INSTRUCTION / DIRECTION WORDS FOR ESSAY QUESTIONS

As you take essay tests, pay particular attention to the instruction or direction words to make sure that you are answering the specific question that is being asked.

ANALYZE  Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part.

COMPARE  Show similarities (and differences, if that is how the professor defines "compare").

CONTRAST  Emphasize the differences.

CRITICIZE  Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Criticism often involves analysis.

DEFINE  Give the meaning. Explain it accurately and make it specific to the course.

DESCRIBE  Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.

DISCUSS  Consider important characteristics, main points, pros/cons, conflicts, etc.

EVALUATE  React to the topic in a logical way. Discuss the merits, strengths, weaknesses, advantages, or limitations of the topic. Include evidence to support the evaluation.

EXPLAIN  Give facts, details, and reasons that make the idea or concept clear and understandable.

INTERPRET  Comment upon, give examples, and describe relationships. Explain the meaning. Describe, then evaluate.

JUSTIFY  Give reasons that support an action, event, or policy.

OUTLINE  Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events (usually with little elaboration).

PROVE  Support with facts. Demonstrate or establish that a concept or theory is correct, logical, or valid.

RELATE  Discuss the connections, correlations, relationships, and points of association among ideas and facts.

References: McWhorter, Kathleen. College Reading and Study Skills, 4th Ed.
Ellis, David. Becoming a Master Student, 5th Ed.