

Essay Exams & Common Words in Essay Questions

1. Remember to read the directions BEFORE you begin.

2. Don't study for total recall of names, dates, facts, and figures as you might for an objective test. Don't merely memorize material.

3. Learn main ideas, key terms, steps in an argument, stages in a process, etc.

Also memorize verbatim at least some key phrases, definitions, or short passages. These will give an authoritative air to your answer.

4. Do anticipate exam questions.

If, for example, you have studied both the fall of Greece and the fall of Rome since the last test, you can anticipate a question which asks you to compare and contrast these.

5. Read through the whole test first.

Answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. Jot down key words now while they are fresh in mind, but don't start writing your answer.

6. Budget your time.

Allow enough time at the end to go back and finish incomplete answers and to proofread your paper. When the time is up for one question, stop writing and begin the next one. On a six question exam, for example, six incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than three complete ones, so try not to leave any questions completely unanswered.

7. Answer the questions you know best first.

Don't panic about any you think you don't know. Stay calm.

8. Take time to structure your answer, even if you are in a hurry.

Whenever you can, work from a brief outline jotted down on scratch paper before you begin to write. Select what is clearly relevant; try to avoid a rambling effect.

9. Come straight to the point in your answer.

Make your very first sentence a summary of your main point. If you are writing a lengthy answer, summarize the key points you intend to make in an introductory paragraph.

10. Take time at the end to reread the exam. Make sure you have answered ALL parts of the question.

11. Qualify answers when in doubt.

It is better to say "Toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1884" when you can't remember whether it's 1884 or 1894. The approximate time may be all that is necessary, but you may lose credit for an incorrect date.

Common Words in Essay Exams

Compare - Examine qualities, or characteristics, in order to determine resemblances.

Contrast - Stress dissimilarities or differences of associated things.

Criticize - Express your judgment with respect to the correctness or merit of the factors under consideration.

Define - Write concise, clear, authoritative meanings, keeping in mind the class to which the item belongs, and whatever differentiated it from all other classes.

Discuss - Examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items.

Enumerate - A list or outline form of reply. Recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate – present a careful appraisal, stressing both advantages and limitations.

Explain - Clarify, elucidate, and interpret the material you present.

Illustrate - Present a figure, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret - Translate, exemplify, or comment upon the subject, and, usually, give your judgment or reaction.

Justify - Prove your thesis or show grounds for decision.

List - Present an itemized series or tabulation.

Outline - Give main points and essential supplementary materials in a systematic manner.

Prove - Establish something with certainty by citing evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate - Emphasize connections and associations.

Review - Analyze and comment briefly, in organized sequence, upon the major points.

State - Express the high points in brief, clear form.

Summarize - Give in condensed form the main points or facts.

Trace - Give a description of progress, sequence, or development from the point of origin.