pros and cons.**
- 3. Support your statements by referring to authority and/or reason.**
- 4. Draw conclusions and/or state your opinion.**

SUMMARIZE

Present the main points in condensed form.

“Summarized the characteristics of the Arabian horse.”

OUTLINE

Organize your answer into main points and details.

“Outline your plans for safety education.”

TRACE Present items in chronological sequence; give description of progress.

ILLUSTRATE Give examples. Or where appropriate, provide diagram or figure.

“Illustrate the visual process.”

3. **Relation Terms:** These direct you to describe the similarities, differences, or associations between two or more subjects.

Examples: analyze, compare and contrast, differentiate, distinguish, relate.

ANALYZE To examine critically the parts or elements.

“Analyze the role of learning and maturation in human development.”

Analyze:

1. **Introductory statement:** “State the structure and function of the whole.”
2. **Break it into parts.** State the parts.
3. **State the structure and function of each part and describe.**
4. **Show relationships among the parts to the whole.**
5. **Usually summarize by restating the structure and function of the major parts and relationship to the whole, or evaluate the effectiveness of the whole.**

COMPARE Point out both similarities and differences.

“Compare California’s population growth to that of New York.”

CONTRAST Point out differences.

“Contrast Gothic music to Baroque style.”

**DIFFERENTIATE
OR
DISTINGUISH**

When things are of approximately the same class, the word “differentiate or distinguish” is used. Show the differences.

“Distinguish the different types of carnivores.”
“Differentiate the two kinds of bacteria and the resultant type of disease.”

RELATE

Show the connection between the things mentioned; how one influences the other.

“Relate the importance of diet to mental alertness.”
“Show the relationship between diet and mental alertness.”

4. **Demonstration Terms:** These tell you to show why something is true or not true.

Examples: explain why, justify, prove, show, support, demonstrate.

EXPLAIN

Give reasons for what is asked. Make plain or clear; tell “how” to do; provide the causes.

“Explain the first aid procedures when moving a person with a broken leg.”

JUSTIFY

Show good reasons for; give your evidence; present facts to support your position.

“Justify U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.”

PROVE

Provide factual evidence or, where appropriate, a logical or mathematical proof.

“Prove a whale is a mammal.”

DEMONSTRATE

Show by example.

“Demonstrate the first aid techniques used to stop the wrist from bleeding.”

5. **Evaluation Term:** These ask you for your opinion or judgment on something.

Examples: evaluate, criticize, comment, interpret, assess, propose.

EVALUATE

Express an opinion concerning the worth or merit. Give the good and bad points; appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of something.

“Evaluate the relevancy of the Freshman Seminar Program at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.”

Evaluate:

- 1. Find the purpose for evaluation (determine the relevance to the class) i.e. "Evaluate a dress." If it is a sewing class – one purpose: if it is a dry cleaning class – another purpose.**
- 2. Decide on the criteria or standards by which you will measure the effectiveness of desirability of the object.**
- 3. Compare and contrast pertinent aspects of the object or idea or structure or whatever you are evaluating, with the criteria or standards.**
- 4. Judge how well the criteria are met and state your opinion based on how closely the criteria are met.**
- 5. One criterion may be critical, if so, state this.**
- 6. Usually, rank the criteria in terms of importance.**

CRITICIZE

Point out the weaknesses as well as the advantages or approval as well as disapproval of the idea presented. Make your own judgment about the item in question.

“Criticize Shakespeare’s use of the revenge motive in Hamlet.”

Criticize:

- 1. Find out the purpose – critique it for what purpose? There may be several, i.e. “Would this book be successful as a children’s book or as an adolescent’s book, or...?”**
- 2. Analyzed to find the criteria relevant to the purpose.**
- 3. Evaluate.**
- 4. State the strengths and weaknesses for each aspect.**

COMMENT

Freedom to express your own opinion in relation to the subject matter.

“Comment on the criminal justice system in Hawaii.”

INTERPRET

Translate, solve, or comment on a subject, usually giving your own judgment about it.

“Interpret section 61 of the Magna Charta dealing with rights to rebel.”

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Compare the planets Earth and Mars.

Compare:

- 1. Means to state similarities. You may point out differences, but emphasize similarities.**
- 2. Must say “They both... are... or have..., etc.”**
- 3. Statements of similarities are abstract, i.e. NOT “This is red and that is red.” But “They are both of the same color. They are red.”**
- 4. Decide on your method or organization.**

Answer: While this question would be answered in one or more paragraphs, it will be answered below in chart form in order to show in a more clear-cut fashion what is involved in making a comparison.

CHARACTERISTICS	EARTH	MARS
Shape	Approximately spherical	Approximately spherical
Diameter	Approximately 8000 miles	Approximately 4000 miles
Rotation	Approximately once in 24 hours.	Approximately once in 24 ½ hours
Revolution	Approximately once in 12 months	Approximately once in 23 months
Surface	Relatively uneven	Relatively flat
Distance from sun	Approximately 93,000,000 miles	Approximately 140,000,000 miles.

Question: Define the term “figure of speech”.

Define:

1. **Begin with broadest category (genus).**
2. **State next broadest category (species).**
3. **Continue differentiating until all other objects are ruled out.**
4. **Enrich by giving uses, functions, structure, appearance, setting, etc.**
5. **“A... is a...” NOT, “A... is to...”**

Answer: **A figure of speech is an expression in which words are used in other than their literal meaning. For example: “France was swept off her feet by Hitler’s army.”**

Question: Describe in one sentence Stephen Crane’s RED BADGE OF COURAGE.

Describe:

1. **Identify that which is relevant**
2. **State the relevant qualities.**
3. **Decide on a method of organization (use categories).**
4. **Use logical, sensory and effective categories.**
5. **Many “describe” questions include analysis and explanation.**

Answer: **THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE is a novel of the Civil War that vividly describes the ordeal under gunfire of its hero, a young recruit.**

Question: Explain why the United States did not join the League of Nations.

Explain:

1. **Tell how to do it or how it happens and/or why.**
2. **Use verbs, i.e. “Due to this, due to that...” or “This happened and caused that and that...”**
3. **Usually organize fact chronologically.**

Answer: **The many American isolationists of the period following World War I disliked the league’s Article Ten, which authorized military and economic sanctions against any nation resorting to war. This looked to them to be risky entanglement in Europe’s troubles. Certain Republican leaders opposed the League, in part at least, to defeat the Democrats. Groups such as the German-Americans disliked President Wilson and the**

League because of their connection with the peace treaty, which was harsh toward the Germans.

Question: **Contrast Latin America with Anglo America.**

Contrast:

1. Means to state differences.
2. Must say “They differ in... (color, method, content, etc.).”
3. Objects or ideas may be similar and different in the degree or the shade of green.
4. Decide on your method of organization.

Answer: (Again, while such a questions would usually be answered in one or more paragraphs, it will be answered below in chart form to illustrate the contrast in a more clear-cut fashion.)

CHARACTERISTICS	LATIN AMERICA	ANGLO AMERICA
Origin	Military conquest	Colonization by free people
Climate	Largely tropical	Temperate
Industrialization	Restricted	Advanced
European cultural influences	Comparatively strong	Comparatively weak
Religion	Comparatively uniform	Diverse
Compulsory education	Wide range of standards	Comparatively uniform

Excerpts from: Ralph C. Preston and Morton Botel, HOW TO STUDY (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc. c. 1974). P. 121-123.

Also adapted from the booklet: DIRECTIVE WORDS USED IN ESSAY EXAM QUESTIONS.