Understanding Short Answer and Essay Questions

Before You Can Answer a Question...

You need to understand it! Many students dive into short answer and essay questions and quickly begin writing their responses. While this may save a few minutes in the short term, it can lead to major problems. Before you can answer a question effectively, you need to make sure that you understand what it is asking you to do.

If, for example, the question asks you to compare the Harper administration to that of previous Prime Ministers, and instead you do a critical evaluation of it, you will write an incomplete answer and lose marks. In order to understand short answer and essay questions, you need to pay particular attention to words like “identify,” “explain,” “compare,” “argue,” “assess”: these words dictate the nature of the task before you.

The Types of Questions that You Can Expect

Consider the following sample essay questions:

1. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the two-party system.
2. Explain the process by which acid rain causes erosion.
3. Argue for or against the feasibility of world government as a solution to the hostilities between nation states.
4. Compare the use of the epic form in classical and neoclassical verse.
5. Assess the significance of the American civil rights movement in the struggle for social justice.

These questions are not only different in kind but in escalating degree of complexity: the first only requires that things be correctly “identified” or named, while the last almost amounts to requiring the student to “identify, explain and compare in order to assess.” Understanding what you need to include in order to fully answer a question depends on interpreting the degree of complexity and range of information that it is asking for.

Five Common Questions

There are overlaps and crossovers, of course, but most short answer and essay questions belong primarily in one of these five categories.

1. Identify questions: Provide a detailed description of an event, process, or idea. These questions often include words such as Identify, Enumerate, Define, Describe, List, or Summarize.
2. Explain questions: Analyze why, how, or in what order a set of events or processes occur. These questions often include words such as Explain, Account for, Analyze, Discuss, Trace, or Outline.
3. **Compare questions**: Analyze the similarities and differences; answer with an investigation of a relationship. These questions often include words such as **Compare, Contrast, Distinguish, Relate**

4. **Argue questions**: Answer with a defence of a position that considers potential detractors. These questions often include words such as **Argue, Agree, Disagree, Debate, Defend, Justify, Prove**

5. **Assess Questions**: Answer with an evaluation. These questions often include words such as **Assess, Criticize, Evaluate, Interpret, Propose, Review**

**Understanding Identify Questions**
As a general rule, “Identify” questions demand detailed, information-packed answers. Rather than asking you for your opinion or evaluation, identify questions ask you to accurately recall what you have learned about a topic. Identify questions might include the following: “Enumerate the varieties of food-borne illnesses caused by the ingestion of improperly preserved foods”; “List the seven deadly sins”; “Summarize Kant’s argument for the Categorical Imperative.” Such questions are often used on the short answer portion of exams as they elicit concise paragraphs, not fully developed arguments or assessments.

**Understanding Argue Questions**
All essays are forms of argument in the general sense of being developed from a premise towards a conclusion via a structure of support built on logic and evidence. Some, though, are argumentative in the more common sense of requiring that a position be defended against potential detractors. For example, if the question were, “Prove that the nuclear industry provides a safe form of power,” you would need to provide evidence to show that nuclear power is safe, despite what its critics might argue.

**Understanding Compare/Contrast Questions**
These questions are popular because they encourage students to undertake more complex analyses than they might if they were asked to discuss only one book, or play, or political system, or whatever. We see a thing more precisely and astutely when we have been asked to distinguish it from something else. The task of a compare/contrast question is not simply to describe two events, characters, or ideas, but to analyse them in relation to one another. It is also important to note that comparisons generally involve pointing out BOTH similarities AND differences, though you can certainly argue that the two things you are comparing are more similar than they are different or vice versa.

**Understanding Explain Questions**
“Explain” questions are somewhat more demanding than identify questions: they are the “why” to identify’s “what.” One is often expected to establish cause and effect relationships or to develop the steps of a process or series of events in explain questions. Thus, one is not asked to “enumerate the varieties of food-borne illnesses caused by the ingestion of improperly preserved foods,” but to “discuss the processes by which improperly preserved foods cause food borne illnesses.”
Understanding the Assess Question

Just as all essay questions require an answer in the form of an argument, all require you to exercise your judgement or powers of discrimination in determining what is relevant or not, significant or not, authentic or not. “Assess” questions require that judgement to become the focus and purpose of the essay. In assess questions, one is frequently asked to measure degree, to answer, “How well?” To do this, sensible criteria must be established against which to judge the subject in question, and then one’s judgement must be defended.

For Further Resources

For information about writing the essay exam as well as many issues relating to exam preparation, please visit our website.