Answering Essay Questions

Essay questions have various requirements. You may be asked to compare, contrast, discuss, criticize, define, explain, prove, evaluate. . . . Each of these verbs has a precise meaning. More important, each of these key “direction” words calls for a certain technique in answering. A list follows:

- Analyze - examine critically to show essential features.
- Criticize - point out strong and weak points (evaluate).
- Compare - show differences and similarities between two or more things.
- Contrast - compare to show differences only.
- Define - give a clear, detailed, and precise meaning (who or what--never when or where).
- Describe - list physical characteristics but often means discuss, explain, identify or give account of.
- Discuss - (comment) - present essentials and their relationships.
- Elaborate - develop theme or idea in greater detail.
- Evaluate - appraise carefully, giving, positive and negative aspects (critique).
- Explain - clarify and interpret details of the problem, theory, etc. Present a step-by-step account of or analysis (how and why).
- Illustrate - explain or clarify by giving clear, pertinent examples (Give examples of).
- List - Set down under each other a series of facts, names, dates, etc. Write a series of numbered items.
- Outline - organize facts by arranging them in a series of headings and subheadings to show relationships.
- Prove - list all logical arguments supporting the statements.
- Summarize - present concisely all main points.

OTHER TIPS FOR TAKING THE EXAM

1. Before starting on any question begin a Memory Dump--jot down on a separate piece of paper words, thoughts, facts, figures--anything, which could be used to answer the questions. No need to be organized, you can do it when you begin each question in earnest. Add to your list for each question as material pops into your mind.
2. Answer the easiest question first. This relieves tension and gives you confidence, thus loosening up material from your memory as you proceed.
3. Outline your answer (drawing from Memory Dump) so you are organized and do not ramble.
4. Build each paragraph around one idea.
5. Label or number the parts of your essay.
6. Use the terminology of the course.
7. If you do not know the answer, write something at least.
8. Use a general answer if you do not know the specifics.
9. If time runs out, use the outline and expand upon it as time permits.
10. Reread the question after you have answered it to be sure you have covered it all.
11. If the question seems ambiguous, vague, or too broad, make clear your interpretation of the question before attempting to answer it.

Adapted from Texas Women's University