

Key Terms for Writing in Biology

Writing about biology requires a very specific way of thinking before you put pen to paper. In all types of academic writing you will be asked to Define and Describe and possibly Discuss.

Define:	Give a concise, clear meaning with any limitations of the definition briefly cited. Keep in mind the class to which a thing belongs and whatever differentiates the particular object from all others in that class. If the Instructor has specified a definition, this is the one you should use.
Describe:	Relate in narrative form what the requested information looks like, sounds like, and feels like, including summarizing events or information.
Discuss:	Elaborate and explore the nature, proportion, function, interrelationship, etc. of the item or process. Offer evidence to support your claims.

This will mean that you always use a working definition that is based on **Structure** and **Function** whenever you are asked to define and describe. What is it and what does it do? To this you will add any unique characteristics including how it functions and the significance. Each point will generally be worth a half mark.

This information will build into Compare and Contrast questions. Without define and describe, you cannot compare and contrast.

Compare:	Examine qualities, or characteristics, to discover resemblances. "Compare" is usually stated as "compare with": and you emphasize similarities; differences may be mentioned.
Contrast:	Stress dissimilarities, differences, or unlikeness of things, qualities, events, or problems. Tell how two or more topics are different from associated things, qualities, or events, etc.

What are you comparing and contrasting? **Structure** and **Function!** You will explain **How** or **Why**. Comparing will require a similarity with details or a couple of similarities for each mark. Differences are worth two marks (two clear differences and/or unique examples).

Your compare and contrast documentation must go beyond what you were given by the question. Do not paraphrase the question. Two to three sentences would be ideal. Your answer might run up to five or six sentences but be aware that this often demonstrates unclear thought. A high word count will not earn you marks.

You may write your compare and contrast in either table or paragraph format depending on the requirements from your instructor. These must be parallel differences not block differences! It would be best if you use "whereas" statements (do not use: does not, composed of, allows, helps, aids, assisted by, etc.).

Criteria for Success

Explain:	Clarify and interpret the material you present. It is best to state the "how" and/or "why," reconcile any differences in opinion or experimental results, and, where possible, state causes. Make plain the conditions which give rise to whatever you are examining.
Examine:	Investigate the essential elements of an issue / topic and the relationship between them.
Synthesize:	Blend two or more things you know in order to produce something original.

Clarity is key and there must be enough detail so that anyone can understand your writing.

Assume your reader needs all the information. They will not assume anything and you must tell them and if you do not, they will point it out and you will lose marks.

Informed by: Pechenik, J.A. (2010) *A short guide to writing about biology*. Boston, MA, USA: Pearson.

