

Answering Essay Questions Made Easy

Back on Track



Instructors frequently remark that a major reason that students don't receive higher grades on essay exams is because they do not follow directions even when these directions are included in the question. These instructors add that many students don't seem to know how to recognize words in questions that give directions on how to construct an essay answer and what to include.

A list of important words in essay questions has been given below to help students answer essay questions with the kinds of responses that instructors seek. These words are called **KEY WORDS**! One suggestion many students have found helpful is to mark all the **KEY WORDS** in all test directions and question before beginning to answer. This makes it easier to organize an answer, know what to say, and know when enough has been written. If there is ever doubt about the clarity of a test question, ask the professor for clarification *before* beginning your answer.

KEY WORDS

ANALYZE	Explain, step by step or point by point while writing. Pay attention to who, what, where, when, why, and how in the answer. Include strengths, what, where, when, why, and how in the answer. Include strengths, weaknesses, pros and cons, research for and against.
COMPARE	Stress similarities and differences between objects, concepts, or ideas. (For example: "Compare Operant and Classical Conditioning")
CONTRAST	Emphasize the dissimilarities, differences, or unique and distinguishing characteristics in the response.
DEFINE	Clearly state the meaning, list qualities, traits, or characteristics.
DESCRIBE	Include traits, characteristics, or retell a story including those facts that summarize the essential features.
DISCUSS	Present significant characteristics, pros and cons, pertinent research, and the significance of each. Develop the arguments for and against or analyze the advantages, disadvantages, or problems.
EVALUATE	Emphasize positive and negative aspects. Include opinions and support these with some kind of proof, information, or examples. Normally, instructors don't like unsupported opinions from college students.
EXAMPLES	Use brief stories, analogies, relevant events, or similar instance to support general statements and main ideas.
EXPLAIN	Give reasons or justifications for something, or present causes, rationalizations, or how or why something occurred.
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 questions 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. No elaboration is usually necessary. It is wise to find out if your instructors wish for you to outline by listing only main and subordinate points in short numbered phrases or if they want you to use the narrative format with complete sentences and paragraphs.
PROVE	Include factual evidence, research, logic, and/or scientific proof that substantiates a case, a specific position, or a set of hypotheses.
RELATE	Clearly point out connections or relationships between two or more ideas.
REVIEW	Mention important ideas, major points, and/or list topics from lecture or the textbook. Sometimes review means critically evaluate and/or give your opinion.
SUMMARIZE	List major ideas, concepts, and consequences in a short paragraph or a sentence. Could also mean present a brief abstract of main ideas, compose a concise resume covering only the highlights and relevant details. Little elaboration is necessary.
TRACE	Discuss according to a pattern such as chronological order, according to a definite sequence, or by presenting phases or stages in order.

The four most important points to remember in answering essay questions are to:

- 1. Read questions carefully.**
- 2. Mark all key words in questions *before* answering.**
- 3. Do what the questions ask or what the statements say.**
- 4. If uncertain about a question, check with the instructor *before* answering.**

A helpful tip for taking exams in general is to look at the exam as an opportunity to succeed and not as an opportunity to fail. Being positive will help your memory whether there has been sufficient study or not. Negative attitudes will not only make vague material difficult to remember, they will reduce chances of recalling ideas and facts that were learned.

A final point is that *the number 1 technique* for taking any test is to be prepared and know the facts cold. There is no substitute for knowing the material.