

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. These explanations serve as general guidelines. Depending on your course, there may be exceptions to what these prompts mean.

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. In some contexts, analysis may involve evaluation.

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

Need more feedback on your exam preparation? Book an appointment with an Instructor:

<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

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/>

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.