

Deciphering Exam Essay Questions

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**. Underlining these words will help you to limit distractions and focus on the task. The following are some key words you may see.

ANALYZE:	Break into parts. Discuss or interpret each part.
COMPARE:	Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences.
CONTRAST:	Show differences between two or more items. Set in opposition.
CRITICIZE:	Make judgments. Evaluate the worth of the subject. Criticism involves analysis and evaluation.
DEFINE:	Explain the exact meaning of the term in relation to the course or subject. Determine the exact limits of the term.
DESCRIBE:	Give a detailed account. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.
DISCUSS:	Consider and debate the pros and cons of an issue. Evaluate and justify. The meaning of "discuss" is vague. Ask for clarification, if possible.
EVALUATE:	Give your opinion or judgement or cite the opinions of experts. Include evidence to support the evaluation.
EXPLAIN:	Clarify an idea. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event.
ILLUSTRATE:	Explain, clarify, or support using examples.
INTERPRET:	Explain the meaning. Describe, show relationships, comment on, and evaluate.
JUSTIFY:	Argue in support of a decision or conclusion. Show that there is sufficient evidence and reason in favor of something. Support your argument with facts, logical reasoning, and examples.
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:** Summarize and comment on the main parts of a work in order. Evaluate or criticize an aspect of the material.
- STATE:** Explain in a concise manner.
- SUMMARIZE:** Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions. Focus on the issue and avoid unnecessary details.
- TRACE:** Show the order of events or the progress of an event.

STEP TWO

Generate **content**. This step is the real challenge during the stress accompanying an exam; once you have a general argument, you can start writing. Concept mapping can help to speed up this step. Writing timed practice essays assigned by a friend ahead of time can also help you to increase the rate at which you generate content.

STEP THREE

Make an **outline**. It will help you organize your thoughts, write faster, keep on track, and include all the important information. Also, if you are unable to finish the essay, you are more likely to get partial marks for having a clear outline that conveys the remaining arguments and logic.

STEP FOUR

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 e.g., Q: Explain grief as a process by defining the five stages,

Thesis: Grief is complex and individualized process, and the major emotions and behaviours associated with it can be classified into five semi-sequential stages.

If you are struggling to get started, write the body of the essay first (leave room for an introduction). Introductions can be a challenge to write under pressure, leading to writer's block.

Tips for Scoring well:

The essay should be focused, with clear arguments

Avoid fluff. If you are having difficulty writing an argument, re-evaluate your outline

If your handwriting is illegible, you should ask to use a word processor/computer in advance of the exam.

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.