

Analysing the Question

Understanding what the question means and what it is asking you to do are important steps in the assignment writing process. Making an error here may mean your assignment does not answer the set question correctly, so a careful analysis of the question is necessary.

You need to use question analysis for all assignments, exam essays and short answer questions. If you learn the steps for question analysis and take 10-15 minutes to think through the question in this systematic way, then you will have a good start to writing a successful essay. The following information can be applied to all question analysis:

1. Read the whole question twice
2. Look for instruction words
3. Look for topic words
4. Look for any other words that restrict the topic in any way

1. Read the whole question TWICE

It is important that you interpret the question accurately and clearly. First impressions can lead to an error which may mean you do not answer the question correctly and you lose marks.

2. Instruction words

In most of your assignment questions, you will find **one or more** instruction words. Instruction words tell you what your essay should do. To interpret the question accurately, you **MUST** understand exactly what these words mean.

Words such as what, how and why are, of course, commonly used in questions. Other instruction words include:

Account for	Give reasons for something.
Analyse	Focus on the 'how' and 'why' of an issue or topic. Do not simply describe or summarise.
Compare	Find similarities and differences between two or more objects, ideas, events or theories.
Contrast	Similar to compare, but differences should be emphasised
Criticise	Assess the merit of something. Consider both good points and bad points and give the results of your analysis.
Define	Give precise meanings with key details. Examples may be useful.
Describe	Recall specific details about size, cost, texture, appearance etc.
Discuss	Present a point of view after considering both sides of an issue or question. Your opinion should be supported by arguments and evidence.
Evaluate	Consider both strengths and weaknesses and make a judgement.
Explain	Relate how something happens in the order in which it occurs, or, clarify reasons, causes and effects.
Illustrate	Use examples to demonstrate a point.
Interpret	Express in your own words. Examples may be useful.
List	Write your answer as an itemized series which may be in point form.
Outline	Provide main points and leave out minor details
Prove	Give factual evidence, examples or clear logical reasons which demonstrate the validity of a statement/idea.
Relate	Tell the story in clear sequence, or, show how things are connected or similar to each other.

Review	Examine a subject critically, analysing and commenting on the main points.
State	Present the main points in brief, clear sequence.
Summarise	Give the main points or facts in condensed form.
To what extent	Consider both sides, make a judgment and defend it. Similar to evaluate or discuss.
Trace	Relate the progress, development or history of a subject.

3. Topic words

Topic words are usually easy to locate. They tell you what you have to write about and are the subject of the question.

For example the question: Contrast the five types of teams.

The topic is “teams”

Another example question: Identify potential sources of stress.

The topic is “stress”

4. Restricting words

Restricting words are words or phrases that narrow the topic and make it more specific.

For example the question: Identify the characteristics of effective teams.

The restrictive word is “effective” because you now don’t have to write about ineffective teams, or teams in general, just effective teams.

Example: Identify the consequences of stress.

The restrictive word is “consequences” because you don’t need to write about the causes of stress, the symptoms of stress, just the consequences of stress.

Examples

Instruction words

What is meant by
Discuss

Assess

To what extent

Explain

Discuss

Trace

Topic words

‘economic dualism’
the impact of colonial rule on
British Burma
contingency theories of
leadership
should students be able to have
cell phones
the trend of rising divorce rates

the arguments for and
against keeping animals in
zoos

the origins of the human
race

Restricting words

in the Japanese context?
before 1870

by their level of support

in primary and secondary
schools?

in western countries, over the
last 20 years
with a focus on endangered
species

in Asia