

Terms or Directives for Essays, Reports, and Answering Questions

These words are "directives" and ask you to answer, or present information, in a particular way. Review these, and most of all note that there are different ways of answering a question or writing a paper!

Compare: Examine qualities, or characteristics, to discover resemblances. "Compare" is usually stated as "compare with": you are to emphasize similarities, although differences may be mentioned.

Contrast: Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems.

Criticize: Express your judgment or correctness or merit. Discuss the limitations and good points or contributions of the plan or work in question.

Define: Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meanings. Details are not required but limitations of the definition should be briefly cited. You must keep in mind the class to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in the class.

Describe: In a descriptive answer you should recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative form.

Diagram: For a question which specifies a diagram you should present a drawing, chart, plan, or graphic representation in your answer. Generally you are expected to label the diagram and in some cases add a brief explanation or description.

Discuss: The term discuss, which appears often in essay questions, directs you to examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items involved. This type of question calls for a complete and entailed answer.

Enumerate: The word enumerate specifies a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate: In an evaluation question you are expected to present a careful appraisal of the problem stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal appraisal of both contributions and limitations.

Explain: In explanatory answers it is imperative that you clarify and interpret the material you present. In such an answer it is best to state the "how or why," reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results, and, where possible, state causes. The aim is to make plain the conditions which give rise to whatever you are examining.

Illustrate: A question which asks you to illustrate usually requires you to explain or clarify your answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret: An interpretation question is similar to one requiring explanation. You are expected to translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject and usually to give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Justify: When you are instructed to justify your answer you must prove or show grounds for decisions. In such an answer, evidence should be presented in convincing form.

List: Listing is similar to enumeration. You are expected in such questions to present an itemized series or tabulation. Such

answers should always be given in concise form.

Outline: An outline answer is organized description. You should give main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove: A question which requires proof is one which demands confirmation or verification. In such discussions you should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate: In a question which asks you to show the relationship or to relate, your answer should emphasize connections and associations in descriptive form.

Review: A review specifies a critical examination. You should analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence upon the major points of the problem.

State: In questions which direct you to specify, give, state, or present, you are called upon to express the high points in brief, clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.

Summarize: When you are asked to summarize or present a summarization, you should give in condensed form the main points or facts. All details, illustrations and elaboration are to be omitted.

Trace: When a question asks you to trace a course of events, you are to give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for probing or for deduction.

Source: Modified and adapted from: Communication Skills Development Center, Division of Student Affairs, University of South Carolina as found at <http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/essayexm.htm>

Source: University of St. Thomas. Study Guides & Strategies. Retrieved September 12, 2003 from, <http://www.iss.stthomas.edu/studyguides/essay%20terms.htm>