

Words to Watch for in Essay Questions

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

Compare: Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and 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. 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.

Evaluate: Give your opinion or cite the opinion of an expert. Include evidence to support the evaluation.

Explain: Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event.

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. (Does not necessarily mean “write a Roman numeral/ letter outline.”)

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

Relate: Show the connections between ideas or events. Provide a larger context.

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.