There are magical keywords in the prompts that students have to know. The graders are looking for very specific things, and if the wrong question is answered, little or no credit can be given. They expect students to know the fine distinctions between definitions, descriptions, and explanations, and to be sensitive to what is asked for. Here are some of the important words:

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| --- | --- |
| **Identify** | Name one or more items, list the parts, or give an example (meaning depends on context). |
| **Define** | Give a meaning for a word or phrase. |
| **Describe** | Provide details in words that help someone visualize or construct a mental model of the object being discussed. |
| **Explain** | Say why or how something happens. The answer should give reasons, not just a description. |
| **Compare** | Consider two or more objects or concepts and point out what is similar. |
| **Contrast** | Consider two or more objects or concepts and point out what is different. “Compare and contrast” is a standard phrase asking for both similarities and differences—it is not asking for explanations or descriptions of the objects separately, but only of their similarities and differences.  Listing “X has A, B, and C, and Y has C, D, E” is not an answer, but the same content expressed as “X and Y both have C. A and B are properties of X but not Y, while D and E are properties of Y but not X” does answer a compare-and-contrast question.  The graders are picky about this sort of trivial presentation change, so be sure to present things in precisely the form the questions asks for. |
| **Discuss** | Consider different theories or points of view.  This is a more general prompt than the others, often asking for all of the above aspects. |

**ADDITIONALLY…**

* Be precise in your answers.  If the question asks for four examples of something, give exactly four, not three and not five.  Only the first four count positively, and anything after that can only hurt your score, not help it.
* When asked to give the effect of something, consider both positive and negative effects.  What happens as a result of the change?  What no longer happens? What increases? What decreases?  Both direct and indirect effects may be needed.
* An essay, when requested, needs to be in paragraphs with full sentences.  An outline or a list will not earn many points when an essay has been requested.
* Write legibly in dark blue or black ink—not pink, purple, green, or other “fun” colors.
* Use a writing implement that allows you to write neatly on the cheap paper provided. Felt-tip markers and fountain pens soak through and become illegible, so a ballpoint pen is a better option.
* Write large enough for elderly teachers who need reading glasses to be able to read your writing.  Packing more in by writing microscopically does nothing but giver your grader a headache, which is not likely to increase your grade.
* Make sure you answer the question effectively, but do not waste your time repeating the question.
* On a multi-part question, start a new paragraph for each part, and label the parts the same as the labels in the question (a, b, c, d).  This greatly speeds the reader’s task of finding whether you’ve done each part and what your answers are for each.
* Each question has a designated place in the “pink booklet” for the answer.  Put the answer on the right page—don’t run the answers together to “save paper”.
* Practice writing AP-style short essays frequently before taking the exam.  Writing a short essay under time pressure is a skill that is valuable for test-taking and it does not come naturally to people—even good writers need to learn to present an idea quickly and clearly without time to do rewrites.
* Label both axes of any graphs, with the independent variable on the X-axis and the dependent variable on the Y-axis.  Put units on the axis labels, and provide a descriptive title for the graph above the graph.
* Secret code:  The AP graders interpret “plot” to mean just putting data points on the graph, while “graph” means to draw a line or curve.
* Don’t extend curves for graphs beyond the provided data (unless asked to predict or extrapolate).
* If you need to put multiple curves on the same graph, make sure that the different curves are clearly labeled.  An arrow from a label to each curve is probably easier than coming up with different dot or dash styles.