Five Common Types of Essay Exam Questions and What They Mean

Prompts are words that explain how you should structure your response to an essay exam question.

1. **Explain**
   State your opinion and describe your thought process. Clarify the meaning of these words within the context of your course.

   **Discuss**
   Consider various points of view; carefully analyze and give reasons to support your ideas.

   **Analyze**
   Summarize in detail and with a clear focus; consider parts of ideas and their relationships.

   **Explain**
   Clarify, interpret, give reasons for differences in opinion or results; analyze causes.

   **Illustrate**
   Use words, pictures, diagrams, or concrete examples to clarify a point.

   **Outline**
   Organize a description based on main and subordinate points, stress the arrangement and classification of the subject.

   **Trace**
   Describe the evolution, development, or progress of the subject in a narrative form.

2. **Assess**
   Respond to the question and defend a judgment on the issue, idea, or question involved. The underlying questions to answer include “to what extent?” and “how well?”.

   **Criticize**
   Judge the truth or usefulness of the views or factors mentioned in the question.

   **Interpret**
   Translate, give examples, or comment on a subject; include your own viewpoint.

   **Evaluate**
   Give your views, mention limitations and advantages; include the opinion of authorities and give evidence to support your position.

   **Review**
   Critically examine a subject; analyze and comment upon it or statements made about it.

3. **Compare**
   Analyze at least two different ideas in terms of their similarities and differences. You may also discuss the connections between these ideas.
Compare
Look for qualities that resemble each other, emphasize similarities, but also note differences.

Contrast
Stress the differences of ideas, concepts, events, and problems; also note similarities.

Relate
Show how ideas or concepts are connected to each other.

4. Argue
Take a position and defend your argument against reasonable alternatives.

Prove
Establish the truth of a statement by using evidence and logical reasoning.

Justify
Show strong reasons for decisions or conclusions; use convincing arguments based on evidence.

5. Identify
Give a direct answer. You may not be required to provide further explanation. These questions are not usually seen on essay exams. However, when they do appear, you are still expected to explain and elaborate upon your ideas.

List
Write a series of concise statements.

Enumerate
Write in a list or outline; make concise points one by one.

Describe
Recount, characterize, sketch, relate in a sequence or story.

Define
Give clear, concise, authoritative meanings.

State
Present main points in brief clear sequence; usually omit the minor details and examples.

Summarize
Give the main points or facts in condensed form; omit details and illustrations.

Diagram
Give a graphic answer, drawing, chart, plan, or schematic representation.

More resources for essay exams

Check out this resource to get more help and information on essay exam strategies:
Test and Exam Preparation – Queen’s University http://sass.queensu.ca/exam-prep/