



Analysing the assignment question

University assignments usually ask you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of particular topic areas related to the unit you're studying. The assignment questions are often quite complex, so you'll need to pay careful attention to what the assignment is asking you to do.

It's important to read and analyse the assignment question or task very carefully to ensure that you have understood the task well. If you hand in a really well-written essay but it doesn't answer the question asked, then you won't get a good result and your hard work will be wasted.

Understanding the task

- **Read** the question, and any other supporting material, at least twice.
 - Note the due date and put the date in your diary/calendar if it's not already there.
 - Note length restrictions and other limits (e.g. word or page limit).
 - Note any specifications regarding resources you should use.
- Check the **definition** of words or phrases you do not fully understand, especially technical words.
- Identify the **key words** and phrases (see below).
- **Rewrite** the question in your own words and check with your tutor that it is on track.
- Check the **guidelines** about how the assignment is to be presented and what referencing style is required. You should also read any **marking guides** provided in your Learning Guide. These will tell you what standards you need to reach to achieve each grade.
- Review the **course objectives**, recommended **readings** and class discussion topics to see what content you have covered that relates to the task.
- Discuss the task, and how you understand it, with other students.
- If there is anything you still don't understand, ask your tutor or lecturer.

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:

Task words

- 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 following example is 'discuss':
'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.' **Discuss.**

Topic words

- Topic words or phrases tell you what topic you are expected to write about. They define the topic, indicating the areas you should concentrate on. Topic words are generally easy to identify, as they are likely to be the topics that you have studied in your Unit. The topic words in the following example are 'current climate crisis':
*'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the **current climate crisis**.'* Discuss.

Focus words

→ Focus words are the specific aspects of the topic you are asked to pay particular attention to as you write about the topic. The focus words/phrases in the following example are ‘rapid population growth’ and ‘major cause’:
‘Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.’ Discuss.

In the example question used above, you are being asked to discuss the given statement. So you need to consider this 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 as part of the curriculum, primary and secondary students, Australia

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

Common writing tasks

You’ll find that your writing at university falls into two main categories: descriptive and analytical. In descriptive writing, you’ll mainly be gathering and repackaging information in a systematic way. In analytical writing, you have to evaluate and analyse information and then synthesise it in an original way.

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 a Common Task Words List 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).

You may have noticed that the word 'describe' appears in both lists. This verb can be used for both types of writing. To work out which kind of response you are required to write, you will need to look carefully at the topic of the question.

In general, if the topic is something that is generally well understood and agreed upon, e.g. 'describe the process of photosynthesis in plants' or 'describe the life cycle of a mosquito', then you are most likely being asked to write a purely descriptive piece.

If the topic is something that could be approached in a number of ways, e.g. 'describe different theories of human language acquisition', then you are most likely being asked for an analytical piece of writing that involves a combination of 'compare', 'contrast', 'evaluate', and 'examine'.

(Adapted from Brick, 2011, p. 30).

Question words

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

- What is/was...? What impact/effect...? In what ways...? How does/did...? How far...? These are usually 'describe' or 'explain' type essays
- Why...? How far...? To what extent...? How effectively...? Was...? Do you agree? Is this fair comment? How important...? What do you think? These are usually analytical 'argue' or 'discuss' type essays

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

Of course, these question words only make sense when read in conjunction with the focus and topic words. But even then, it can sometimes be difficult to identify what you actually have to do, and you may need to clarify the task with your tutor or lecturer before going any further.



Watch [Analysing your assignment question](#) (video), 2:35 via the Library for more help.

Try it yourself



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)			

If your question uses a question word, which task word do you think it is closest to? Why do you think that?

Question word	Corresponding task word	Why I think this
(1)		
(2)		
(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 (do the Library's [Successful Searching](#) online tutorial 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.