

# Important Words in Essay Questions

**AAAC**

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*Here are some of the words that provide the critical instructions for answering essay questions. We've provided a brief summary of what each tells you to do.*

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## **Compare**

Look for similarities and differences between the things mentioned (e.g., "Compare the U.S. and Confederate Constitutions").

## **Contrast**

Stress the dissimilarities.

## **Criticize**

Make your judgment about the items in question. Stress the deficiencies (e.g., "Criticize Paul Valéry's views on the poet's language").

## **Define**

Provide a concise and accurate definition of what is called for.

## **Describe**

Mention the chief characteristics of a situation or retell the essential features of a story (e.g., "Describe France on the eve of the revolution" or "Describe Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*").

## **Diagram**

Provide a drawing, chart, or plan.

## **Discuss**

Be analytical. Give reasons pro and con.

## **Evaluate**

Provide both positive and negative sides of the topic (e.g., "Evaluate the role of Disraeli in forming the modern Conservative Party").

## **Explain**

Give reasons for what is asked for. Provide the causes (e.g., "Explain the reasons for the notion of penetrance in population genetics").

## **Illustrate**

Use examples or, where appropriate, provide a diagram or figure.

## **Interpret**

Translate, solve, or comment on a subject, usually giving your judgment about it.

## **Justify**

Provide the reasons for your conclusions or for the statement made in the question (e.g., "Justify Henry Clay's interpretation of the Constitution").

## **List**

Provide an itemized list. The items should be numbered.

## **Outline**

Organize your answer into main points and subordinate points. While it is not necessary that your answer be in outline form, it helps to prepare it that way.

## **Prove**

Provide factual evidence or, where appropriate, a logical or mathematical proof.

## **Relate**

Show the connection between the things mentioned in the question. Note this does not mean to compare, so if you are asked to relate the American and French revolutions, you are not to compare them but to show how one influences the other.

## **Review**

Provide a summary, usually a critical one. A review usually also implies commenting on important aspects of the question.

## **Summarize**

Provide a summary, usually without comment or criticism.

## **Trace**

Describe the progress of some historical event or, where appropriate, describe the causes of some event.

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