

Essay Exams: Common Question Types

When approaching any essay exam, it is important to identify what kind of response is expected—that is, what is being asked of you and what information you are required to include. This handout outlines several question types and includes key words to look for when deciding how to respond to an essay prompt.

Identify

Essay Type	This type of essay asks for short, direct answers and usually does not require a fully developed response.
Questions to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What is this idea or concept?” • “What does this mean?” • “What are the main characteristics?”
Key Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List • Summarize • Enumerate • Describe • Define • State

Explain

Essay Type	This type of essay should be fully thought out and developed in as much detail as you have time for.
Questions to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why is this the case?” • “What are the main points?”
Key Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss • Analyze • Explain • Illustrate

Compare

Essay Type	This type of essay requires an analysis in essay form, which emphasizes similarities, differences, and connections between these ideas or concepts.
Questions to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What are the similarities?” • “What are the differences?”
Key Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare • Contrast • Relate

Argue

Essay Type	This type of essay requires that you take a position on an issue and defend your argument against reasonable alternatives.
Questions to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Why is this correct?”• “Why is this true?”
Key Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prove• Justify

Assess

Essay Type	This type of essay involves describing acceptable criteria and defending a judgment on the idea, issue, or question involved.
Questions to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “What does this idea mean?”• “Why is it important?”• “What are the strengths?”• “What are the weaknesses?”
Key Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Criticize• Evaluate• Interpret• Review• Critique

Activity

Identify the key verb(s) in the sample questions below. What type of question are you being asked to answer? What type of approach should you use?

1. Discuss the differences between the movie version and the print version of the same story. Use specific examples from each version to argue which version is better.
2. Define what is meant by “freedom of the press.”
3. Argue whether computers will or will not simulate most aspects of human intelligence in the next ten years.
4. Explain how oxygen is absorbed in the lungs.
5. Explain what seems to be the source of aggression in human beings. What can be done to lower the level of aggression in our society?
6. Define briefly the systems approach to business management. Illustrate how this differs from the traditional approach.
7. Compare the experience of owning a compact car to the experience of owning a full-sized car. Which would you rather own?