



Direction Words In Essay Exams

Most essay exams are not presented in the form of a question. Instead, they are often presented as a statement that includes a **direction word**. The direction word tells you what you should do when you write your answer to the item. Look for the direction word and be sure to do what it tells you to do.

Here are the direction words that are most frequently used by teachers when they write essay test items. The meaning of each direction word is provided and is followed by an example of an essay test item using that direction word. Get to know what each of these direction words tells you to do.

Analyze - *Analyze* tells you to break something down into its parts and show how the parts relate to each other to make the whole.

Analyze the factors that contribute to good health.

Compare – *Compare* tells you to show how two or more things are BOTH similar and different.

Compare the forms of government found in the United States and in China.

Contrast – *Contrast* tells you to show how two or more things are different.

Contrast the Republican and Democratic political platforms.

Define – *Define* tells you to explain the meaning of something in a brief, specific manner.

Define what is meant by "living life to the fullest."

Describe – *Describe* tells you to present a full and detailed picture of something in words to include important characteristics and qualities.

Describe what it was like to live in ancient Rome.

Diagram – *Diagram* tells you to illustrate something by drawing a picture of it and labeling its parts.

Diagram a modern commercial jet airplane.

Evaluate – *Evaluate* tells you to present both the positive and negative characteristics of something.

Evaluate the impact of rap music on American youth.

Explain – *Explain* tells you to provide facts and reasons to make something clear and understandable.

Explain why the American Civil War occurred.

Justify – *Justify* tells you to provide reasons and facts in support of something.

Justify the need for the federal income tax.

List – *List* tells you to present information about something as a series of brief numbered points.

List the ingredients needed to bake bread.

Outline – *Outline* tells you to present the most important information about something in a carefully organized manner.

Outline what it takes to be successful in school.

Summarize – *Summarize* tells you to present the main points about something in a brief form.

Summarize how Thomas Edison's inventions have made our lives better.

Trace – *Trace* tells you to present the order in which something occurred.

Trace the major events that led to America's Declaration of Independence.

Recognizing these direction words and knowing what they tell you to do will help you do well when taking an essay test.