

Deciphering Exam Essay Questions

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| STEP ONE: | Determine precisely what the question is asking. Underline key words (usually verbs or action words) and think about what the question is asking you to do . The following are some key words you may see. |
| ANALYZE: | Break into parts. Discuss, examine, or interpret each part. |
| COMPARE: | Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences. |
| CONTRAST: | Show difference. Set in opposition. |
| CRITICIZE: | Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Criticism involves analysis and evaluation. |
| DEFINE: | Explain the exact meaning of the term in relation to the course or subject. Determine the precise limits of the term being defined. |
| DESCRIBE: | Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities and parts. |
| DISCUSS: | Consider and debate or argue the pros and cons of an issue. Evaluate and justify. The meaning of "discuss" is vague. If possible ask for clarification. |
| EVALUATE: | Give your opinion or judgement or cite the opinions of experts. Include evidence to support the evaluation. |
| EXPLAIN: | Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event. |
| ILLUSTRATE: | Explain, clarify, or support using examples and/or diagrams. |

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| INTERPRET: | Explain the meaning. Describe, show relationships, comment on, and evaluate. |
| JUSTIFY: | To argue in support of some decision/conclusion to how sufficient evidence/reason in favor of something. Support your argument with facts, logical reasoning, and examples. |
| LABEL: | To point out and name specific parts of a figure/illustration. |
| LIST: | List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc. (Enumerate means the same thing.) |
| OUTLINE: | Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events. |
| PROVE: | Means the same as justify. Often used in the context of mathematical or scientific formula derivations. |
| RELATE: | Show the connections between ideas or events. Provide a larger context. |
| REVIEW: | To summarize and comment on the main parts of a problem/series of statements/events in an appropriate order. Evaluate/criticize some aspect of the material. |
| STATE: | Explain precisely. (Also see explain) |
| SUMMARIZE: | Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions, and justify. Focus on the issue and avoid unnecessary details. |
| TRACE: | Show the order of events or the progress of a subject/event. |
| STEP TWO: | Make an outline --it will help you organize your thoughts, write faster, keep on track, and include all the important information. |
| STEP THREE: | Write your essay answer. Get to the point. A long introduction is not required. Include a |

key part of the question in your opening sentence to help define your essay and keep you on topic.

Information adapted from: Ellis, D (1995) Becoming a master student (Canadian Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Gardner, J. et al. (1995). Your first-year experience: Success strategies for Canadian students. Toronto: Nelson.

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