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A short guide to understanding your assignments



Understanding your assignments

It is important to understand what an essay question or assignment brief is asking of you. Before you start to research or write, it is worth spending time considering the wording of the question and any learning outcomes that may accompany it. Failure to do this could result in an unfocused response which does not answer the question.

Before you start to research, plan or write:

- Check the word count, deadline and any guidance from your department
- Read through any learning outcomes or marking criteria
- If there is a choice of questions, make some initial notes on each one (or a few that appeal) and make a careful decision
- Unpick your chosen (or given) question and ensure that you understand exactly what it is asking you to do



Specific vs general essay questions

Some essay questions may have a narrow focus eg,

'TO WHAT EXTENT CAN IT BE ARGUED THAT BYRON AND KEATS ARE SECOND GENERATION ROMANTIC POETS?'

While others may be quite broad eg,

'EVALUATE THE EFFECT OF LANDSCAPE ON THE EXPANSION OF THE TOWN.'

The first example indicates exactly which poets to focus on, and which aspect of their work to explore. The second example is much broader: it doesn't specify which features of landscape, or which towns should be analysed.

Even if the essay question is broad, your answer should have a clear and specific focus. Therefore, **YOU** need to choose an area of the topic to concentrate on. If answering the second of the two questions above, you would not need to write about the impact of every type of landscape on every town in the world. It is normally better to write a lot about a little, rather than a little about a lot.

It is also important to note that, although the specific essay question tells you which poets to focus on and which aspect of their work to discuss, it does not dictate which way you have to argue. You are still free to choose your own standpoint (based on reasons and evidence) as to whether or not Byron and Keats can be seen as second generation Romantic poets.

How do you narrow down a broad or general essay question?

- Choose one or two key aspects of the topic to focus your argument around
- Focus on a few examples rather than trying to cover everything that falls under that topic
- Decide on a standpoint you want to argue (this applies to specific essay questions too)
- Make sure your introduction explains your chosen focus, aim and argument

Breaking down an assignment question

Before you attempt to answer an assignment question, you need to make sure you understand what it is asking. This includes the subject matter, but also the way in which you are required to write. Different questions may ask you to discuss, outline, evaluate... and many more. The task words are a key part of the question.

Parts of a question

DIRECTIVE OR TASK WORDS: TELL YOU EXACTLY WHAT TO DO EG, DISCUSS, ARGUE ETC.

SUBJECT MATTER: SPECIFICALLY WHAT YOU SHOULD BE WRITING ABOUT.

LIMITING WORDS: PARTS OF THE QUESTION THAT MAY NARROW OR ALTER THE FOCUS OF YOUR ANSWER.

Example:

This indicates you will need to explore both sides of the topic in a critical way and reach a decision

This limiting phrase indicates that you will not be writing everything you know about *White Teeth* and 9/11. You will be focussing on whether or not the terrorist attack alters our reading of the novel. Every point you make should contribute to this.

**TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE NOVEL
WHITE TEETH BY ZADIE SMITH BE READ DIFFERENTLY
IN THE LIGHT OF THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACK?**

You will need to focus on this novel

You will also need to write about this event in relation to the novel

Directive or task words

It is really important to understand the directive or task word used in your assignment. This will indicate how you should write and what the purpose of the assignment is. The table on the next page shows some examples of task words and their definitions. However, it is important

to note that none of these words has a fixed meaning. The definitions given are a general guide, but interpretation of the words may vary according to the context and the discipline. If you are unsure as to exactly what a lecturer means by a particular task word, you should ask for clarification.

Task words

Analyse	Break up into parts; investigate
Comment on	Identify and write about the main issues; give your reactions based on what you've read/heard in lectures. Avoid just personal opinion.
Compare	Look for the similarities between two things. Show the relevance or consequences of these similarities concluding which is preferable.
Contrast	Identify the differences between two items or arguments. Show whether the differences are significant. Perhaps give reasons why one is preferable.
Criticise	Requires an answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses, and which also indicates any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. It requires a balanced answer.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.
Define	Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant, show you understand how the definition may be problematic.
Describe	Provide a detailed explanation as to how and why something happens or happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; examine the implications.
Evaluate	Assess and give your judgement about the merit, importance or usefulness of something using evidence to support your argument
Examine	Look closely into something
Explain	Make clear why something happens, or is the way it is; interpret and account for; give reasons for
Explore	Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints
Illustrate	Make something clear and explicit, giving examples of evidence.
Justify	Give evidence that supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made
Outline	Give the main points/features/general principles; show the main structure and interrelations; omit details and examples
State	Give the main features briefly and clearly
Summarise	Draw out the main points only; omit details and examples
To what extent...	Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which it is not true

Ways to get started

Once you have broken down and understood your assignment question, you can start to jot down your ideas, organise your research, and figure out exactly what point you want to argue in your essay. Here is something to try if you are struggling to get going with responding to the assignment question:

- Try to come up with a one-word answer to the assignment question ('yes,' 'no,' 'maybe' – or perhaps two words: 'not quite,' 'only sometimes');
- Then expand the one-word answer into a sentence summarising your reason for saying that;
- Then expand that sentence into three sentences giving slightly more detail. This could be the beginning of your essay plan.

Conclusion

Before you launch into an essay or assignment, it is important to consider the task or question that you have been set. Ask yourself whether it is a broad or narrow question, and if it is broad, which aspect of it do you intend to focus on? Break down your question into its parts and make notes on each. Consider how you will need to write; what limiting factors there are; what subjects you will need to read about. Develop these notes into the first stages of your assignment plan. If you are unclear as to what is expected of you, check with your tutor or try discussing the assignment with your peers.

Activity adapted from LearnHigher, Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Available from: <http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Staff/Academic-Writing.html> (Accessed 28 May 2013)

Further reading and references on writing essays and assignments

Open University. (2017) *Essay and report writing skills*. Available at:

www.open.edu/openlearn/education/essay-and-report-writing-skills/content-section-0 (Accessed 27 June 2017)

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Available at: www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/essay-terms (Accessed 29 Aug 2013)

University of Portsmouth. (2010) *Essays: Task Words*. Available at:

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