Commonly Used Key Words in Writing Prompts

**Analyze:** Break into separate parts and discuss, examine, or interpret each part.

**Compare:** Examine two or more things. Identify similarities and differences.

**Contrast:** Show differences and set in oppositions.

**Criticize:** Make judgments. Evaluate comparative worth. Note that criticism often involves analysis.

**Define:** Give the meaning (usually a meaning specific to the course or subject). Explain the exact meaning. Definitions are usually short.

**Describe:** Give a detailed account. Make a picture with words. List characteristics, qualities, and parts.

**Discuss:** Consider and debate or argue the pros and cons of an issue. Write about any conflict. Compare and contrast if appropriate.

**Enumerate:** List several ideas, aspects, events, things, qualities, reasons, etc.

**Evaluate** Give your opinion or cite the opinion of an expert. Assess the value or significance of the topic.

**Explain:** Make an idea clear. Show logically how a concept is developed. Give reasons for an event.

**Illustrate:** Give concrete examples. Explain clearly by using comparisons or examples.

**Interpret:** Comment upon, give examples, describe relationships. Explain the meaning. Describe then evaluate.

**Outline:** Describe main ideas, characteristics, or events.

**Prove:** Support with facts

**Relate:** Show the connections between one idea and another. Prove a larger context.

**State:** Explain precisely.

**Summarize:** Give a brief, condensed account. Include conclusions. Avoid unnecessary details.

**Trace:** Show the order of events or progress of a subject or event.

Taken from Dave Ellis’ *Becoming a Master Student*, 1995.