



Campus Academic Resource Program

Translating Key Words in Essay Prompts

To correctly answer a question one must first know what the question asks. A familiarity with the following list of terms and definitions will prove helpful when addressing most questions and prompts.

Account for: Your answer should provide reasons for the subject of the question.

Analyze: To analyze means to examine by breaking into individual elements, so an answer will take apart an idea, concept or statement in order to consider all the factors it consists of. Answers of this type should be methodical and organized.

Compare: Set items side by side and show their similarities and differences. A balanced (fair, objective) answer is expected.

Consider: Students should describe a subject and give their thoughts on it.

Contrast: The answer should only point out only the differences between two items.

Criticize: An answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses of a subject and also indicates any favorable aspects of the subject of the question. A balanced answer is expected.

Define: The answer should explain the precise meaning of a concept.

Describe: Requires an answer that says what something is like, how it works and so on.

Discuss: Explain an item or concept, and then gives details about it with supportive information, examples, points for and against, and explanations for the facts put forward. It is important to give both sides of an argument and come to a conclusion.

Elucidate: Explain what something means, make it clear (lucid).

Explain: An answer should offer a detailed and exact explanation of an idea or a set of reasons for a situation or attitude.

Explore: Examine the subject thoroughly and consider it from a variety of viewpoints.

Historicize: Answer should consist of an examination of social, cultural, political factors over time that affected a particular social phenomenon.

Illustrate: The answer should consist mainly of examples to demonstrate or prove the subject of the question. It is often added to another instruction.

Justify: An answer gives only the reasons for a position or argument. Answer the main objections likely to be made of them. Note, the proposition to be argued may be negative one.

Prove/Disprove: Each of these answers should demonstrate the logical arguments and/or evidence connected with a proposition. Prove requires the 'pro' points, while disprove requires the 'contra' points.

State: Express the relevant points briefly and clearly without lengthy discussion or minor details.

Summarize/outline: Contains a summary of all the available information about a subject, i.e. only the main points and not the details should be included. Questions of this type often require short answers.

Trace: Is found most frequently in historical questions (but not only in History courses) It requires the statement and brief description in logical or chronological order of the stages (steps) in the development of a theory, a person's life, a process, etc.

To what extent is X true?: An answer discusses and explains in what ways X is true and in what ways X is not true.