



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

College of Undergraduate Studies

## Tutoring and Testing Center

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# Answering Essay Questions

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*A major reason students do not receive higher grades on essay exams is they miss important clues and directions. Many students fail to recognize words that give directions on how to construct an answer and what to include.*

A helpful tool is to mark all the **KEY WORDS** in all test directions and questions before beginning. This makes it easier to organize an answer, know what to say, and know when enough has been written. If there is ever doubt about the clarity of a test question, ask the professor for clarification *before* beginning to answer.

### **KEY WORDS**

- ANALYZE** Explain **step by step** or **point by point**. Pay attention to **who, what, where, when, why, and how**. Include **strengths, weaknesses, pros and cons, research for and against**.
- COMPARE** Stress **similarities** between objects, concepts, or ideas.
- CONTRAST** Emphasize the **dissimilarities, differences, or unique and distinguishing characteristics** in the response.
- DEFINE** Clearly **state the meaning, or list qualities, traits, or characteristics**.
- DESCRIBE** Include **traits, characteristics, or retell a story** including those facts that **summarize the essential features**.
- DISCUSS** Present **significant characteristics, pros and cons, pertinent research, and the significance of each. Develop the arguments for and against or analyze the advantages, disadvantages, or problems**.
- EVALUATE** Emphasize **positive and negative aspects**. Include **opinions and support** these with some kind of **proof, information, or examples**.
- EXAMPLES** Use **brief stories, analogies, relevant events, or similar instances** to support general statements and main ideas.

<b>EXPLAIN</b>	Give <b>reasons</b> or <b>justifications</b> for something, or present <b>causes</b> , <b>rationalizations</b> , or <b>how</b> or <b>why</b> something occurred.
<b>INTERPRET</b>	Cover <b>existing understandings</b> of a topic. <b>Paraphrase</b> , <b>translate</b> , <b>condense</b> , <b>simplify</b> , and/or <b>diagnose</b> as you write.
<b>JUSTIFY</b>	Present <b>rationale</b> , <b>reasons</b> for conclusions, recommendations, or results. Use <b>proof</b> , <b>research</b> , <b>examples</b> , or <b>quotes</b> to support justifications.
<b>LIST</b>	Record topics in <b>numerical</b> , <b>developmental</b> , or <b>chronological order</b> . Many times a brief description or explanation is expected, but the question will usually request it if desired. If in doubt, ask your instructor.
<b>OUTLINE</b>	Present your answer in terms of <b>major points followed by clarifying details</b> or facts. Elaboration is <i>usually</i> unnecessary. It is wise to find out if your instructor wishes for you to outline by listing only main and subordinate points in short numbered phrases or to use the narrative format with complete sentences and paragraphs.
<b>PROVE</b>	Include <b>factual evidence</b> , <b>research</b> , <b>logic</b> , and/or <b>scientific proof</b> that substantiates a case, a specific position, or a set of hypotheses.
<b>RELATE</b>	Clearly point out <b>connections</b> or <b>relationships</b> between 2 or more ideas.
<b>REVIEW</b>	<b>Mention important ideas</b> , <b>major points</b> , and/or <b>list topics</b> from lectures or the textbook. Sometimes review means <b>critically evaluate</b> and/or <b>give your opinion</b> .
<b>SUMMARIZE</b>	<b>List major ideas</b> , <b>concepts</b> , and <b>consequences</b> in a short paragraph or a sentence. Little elaboration is necessary.
<b>TRACE</b>	Discuss <b>according to a pattern</b> such as chronological order, according to a definite sequence, or by presenting phases or stages in order.

**The four most important points to remember in answering essay questions are:**

1. Read questions carefully.
2. Mark all **Key Words** in the questions before answering.
3. Do what the questions ask or what the statements say.
4. If uncertain about a question, check with the instructor before answering.

A final point is that ***the number one technique for taking any test is to be prepared and know the facts cold.*** There is no substitute for knowing the material.