

Verbs Used in Essay Questions

You will be more effective as a student if you know what kind of response is required by different types of questions. In fact, professors construct tests and exams in order to evaluate their students' depth of thought on a given subject.

In the process of researching how we think, psychologist Benjamin Bloom (1956) recognized that test questions require different levels of thinking and created what is known as Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy shows the progressive demands in levels of thinking. Once you know the level of thinking required for essay questions, you can maximize how and what to study to answer them effectively. Often, interpreting the verbs used in essay questions can help to focus how the question should be answered.

Sometimes essay questions can be understood focusing on the concepts. Please see our tip sheet *Concept Words Used in Essay Questions*.

Knowledge: The Most Basic Level of Questioning

The most basic type of questions solicits basic knowledge. You are required at this level to memorize and recall.

Classify

Organize items, events or qualities into categories or into classes or groups that share traits. Librarians, for example, use a classification system for organizing books, and biologists for organizing plants and animals.

Describe

Systematically recount or explain in narrative form. When you describe something it is important to be both detailed and sequential.

Enumerate

List or outline by recounting, one by one, in concise form, the points required.

List

See enumerate. Concisely present an itemized series or tabulation.

Outline

Provide an organized description. Give main points and essential supplementary materials, omitting minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.

Summarize

Supply the main points or facts in condensed form. Omit details, illustrations, and elaborations.

Comprehension

Comprehension questions include remembering (knowing) and understanding the information. These questions require putting the ideas in your own words.

Compare

Similarities and associations of things, qualities, events or problems should be stressed. The term compare is usually stated as "compare with" and it implies that you are to emphasize similarities although differences may be mentioned.

Contrast

Dissimilarities, differences, unlikeness of associated things, qualities, events, or problems should be stressed.

Define

Definitions should be clear and concise, indicating what is important or not, and representing authoritative or official meanings for a discipline or subject area. In such statements, details are not required but limitations should be briefly cited. Keep in mind the class to which a thing belongs, the function it serves and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in the class. In some courses you are asked to create a definition of a concept that has been variously defined by experts. This type of question requires you to synthesize your understanding of course material to produce a succinct explanation of the concept.

Explain

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 state causes where possible. The aim is to make plain the conditions that give rise to whatever you are examining.

State

Express the main or key points in brief, clear form. Details, and usually illustrations or examples, should be omitted.

Application

Application questions require using known concepts in different contexts.

Illustrate

Explain or clarify your answer to the problem by presenting a figure, picture, diagram, or concrete example.

Demonstrate

Show how a concept or thing can be used.

Predict

Propose future developments based on theories or past and current events.

Trace

Describe progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin. Such narratives may call for probing or deductions.

Analysis

Analysis questions call for breaking down the overall structure of the ideas or concepts into components and explaining them.

Discuss

Examine, analyze carefully, and present pro and con considerations regarding the problems or items involved. Answer in a complete and detailed manner.

Relate

Emphasize connections and associations in descriptive form.

Distinguish

Emphasize differences in descriptive form.

Synthesis

Synthesis questions involve combining information from various sources to create new ideas.

Formulate

Create something new, using the learned concepts. Similar words are: compose, design, construct, and develop.

Diagram

Present a drawing, chart, plan, or graphic representation in your answer. Generally, you are also expected to label the diagram and, in some cases, to add a brief explanation or description.

Interpret

As in an explanation question, you are expected to translate, exemplify, solve, or comment upon the subject and usually to give your judgment or reaction to the problem.

Evaluation: The Highest Level of Questioning

Evaluation questions are the most demanding because they require presenting the overall worth of a concept using sufficient evidence and grounds.

Criticize

Express your judgment on the correctness or merit of the factors under consideration. Give the results of your own analysis and discuss the limitations and benefits or contributions of the plan, work, or concept in question.

Justify

Prove or show grounds for decisions. In such an answer, evidence should be presented in convincing form.

Prove

Provide confirmation or verification. In such discussions you should establish something with certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.

Evaluate

Present a careful appraisal of the problem, stressing both advantages and limitations. Evaluation implies authoritative and, to a lesser degree, personal consideration of both contributions and limitations.

Review

In a critical examination, analyze and comment briefly in organized sequence on the major points of the problem or issue.

Often these verbs are used in combination. In addition to indicating different levels of thinking the way these questions are presented may indicate how you should organize/structure your essay. Consider this example:

Illustrate and discuss the effects of the Vietnam War on American foreign policy.

This question asks first for evidence to support the notion that the Vietnam War did in fact influence American foreign policy and second for an examination of the cause and effect relationship between the war and policy changes. In most cases the discussion section of your essay should be longer.

Sources

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