Definition of Terms Used In Essay Exams

Compare: When you are asked to compare, you should examine qualities or characteristics in order to discover resemblances. The term compare is usually stated as “compare with” and it implies that you are to emphasize similarities although differences maybe mentioned.

Contrast: When you are instructed to contrast, dissimilarities, differences, unlikeness of associated things, qualities, events, or problems should be stressed.

Criticize: In a criticism you should express your judgment with respect to the correctness or merit of the factors under consideration. You are expected to give the results of your own analysis and to discuss the limitations and good points or contributions of the plan or work in question.

Define: Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meanings. In such statements details are not required but boundaries or limitations of the definition should be briefly cited. You must keep in mind the class to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in the class.

Describe: In a descriptive answer you should recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative form.

Diagram: For a question that specifies a diagram, you should present a drawing, chart, plan or graphic representation in your answer. Generally, the student is also expected to label the diagram and, in some cases, to add a brief explanation or description.

Discuss: The term discuss, which appears often in essay questions, directs you to examine, analyze carefully, and present considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items involved. This type of question calls for a complete and detailed answer.

Enumerate: The word enumerate specifies a list or outline form of reply. In such questions you should recount, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

Evaluate: In an evaluation question you are expected to present a careful appraisal of the problem, stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal appraisal of both contributions and limitations.

Explain: In explanatory answers it is imperative that you clarify, elucidate, and interpret the material you present. In such an answer it is best to state the “how” or “why”; reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results; and, where possible, state causes. The aim is to make plain the conditions that give rise to whatever you are examining.

Illustrate: A question that asks you to illustrate usually requires you to explain or clarify your answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.
Interpret: An interpretation question is similar to one requiring explanation. You are expected to translate, exemplify, solve or comment upon the subject and usually to give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Justify: When you are instructed to justify your answer you must prove or show grounds for decisions. In such an answer, evidences should be presented in convincing form.

List: Listing is similar to enumeration. You are expected in such questions to present an itemized series or a tabulation. Such answers should always be given in concise form.

Outline: An outlined answer is an organized description. You should give main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Prove: A question that requires proof is one which demands confirmation or verification. In such discussion you should establish something with certainty by evaluation and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.

Relate: In a question which asks you to show the relationship or to relate, your answer should emphasize connections and association in descriptive form.

Review: A review specifies a critical examination. You should analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence upon the major points of the problem.

State: In questions which direct you to specify, give, state, or present you are called upon to express the high points in brief, clear narrative form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, may be omitted.

Summarize: When you are asked to summarize or present a summarization, you should give the main points or facts in condensed form. All details, illustrations and elaborations are to be omitted.

Trace: When a question asks you to trace a course of events, you are to give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for probing or deductions.