

27 IMPORTANT VERBS IN ESSAY TEST ITEMS

—AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

Gaining or losing points on an essay test can depend on how well you understand what you are asked to do on each item. Even if you thoroughly understand the test material, you may be penalized if you:

1. Fail to do anything you are asked to do, or—
2. Do anything you are not asked to do.

To receive maximum credit on an essay test, it is important that you DO EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE ASKED to do and NO MORE!

It is almost always a mistake to try to write down everything you know (or think you know) about a topic on an essay test. You are seldom asked to do that. Among the many pitfalls in doing so are:

1. It is time consuming;
2. You may "talk around" the question without answering it;
3. You may stretch your knowledge of the topic thin and end up showing what you don't know as well as what you know.

Read each item carefully and ask yourself "what is the simplest way to carry out the instructions given on this item?" Then respond to the item according to those "simple" instructions.

Of particular importance are the verbs that tell you what to do on each essay item. The following 27 verbs, with explanations of what you are to do when each verb appears, are common in essay test items. Some of these verbs have more than one meaning. Determine from the test item itself which is the most appropriate meaning.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of essay test verbs. The verbs do appear frequently in essay items, however, and they are often misinterpreted.

Verb used	means "do this"
1. Analyze	a. Separate an idea or statement into the parts that make it up. b. Tell what assumptions are necessary in order to accept an idea as valid.
2. Cite	a. Give evidence related to _____. b. Quote or refer to authorities on _____.
3. Classify	Place within a group with others having similar characteristics.
4. Compare	State similarities and differences.
5. Contrast	State differences.
6. Criticize	State your opinion of the merits of _____.
7. Define	a. State the meaning of _____. b. Classify _____.
8. Demonstrate	a. Prove (see verb #24). b. Illustrate (see verb #18).
9. Describe	Give an account of _____ so that the reader gets a mental picture.
10. Designate	a. Point out _____. b. Specify _____. c. Name _____.
11. Discuss	a. Talk about _____. b. Consider _____ by presenting various points of view.

12. **Discriminate**
Distinguish
Differentiate Contrast (see verb #5).
13. **Document** Give evidence to prove or support an idea.
14. **Enumerate** Give a concise list.
15. **Evaluate**
- State advantages or disadvantages of _____.
 - Give an opinion of the value of _____ (appraise).
 - State good points and bad points of _____.
16. **Explain**
- Make clear or plain.
 - Tell how something works.
 - Define _____.
17. **Identify**
- Classify _____.
 - Present a list of _____.
18. **Illustrate**
- Clarify a point or idea by using a concrete example.
 - Clarify by presenting a word "picture."
 - Clarify by use of a chart, diagram, etc.
19. **Interpret**
- State the meaning of _____.
 - Clarify _____.
 - Give your own ideas about _____.
 - Translate.
20. **Itemize** List in detail.
21. **Justify**
- State your evidence.
 - State good reasons in favor of _____.
22. **Order**
- Place in proper sequence.
 - Arrange
23. **List** Briefly state in an orderly fashion (as in a numbered column).
24. **Prove** Establish the truth of a statement by giving factual evidence and logical reasons. (In other words, present an argument to remove all reasonable doubt.)
25. **Relate**
- Give an account of _____. (Tell the story.)
 - Show the relationship between _____.
26. **Summarize**
- Give the main points briefly.
 - Make a generalization based on details already discussed, etc.
27. **Trace** Tell the sequence of events in the development of (or leading up to) _____.