KEY WORDS FOR ESSAY EXAMS
from: http://faculty.ccp.edu/dept/learn_lab/Ace/key1.htm (Community College of Pennsylvania)

The following words are commonly found in essay tests. Understanding them is essential to success on these tests. A sample essay question for each key word is also provided.

**Analyze** – Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part

*Analyze the effects of acid rain on a freshwater lake.*

**Compare** – Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences

*Compare the political systems of England and France.*

**Contrast** – Show differences. Set in opposition.

*Contrast the music of Beethoven and Bach.*

**Criticize** – Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. This often involves analysis.

*Criticize the efforts of law enforcement to catch the sniper.*

**Define** – Give the meaning, usually a meaning specific to a subject. Definitions are usually short.

*Define serendipity.*

**Describe** – Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.

*Describe a favorite restaurant.*

**Discuss** – Consider and debate the pros and cons of an issue. Write about any conflict. Compare and contrast.

*Discuss the ethical issues of cloning.*

**Enumerate** – List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc.

*Enumerate the steps to prepare for a test.*

**Evaluate** – Give your opinion or cite the opinions of experts. Include evidence to support the evaluation

*Evaluate the argument for the legalization of marijuana.*
**Explain** – Make an idea clear. Show logically how an idea is developed.
*Explain the forces that shaped the U.S. Constitution.*

**Illustrate** – Give concrete examples. Explain with word pictures.
*Illustrate how the U.S. aided Japan’s becoming a world power after World War II.*

**Interpret** – Comment upon, give examples, and describe relationships. Explain the meaning, and then evaluate.
*Interpret Marx’s statement that “religion is the opiate of the people.”*

**Outline** – Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events. (not necessarily with Roman numerals and/or letters).
*Outline the causes of the Civil War.*

**Prove** – Support with facts (especially those from class or the text).
*Prove that man descended from apes.*

**State** – Explain precisely.
*State the reasons for the separation of church and state.*

**Summarize** – Give a brief, condensed account. Avoid unnecessary details. Include conclusions.
*Summarize Barbara Ehrenreich’s essay “In Defense of Talk Shows.”*

**Trace** – Show the order of events or progress of a subject or event.
*Trace the rise of the Taliban to power.*