

How to Create Prompts For Essays and Exams

Directives are the key words which appear in essay questions and give the students guidance about what the instructor is asking. If students don't understand the question, they cannot answer it properly. A good practice for writing prompts is to begin by visualizing what the ideal product would look like and then create a directive that will match this outcome. Using the correct term can help teachers and students understand the full expectation of a given essay prompt. The following are examples of key words to consider for use in essays and exam questions:

Analyze:

Break the subject down into its component parts and describe the importance of the part to the whole

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. Often combined with "contrast."

Contrast:

Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems. Often combined with "compare."

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 or chronological 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. At higher levels, discussion should involve presentation of multiple points of view.

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:

Judge the worth or value of the subject against objective criteria. The process of evaluating must begin by establishing a criteria.

Explain:

In explanatory answers it is imperative that the student clarify and interpret the material presented. 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.

Infer:

Draw conclusions based on implied meaning in a process that leads to a final, major conclusion

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.

Paraphrase:

This is restating the content in approximately the same length as the original. This should contain student's wording but not their ideas.

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, elaboration, and student opinions/reactions are to be omitted.

Synthesize:

Combine information from multiple sources to create a new insight

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.

*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/essayxm.htm> January 2002*