



Key Task Words in Essay Questions

Essay questions often use key task words such as *discuss* or *define*. Help yourself to focus more quickly and avoid misinterpretation by becoming familiar with them. Always consult with your instructor if you have questions about the intent of any essay question.

- ✓ **Analyze** – to examine critically to show essential features
- ✓ **Compare** – to look at the characteristics or qualities of several things and identify their similarities; however, it often means to examine and show differences and similarities between two or more things
- ✓ **Contrast** – to identify the differences between things
- ✓ **Critique** – to evaluate and point out strong and weak points
- ✓ **Define** – to give a clear, detailed, and precise meaning
- ✓ **Describe** – to list characteristics or qualities; often means to discuss, explain, or identify in narrative or other form
- ✓ **Discuss** – to examine important characteristics of a topic or issue; often includes identifying the main points and the important questions within the topic
- ✓ **Elaborate** – to develop the theme or idea in greater detail
- ✓ **Evaluate** – to weigh the strengths, weaknesses, merits, worth, or truthfulness of a topic or argument
- ✓ **Explain** – to make a concept or topic understandable; often treats how and why things develop
- ✓ **Illustrate** – to give concrete examples of things; may be in written form, diagram, or picture
- ✓ **Interpret** – to explain the meaning or meaningfulness of something
- ✓ **Justify** – to argue in support of a position by giving evidence or reasons in its favor
- ✓ **List** – to present information in a series of short, discrete points
- ✓ **Narrate** – to tell a story or describe a series of events in chronological order
- ✓ **Outline** – to give the main points of a topic in appropriate order
- ✓ **Prove** – to give a convincing logical argument and evidence in support of the truth of some statement
- ✓ **Relate** – to identify the connections or relationships between topics or events
- ✓ **Review** – to summarize the main parts of a topic; often an evaluation by be included
- ✓ **Summarize** – to present concisely all main points