



Answering Essay Questions

Essay questions are designed to provide students with the opportunity to display their understanding of a topic, their ability to think clearly, and their ability to communicate effectively in writing. You can answer this type of test question successfully if you are familiar with the stages of the writing process listed below:

- Stage One: Be familiar with the following direction terms used in essay questions:
- Argue: present your opinion and, through reasoning, defend it with examples
 - Compare: present similarities and differences
 - Contrast: present only the differences
 - Criticize / Evaluate: judge the strengths and weaknesses, pros and cons, or advantages and disadvantages
 - Define: explain the meaning and (often) provide an appropriate example
 - Describe / Illustrate: present the main points with clear examples that enhance the discussion
 - Differentiate / Distinguish: present the differences between two things
 - Discuss / Explain: present the main points, facts, and details of a topic; give reasons
 - Enumerate / List / Identify / Outline: write a list of the main points with brief explanations
 - Interpret: present your analysis of the topic using facts and reasoning
 - Justify / Prove: present evidence and reasons that support the topic
 - Summarize: briefly state the main ideas in an organized manner
 - Trace: state the main points in logical or chronological order

- ▶ Stage Two: Read and understand the question. Read each question carefully, and make sure that you understand them. Pay particular attention to the direction word (or words) used in the question. You may find it helpful to circle or underline them to help clarify your thinking.
- ▶ Stage Three: Jot down notes. When you have read the question and understand what it requires, take a minute to write a brief outline of the answer. Be sure to write down all the pertinent information then put the information in a logical order.
- ▶ Stage Four: Restate the question. To begin writing the answer to the question, rephrase the question in your opening sentence. It is important to repeat many of the words found in the question to show your instructor that your answer is clear and on target.
- ▶ Stage Five: Use transitional words. As you proceed to write the rest of your answer, help the instructor follow your answer by providing clues to your pattern of organization. Use words such as *first, second, next, finally, on the other hand, consequently, furthermore* and *in conclusion*.
- ▶ Stage Six: Proofread your answer. Because an essay test is also a test of your writing ability, be sure to spend time to review and proofread your answer. Look for mistakes in grammar and punctuation, check for misspelled or missing words, and omit needless words.