Analysing assignment questions

Why should I analyse assignment questions?

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 assignment questions to make sure you've understood what you're supposed to do.

How do I analyse the question?

The keywords in a writing task will help you decide what kind of approach you should take in your response. The keywords will tell you:

→ whether you should write a description or an analysis (Task)

→ what the topic of the assignment task is (Topic)

→ what particular aspect of the topic you should focus on (Focus)

> Tip: 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.

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'.
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'.
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'.

'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.' **Discuss**.

'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the **current climate crisis**.*' Discuss.*

*'***Rapid population growth*** is the **major cause** of the current climate crisis.' Discuss.*

Here is another example:

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)

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 (**synthesise** information).

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

You can 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.

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                                          westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart

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)		

References

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.