Predicting Essay Questions

Anticipating or predicting possible essay questions and preparing an outline for each question is an excellent way to prepare for an essay exam. In order to predict essay questions, you should be aware that ideas are often presented in one of four basic types of organization: 1) Listing, 2) Sequence of Events, 3) Compare/Contrast, and 4) Personal Interpretation.

While the questions you find on your exams may vary according to the exact directional words used, these four basic types of organization should be sufficient for your predictions and practice answers.

Listing Questions
On an essay exam, you may be asked to write about a list of important items. It is therefore important to memorize the items and to be prepared to use these items in a number of ways, depending upon the specific directional word used in the question. Directional words often used to test your knowledge of ideas organized into lists include:

list   enumerate   describe   discuss   define

Sequence of Events Questions
Ideas presented in a special order require you to remember the steps in the order in which things happen. To note or recall facts in proper sequence, you must understand the relationship of the ideas. Exam questions which require a sequence answer will often contain the following words:

trace   give the steps   summarize   develop the order of events

Compare/Contrast Questions
Ideas, persons, places, or things are often compared or contrasted. Be constantly on the lookout for ideas that are alike in at least one way, yet different in another. Compare/Contrast questions usually include one of the following words:

show the differences (or similarities)   compare   contrast   relate

Personal Interpretation Questions
Often professors will require you to describe a situation and present your own opinions or interpretation. Courses in political science, philosophy, literature, and history often introduce information which suggests these types of questions. Directional words often found in this type of question include:

criticize   evaluate   interpret   justify