Common Words Used in Essay Exams

Compare: Examine qualities, or characteristics, in order to determine resemblances.

Contrast: Stress dissimilarities or differences of associated things.

Criticize: Express your judgment with respect to the correctness or merit of the factors under consideration.

Define: Write concise, clear, authoritative meanings, keeping in mind the class to which the item belongs, and whatever differentiated it from all other classes.

Discuss: Examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items.

Enumerate: A list or outline form of reply. Recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate: Present a careful appraisal, stressing both advantages and limitations.

Explain: Clarify, elucidate, and interpret the material you present.

Illustrate: Present a figure, diagram, or concrete example.

Interpret: Translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject, and, usually, give your judgment or reaction.

Justify: Prove your thesis or show grounds for decision.

List: Present an itemized series or tabulation.

Outline: Give main points and essential supplementary materials in a systematic manner.

Prove: Establish something with certainty by citing evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate: Emphasize connections and associations.

Review: Analyze and comment briefly, in organized sequence, upon the major points.

State: Express the high points in brief, clear form.

Summarize: Give in condensed form the main points or facts.

Trace: Give a description of progress, sequence, or development from the point of origin.

Adapted from The Leader’s Guide to Supplemental Instruction, University Missouri-Kansas City.