Key Words For Essay Questions

The following words are commonly found in essay test questions. Understanding them is essential to success on these kinds of questions.

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

**Compare**: Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences. Comparisons generally ask for similarities more than differences.

**Contrast**: Show differences; set in opposition.

**Criticize**: Make judgments; evaluate comparative worth; criticism often involves analysis

**Define**: Give the meaning; usually a meaning specific to the course or subject. Determine the precise limits of the term to be defined. 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.

**Enumerate**: List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc.

**Illustrate**: Give concrete examples; explain clearly by using comparisons or examples.

**Interpret**: Comment upon, give examples, describe relationships. Explain the meaning. Describe, then evaluate.

**Outline**: Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events.

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

**State**: Explain precisely

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

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