

HANDLING ESSAY EXAMS

Essays may vary in length from a few sentences to several pages. The key to writing an essay is being sure you understand the question. Read the directions very carefully; otherwise, you might not receive credit for your work regardless of how much you write, how neat you are, or how much you studied. As you read an essay question, look for **key words** to guide your answer.

Key Words

On the following pages are lists of **key words** that are often used in essay questions. *Be sure you understand what kinds of information the key words ask for!* Many times students know the material for an exam but fail to answer the question that is asked. Besides looking for key words, you should analyze an essay question to find the **topic** and **limiting words**. In the following example, the **topic** is italicized, the **key word** is bracketed, and the **limiting words** are underlined.

[Describe] three main principles of *Kant's philosophy*.

Notice that the topic, or your focus, is on Kant's philosophy, but you are limited to three main principles. The key word is *describe*, which means that you will want to give detailed explanations of the three main points.

Outline

Before you start writing, take a few moments to make a quick outline on a piece of scrap paper or in the margin of the test. This rough outline will help you organize your thoughts and will ensure that you cover the main points without getting wrapped up in a detail.

If you don't have enough time to finish the essay, attach your outline to show the professor where you were going. It may not help your grade, but it can't hurt it!

Organization

You will probably want to include a very brief introduction that shows your grasp of the issue and defines your direction. Some professors prefer that you simply start with a thesis statement (i.e. one sentence). Either way, express your strongest main point first, and continue your points in order of their strength. Conclude your essay with a brief summary statement that reaffirms your position on the topic you were describing.

Budgeting Your Time

Be aware of the time allowed for the exam! After you outline your essay, figure out how many minutes to allow for the introduction, conclusion, and each supporting point. This will keep you from spending too much time on one portion and not finishing the essay. Also, frequently check the clock or your watch as you write to be sure you budget enough time to answer all the questions. Remember, neatness is important too, so don't rush too much!

Key Word List¹

Analyze:	Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part.
Compare:	Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences.
Contrast:	Show differences. Set in opposition.
Criticize:	Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Criticism often involves analysis.
Define:	Give the meaning, usually a meaning specific to the course or subject. Determine the precise limits of the term to be defined. Explain the exact meaning. Definitions are usually short.
Describe:	Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.
Discuss:	Consider and debate or argue the pros and cons of an issue. Write about any conflict. Compare and contrast.
Enumerate:	List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc.
Evaluate:	Give your opinion or cite the opinion of an expert. Include evidence to support the evaluation.
Explain:	Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give the reasons for an event.
Illustrate:	Give concrete examples. Explain clearly by using comparisons or examples.
Interpret:	Comment upon, give examples, describe relationships. Explain the meaning. Describe, then evaluate.
Outline:	Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events. (Does not necessarily mean "write a Roman numeral/letter outline.")
Prove:	Support with facts (especially facts presented in class or in the text).
Relate:	Show the connections between ideas or events. Provide a larger context.
State:	Explain precisely.
Summarize:	Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions. Avoid unnecessary details.
Trace:	Show the order of events or progress of a subject or event.

¹Ellis, David. Becoming a Master Student. 7th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994. p. 167.