

An essay will **demonstrate knowledge of the subject** at hand AND **organize that information** into a coherent argument or description. There is normally no one specific answer. You may include your own experiences, examples, or opinions, depending on what the essays calls for. However, there is usually certain information expected in the answer. Your essay should answer the question fully and specifically.

### Length

Essays may be short (1 paragraph) or long (1+ page). If a teacher gives you 3 inches on a page to respond, your essay should probably be a short paragraph. If you are told to write 1-2 pages, then plan for a full page. You should gauge the breadth and detail of your answer based on the length of the essay.

### Organization

Your response should be organized in the same way the question is. If there are multiple parts, respond to each part in the order they are presented in the question.

### Content

Essays usually require recalling information covered in the class. Figure out which information from class will respond to the question(s) asked. For example, if the question is about the scientific method, you probably need to be able to list the steps of the scientific method.

### Steps in Responding

1. **Read the directions and question** carefully (out loud if you are an aural learner!)
2. Analyze the question and **divide it into parts** (and subparts). Construct a rough outline from these parts. This is a “map” of your response. It will help you stay focused.
3. **Highlight instructional words** in the question (e.g., compare, contrast, list, describe).
4. Note any **immediate responses** that come to mind.
5. List the **vocabulary, concepts, or other class content** that relates to each part of the question. Skim your notes and any readings to search for this information. Mark any terms or concepts that you want to be sure to include. Be sure you understand them well.
6. **Respond to one part** of the question at a time. Use the words from the question in your answer. (This lets the reader know which part you are answering.)
7. Make your answer as **specific** as possible. Avoid generalities. If you make a general statement, back it up with a specific detail or example.
8. If your essay is lengthy, add an introductory statement at the beginning and a summary paragraph at the end.
9. **Review your answer.** Check for spelling, grammar, and omitted words.

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**Some Essay Test Direction Words<sup>1</sup>**

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- Analyze:** Break the thing/idea into its parts to show their relationship.
- Comment:** Explore the impact and meaning of something; give a note in explanation, criticism, or illustration of something written or said; remark or make an observation made as an expression of opinion (supported by evidence).
- Compare:** Show how two or more things are similar and different (sometimes this suggests emphasizing similarities).
- Contrast:** Show how two or more things are different.
- Criticize, interpret, review:** Express your judgment with respect to the correctness or merits of the factors under consideration. Give the results of your own analysis and discuss the strengths and limitations of the item in question.
- Define:** Give a concise, clear, authoritative meaning. Details are not required, but boundaries or limitations of the definition should be cited. Keep in mind how this item differs from other items in the class when defining it.
- Describe:** Present a full and detailed picture of something in words. Include important characteristics and qualities.
- Diagram, illustrate:** Present a drawing, chart, plan, or graphic representation in your answer. You may be expected to label the diagram or add a brief explanation or description.
- Discuss:** Examine, analyze carefully, and present detailed considerations pro and con regarding the problems or items involved.
- Evaluate:** Carefully assess the item in question, stressing both advantages and limitations, or positive and negative characteristics. This implies authoritative and to a lesser degree personal assessment.
- Explain:** Tell the "how" or "why." Describe and reconcile any differences in opinion, and state causes if possible. In brief, tell how it all happened.
- Justify, Prove:** Provide (factual) evidence or logical reasons to support something. Present the evidence in convincing form.
- List, enumerate:** Present information about something as a series of brief, numbered points (e.g., 1.xxx, 2. Xxx, 3 xxx). Be concise.
- Outline:** Give main (most important) points and essential supporting information in a brief form. Omit minor details, and present the information in a systematic arrangement or classification.
- Summarize:** Give the main points or facts in a brief form. Omit details, illustrations, and examples.
- Trace:** Present the order in which something occurred. Give a description of progress, historical sequence, or development from the point of origin.

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from from California Polytechnic State University Student Services website  
<http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl.html> 2/10/09.