



Understand the Instructions and Action Verbs

Students may be asked to list, discuss, describe, explain, analyze, etc.; these are not all identical tasks. Also, the question may call for more than one task, such as both to identify and explain. Students should understand that some tasks are more complex than others. For example, composing a list may not even require a complete sentence, but students may need to write several paragraphs for a satisfactory discussion, including well-developed examples as support, in order to adequately explain some phenomenon. Here are some of the most common action words used in past free-response questions:

- **List/Identify:** Listing or identifying is a task that requires no more than a simple enumeration of some factors or characteristics. A list does not require any causal explanations. For example, a student might be asked to list or identify three factors that increase political legitimacy. Such a list could be bulleted or numbered, and might include such factors as a written constitution, competitive elections, and transparent institutions.
- **Define:** A definition requires a student to provide a meaning for a word or concept. Examples may help to demonstrate understanding of the definition. Students may be instructed to note the term's significance as part of the definition.
- **Describe:** A description involves providing a depiction or portrayal of a phenomenon or its most significant characteristics. Descriptions most often address "what" questions. For example, if students are asked to describe a political cleavage in Mexico, they must demonstrate knowledge that the cleavage has at least two sides by describing what the two sides are.
- **Discuss:** Discussions generally require that students explore relationships between different concepts or phenomena. Identifying, describing, and explaining could be required tasks involved in writing a satisfactory discussion.
- **Explain:** An explanation involves the exploration of possible causal relationships. When providing explanations, students should identify and discuss logical connections or causal patterns that exist between or among various political phenomena.
- **Compare/Contrast:** This task requires students to make specific links between two or more concepts, occurrences, or countries. Thus, students cannot simply have a one-paragraph description of how women participate in Iranian politics and a one-paragraph description of how they participate in Nigeria with no connections between the two paragraphs. To correctly compare participation of women in Nigeria and Iran there must be cross paragraph references and development of a comparative structure. The students must provide the connective tissue. They should understand that it is important to note similarities AND differences.
- **Evaluate/Assess:** An evaluation or assessment involves considering how well something meets a certain standard, and as such generally requires a thesis. It is important to identify the criteria used in the evaluation. If no criteria are explicitly given in the question, students should take care to clearly identify the ones that they choose to employ. Specific examples may be applied to the criteria to support the student's thesis. Evaluation or assessment requires explicit connections between the thesis or argument and the supporting evidence.
- **Analyze:** This task usually requires separating a phenomenon into its component parts or characteristics as a way of understanding the whole. An analysis should yield explicit conclusions that are explained or supported by specific evidence and/or well-reasoned arguments.