

CLUE WORDS IN ESSAY QUESTIONS

Every essay question contains certain words called **clue words** that tell you exactly what to do. Clue words are extremely important in essay questions. Your instructor will not usually ask you to “write a short essay on Socrates.” Instead, s/he might ask you to “contrast the philosophy of Socrates with that of the Ionians.” Contrast is the clue word here. S/he has chosen this word because s/he wants a certain kind of answer. If s/he asks you to “list the parts of ___: s/he wants a list, not a story or an argument. List is the clue word here.

CLUE WORDS	ACTION REQUIRED
ANALYZE	Find the main ideas and show how they are related and why they are important.
COMMENT ON	Discuss, criticize, or explain its meaning as completely as possible.
COMPARE	Show both the similarities and differences.
CONTRAST	Show the differences.
CRITICIZE	Give your judgment or reasoned opinion of something, showing its good and bad points. It is not necessary to attack it.
DEFINE	Give the formal meaning by distinguishing it from related terms. This is often a matter of giving a memorized definition.
DESCRIBE	Write a detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence or story form.
DIAGRAM	Make a graph, chart, or drawing. Be sure you label it and add a brief explanation if necessary.
DISCUSS	Describe giving the details and explaining the pros and cons of it.
ENUMERATE	Name and list the main ideas one by one. Number them
EVALUATE	Give your opinion or some expert's opinion of the truth or importance of the concept. Tell the advantages and disadvantages
ILLUSTRATE	Explain or make it clear by concrete examples, comparison, or analogies.
INTERPRET	Give the meaning using examples and personal comments to make it clear.
JUSTIFY	Give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.

LIST	Produce a numbered list of words, sentences, or comments. Same as enumeration.
OUTLINE	Give a general summary. It should contain a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Omit minor details. Show the organization of the ideas.
PROVE	Show by argument or logic that it is true. The word “prove” has a very special meaning in mathematics and physics.
RELATE	Show the connections between things, telling how one causes or is like another.
REVIEW	Give a survey or summary in which you look at the important parts and criticize where needed.
STATE	Describe the main points in precise terms. Be formal. Use brief, clear sentences. Omit details or examples.
SUMMARIZE	Give a brief, condensed account of the main ideas. Omit details and examples.
TRACE	Follow the progress or history of the subject.

This list is too long for most students to memorize, but try to remember the six most often used clue words:

