

Understanding Cue Words and Exam Terms

Many students do poorly on their essays because they do not respond to the assignment correctly.

When writing essays, or taking tests and exams, it is important to recognize specific key words in the question, and to be able to understand exactly what information that word is asking for. Individual terms require a particular type of response.

Circle the key direction word before beginning to write to help you determine and stay focused on the purpose of the essay.

Assess – see evaluate.	Illustrate – Use extended vivid examples to demonstrate that you understand a concept, or to help the reader make connections that will lead them to understanding.
Analyze – Carefully examine the parts of a subject/topic to determine the significance of the whole.	Interpret – Find meaning or significance using subjective (personal) knowledge and experiences.
Argue – Build a convincing case for your point of view. Use persuasion, logic, reasoning, facts, and statistics.	Justify – Show or prove the validity of an idea by providing solid reasons.
Compare – Show the similarities between objects or concepts.	List – Organize the factual material item by item until the topic is thoroughly covered.
Contrast – Focus on the differences between objects or concepts.	Outline – Cover a topic by moving from a general idea into its specifics. Provide the main ideas and supporting details briefly in logical order.
Criticize – Closely examine strengths and weaknesses of one or several points. Use analysis and evaluation.	Prove – Verify or explain through argumentation and evidence.
Define – Discuss the meaning, characteristics, and qualities that separate an object or concept from all others.	Relate – Demonstrate how separate ideas, concepts, time periods, people, principles, etc. are connected.
Describe – Use sensory information to illustrate a person, place, or thing.	Review – Cover the important main ideas of a topic.
Discuss – Use multiple modes such as definition, description, examples, and evaluations to thoroughly cover the topic.	Summarize – Briefly restate the main ideas of a larger work. Be concise. Eliminate supporting details.
Evaluate – Examine different aspects of a topic carefully. Include opinion and judgment supported with facts.	Synthesize – Bring together separate elements or ideas to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of how they interrelate as a whole.
Explain – Make understandable by detailing background information, reasons, examples, processes, etc.	Trace – Chronologically document the successive stages, development, progress, origins, or history of a topic.