Cracking the Code for Essay Exams

Common Words Used in Essay Exams:

1. **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.
   
   [Enumerate the great Dutch painters of the seventh century.]

2. **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.
   
   [Evaluate the contributions of teaching machines.]

3. **Contrast**
   Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems.
   
   [Contrast the novels of Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray.]

4. **Explain**
   In explanatory answers it is imperative that you clarify 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 which give rise to whatever you are examining.
   
   [Explain how man can, at times, trigger a full-scale rainstorm.]

5. **Describe**
   In a descriptive answer you should recount, characterize, sketch or relate in narrative form.
   
   [Describe the Pyramids of Giza.]

6. **Define**
   Definitions call for concise, clear, authoritative meanings. Details are not required but 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.
   
   [Define the term “archetype.”]

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

8. **Compare**
   Examine qualities, or characteristics, to discover resemblances. “Compare” is usually stated as “compare with”: you are to emphasize similarities, although differences may be mentioned.
   
   [Compare the legislative branches of the state government and the national government.]

9. **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 entailed answer.
   
   [Discuss the use of pesticides in controlling mosquitos.]

10. **Criticize**
    Express your judgment or correctness or merit. Discuss the limitations and good points or contributions of the plan or work in question.
    
    [Criticize the increasing use of executive agreement in international negotiations.]

11. **Justify**
    Show good reasons for; give you evidence; present facts to support your position.
    
    [Justify the American entry in to World War II.]

12. **Trace**
    Follow the course; follow the trail of; give a description of progress.
    
    [Trace the development of television in school instruction.]

13. **Interpret**
    Make plain; give the meaning of; give your thinking about; translate.
    
    [Interpret the poetic line, “The sound of a cobweb snapping is the noise of my life.”]

14. **Prove**
    Establish the truth of something by giving factual evidence of logical reasons.
    
    [Prove that in a full-time employment economy, a society can get more of one product only by giving up another product.]

15. **Illustrate**
    Use a word picture, a diagram, a chart, or a concrete example to clarify a point.
    
    [Illustrate the use of catapults in the amphibious warfare of Alexander.]

16. **Summarize**
    Sum up; briefly give the main points.
    
    [Summarize the way in which man preserves food.]
Helpful Examples of Essay Answers:
Here is a series of short essay questions and answers. As you read them, think about:

a) Which one is the best
b) What is wrong with the other

1. Evaluate the French Impressionist movement on modern art.

Student A:
The French Impressionist movement included men like Van Gogh, Guuguin, Renois, and Matisse. These men used to meet frequently in Paris cafes and discuss their progress. They didn’t paint exactly what the thing they were painting looked like, but they brought in shadow effects and painted impressions, such as the name of their movement indicated. They were not very popular at the time, but have subsequently become popular, although I still think they are silly.

Student B:
The French Impressionist movement signaled the breaking from traditional photograph-like art. Its followers made use of shadow effects and impressions rather than exact likenesses. The movement enabled painting to free itself of having to stick to so-called reality and to make greater use of imagination. The artists became less restricted, experimented in color and in form, and created many new schools of art. At the same time, freedom seemed to be license for some artists, and they moved to painting abstractions, which in my opinion retarded the field of painting.

2. List four presidents preceding Eisenhower and state one accomplishment of each.

Student A:
Truman – war in Korea
Roosevelt – depression, war with Europe
Hoover – helped Belgians
Coolidge – prosperity

Student B:
Harry Truman – prosecuted the Korean War almost to conclusion
F.D. Roosevelt – led the country through the depression and through WWII.
Herbert Hoover – developed programs to try to offset the depression
Calvin Coolidge – led the country during great prosperity

3. What is SQ3R and how does it work?

Student A:
SQ3R is a method for reading textbooks with greater efficiency. It works by making the student pay greater attention to what he reads. This is achieved through five steps: (1) Survey – skim the chapter and read the summary. (2) Question – turn headings into chapters. (3) Read – read the section under the heading. (4) Recite – answer the questions of the Q-step. (5) Review – review the notes and perhaps skim again and read the summary.

Student B:
SQ3R is when you read textbooks by using five things – you survey, question, read, recite, review. You survey when you look over the chapter; you question when you make up questions; you read when you read; you recite when you answer questions; then you review.

Answers for the above questions:

1. Evaluate the French Impressionist movement on modern art.
   Both of these students knew the material quite well, although the latter expressed himself much better. The major difference, however, is that the first answer does not evaluate, but rather describes the movement – until the final clause in which the writer “evaluates” by saying he doesn’t like it. The second answer shows greater depth of understanding, as well as a grasp of the meaning of the question.

2. List four presidents preceding Eisenhower and state one accomplishment of each.
   The first answer is satisfactory, but minimally so. Hoover’s work with the Belgians took place much earlier and was not so important in its impact on the United States as his attempts to curb the depression. The second answer, although very brief, expresses the ideas much more clearly.

3. What is SQ3R and how does it work
   The first answer gives a fairly good, brief response, covering both parts of the question. The second makes several errors: (1) it never states what SQ3R is; (2) it uses very poor grammar and rhetoric; (3) it answers superficially and vaguely.