

Analysing the assignment question

Why should I analyse the question?

University assignment questions can be complex and hard to understand. If you get it wrong, your hard work might be wasted.

The skills described in this guide can assist you to read and analyse the assignment question or task to make sure you've understood what you're supposed to do.

How do I analyse the question?

Every assignment question has key words that will help you decide what kind of approach you should take.

Here is an example question:

Which is healthier: a chocolate cake or a cheesecake?

The keywords will tell you:

- the topic of the assignment task (**Topic words**), in this case *chocolate cake* and *cheesecake*
- an aspect of the topic you should focus on (**Focus words**), in this case *healthier*
- what kind of thinking and writing/speaking you need to do (**Task words**), in this case it's asking for a *comparison*

Step 1: Identify the Task word and use the **Common task words** guide to understand what it means.

Step 2: Identify the Topic word(s) and check the definition of any words you don't understand.

Step 3: Identify the Focus word(s) and check the definition of any words you don't understand.

Step 4: Think about how the Topic and Focus words relate to each other and to your unit content.

Step 5: Write out the question using your own words.

Learn more about these steps below.

An everyday example

Charlie: Hey Lee, tell me about Parramatta South campus. I've never been there.

Lee: I love the library there. It's got more computers than the other libraries and it's close to Subway. They've got blankets you can borrow in winter so it's warmer than studying at home.

Charlie: Yeah, but what about the rest of the campus? What does it look like? Is it big, small? Does it look nice or ugly?

Charlie was asking Lee to **describe** Parramatta South campus.

But Lee just focussed on the library, compared it to other libraries, and said how she personally felt about it. She **evaluated** and **analysed** the campus, with the wrong focus (the library). She didn't answer Charlie's question. So Charlie had to ask another question.

Analysing the question

The key words in a writing task will help you decide what kind of approach you should take in your response. The keywords will tell you what the topic of the assignment task is, what particular aspect of the topic you should focus on, and whether you should write a description or an analysis.

Types of keywords

There are three types of keywords you should look for in your assignment question:

TYPE OF KEYWORD	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	
Task word	Task words or phrases indicate what kind of response you are expected to write. These words are usually verbs, but may also be question words, for example: How? Why? The task word in the example is 'discuss'.	<i>'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.'</i> Discuss.
Topic words	Topic words or phrases tell you what topic you have to write about. They are usually easy to find, as they are often the topics that you have studied in your subject. The topic words in the example are 'current climate crisis'.	<i>'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis'</i> Discuss.
Focus words	Focus words are the specific aspects of the topic you have to pay particular attention to as you write about the topic. The focus words/phrases in the example are 'rapid population growth' and 'major cause'.	<i>'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.'</i> Discuss.

In the example question used above, you're being asked to discuss the given statement. So you need to think about the claim about the current climate crisis in light of other views on the topic, and decide whether the claim is valid.

Here are two more examples:

Schoolies week is an important rite of passage for Australian teenagers. Discuss.

Task word: Discuss

Topic words: Schoolies week

Focus words: Important, rite of passage, Australian teenagers

Since sustainability is a key concept of the twenty-first century, it should be included as part of the curriculum of primary and secondary students throughout Australia. Do you agree?

Task phrase: Do you agree? (i.e. discuss or evaluate the claim)

Topic words: Sustainability

Focus words: should be included, curriculum, primary and secondary students, Australia

(Adapted from UniStep Guide, 2013, p. 77).



To learn how to analyse a question to work out the best search terms for finding information, watch [Analysing your assignment question](#) (video, 2:35) via the Library.

Common writing tasks

Writing at university usually falls into two main categories: **descriptive** and **analytical**.

In **descriptive** writing, you'll mainly be **gathering** and **reorganising** information in a logical way.

In **analytical** writing, you have to **evaluate** and **analyse** information and then bring your ideas together.

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING	ANALYTICAL WRITING
Gathering information	Evaluating information
Repackaging information	Analysing information
Classifying information	Synthesising information

The table below shows examples of common tasks in each category of writing. You can also download the [Common Task Words](#) guide that gives examples of essay questions for the most common task words, and keep it near your study space as a handy guide.

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING		ANALYTICAL WRITING	
Define	Give the exact meaning of a term	Analyse	Identify the components of a concept, theory or plan and describe the relationship between them
Describe	Identify and outline the attributes or characteristics of a subject	Compare	Identify the similarities and differences between concepts, theories, plans or objects
Explain	Describe features so they can be easily understood	Contrast	Identify the differences between concepts, theories, plans or objects
Illustrate	Explain and give examples	Criticise	Identify the weak points of a concept or theory
Outline	List or describe the most important features	Discuss	Identify different approaches to a question or problem and decide which is most valid or useful
State	Describe precisely the content of a law, theory or concept	Describe	Identify different approaches to a question or problem
Summarise	Briefly present all the main points	Evaluate	Decide whether a concept, theory, plan or action is valid or useful
		Examine	Identify the strengths and weaknesses of a concept or theory

(Adapted from Brick, 2011, pp. 26-30).

Question words

Sometimes the task is set by a question word instead of a verb. Some of the most common question words are:

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING		ANALYTICAL WRITING	
QUESTION WORDS	TASK WORD EQUIVALENTS	QUESTION WORDS	TASK WORD EQUIVALENTS
What is/was...?	Describe or Explain (descriptive)	Why...?	Argue or Discuss (analytical)
What impact/effect...?		To what extent...?	
In what ways...?		How	
How does/did...?		effective/important...?	
How far...?		Do you agree?	
		Is this a fair comment?	
		What do you think?	

(Adapted from UniStep Guide, 2013, p. 59).

Checklist for understanding the assignment task

- ☐ Read the question and instructions at least twice.
- ☐ Find the due date and put it in your diary/calendar.
- ☐ Highlight the word/page length or time limit.
- ☐ Highlight information about what resources you should use.
- ☐ Check the guidelines about how the assignment is to be presented and what referencing style is required.
- ☐ Read the marking criteria (if available) to find out what standards you need to reach to achieve each grade, and what things you should focus your time on.
- ☐ Review the subject outline, recommended readings, and class discussion topics to see what content you have covered that relates to the task.
- ☐ Check your understanding of the task with other students and/or your tutor.



Try it yourself

1. Look at your assignment question and analyse it using the following table. If the question uses more than one task word or question word, number them.

Task word / phrase OR Question word	Topic word(s)	Focus word(s)	Other information or instructions
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			

2. If your question uses a question word, fill in the table below to show which task word you think it is closest to and why you think that.

Question word	Corresponding task word	Why I think this
(1)		
(2)		
(3)		

3. Write each topic word in a column below, and think of synonyms or similar phrases to match each one. You can then use these groups of words in a Library search (follow the [Successful Searching Tutorial](#) on Study Smart to learn how).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Topic word	car		
Similar words or phrases	Automobile, vehicle, etc.		

References

Brick, J. (2011). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university* (pp. 26-30). South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan.

UniStep Guide: Making the transition to university (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.