

Answering Assignment Questions

In order to decide how to answer an essay question, you need to identify what the question requires in terms of content and genre. This guide outlines some methods to help you analyse essay questions.

Analysing a Question

Assignment questions can be broken down into parts so that you can better understand what you are being asked to do. It is important to identify key words and phrases in the topic.

Key Words

Key words tell you the approach you should take when answering an essay question. There are three types of key words:

- **Task Words** These tell you what you have to do; the action you need to perform.
- **Content Words** These tell you what the topic area is and what you should write about.
- **Limiting Words** These limit and focus the essay, making it workable.

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question.

Using Key Words

Look for the keywords in your essay question and underline them. Spend time working out what they mean. Use the glossary of task words included in this guide to help you.

An example essay question (from the school of education)

Computers have had a significant impact on education in the 20th century. Discuss the changes they have made.

Task word: *Discuss*

Task words indicate what you are being asked to do. Task words are usually verbs (action words or processes). In this question, the task word is *discuss*. If you look up the definition in the glossary of task words used in essay questions below, you will see that to *discuss* (in an essay) means to 'examine and assess by means of an argument'.

Content word(s): *education, computers*

Content words set and define the essay topic area. Content words help you to focus your research and reading on the correct area, in this case on computers in education.

Limiting words: *changes, significant impact, 20th century*

Limiting words define the topic area further, indicating aspects of the topic you should focus on. For example, in this question, you should not write broadly about computers in education, but focus on analysing the *changes* computers have made to education.

Implied or Complex Questions

Some assignment questions are more complex than the example above. They might have a number of parts or may not include a clear task word, which can make them appear confusing. Some tasks are implied rather than explicitly stated.

In order to understand what you must do, you need to work out your task by looking at the entire question. Look for clues in the limiting and content words and in the relationships between words, phrases and parts of the question.

Elements

Some questions consist of a statement or a proposition that requires **a discussion**. Such questions often provide a quotation or statement, followed by a task word such as 'discuss'.

Other questions include **a direction** such as 'explain the significance' of a given statement.

Some questions require an **evaluation**. They may use task words like 'to what extent'.

Some questions include **specific instructions**. They might require you to include certain material, use specific sources or to take a particular approach. Make sure you follow these instructions.

Other questions include **guidelines as to the scope** of the essay. They will specify a time period or location, or specify a framework for the discussion.

Sometimes an assignment task consists of **a number of related questions**. There may be several parts to the question, including a number of task words or specific questions.

In this case, it may be necessary to break the question into small chunks to find all the different sections that you will need to cover in order to answer a question fully. You should make sure you address each part of the task, and also recognise the relationship and links between the different parts of the assignment when forming your conclusion.

What if I don't have a question?

Some assignments let you choose a topic to explore within a particular framework or context. For example:

'Write a report on the significance of your chosen topic for the Engineering program.'

If you are given a general topic to research for an assignment, you need to form your own focus. First consider the current trends, issues or debates on the topic (this may require some preliminary research). Then form a focus question that indicates how you will approach the topic. You should also discuss your question with your tutor.

Sample Questions

The sample assignment questions below which are examples of implied tasks.

Questions which require a discussion or explanation:

'The ideal of human rights is not universal. Discuss.'

'Account for the economic success of the 'tiger' economies of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea during the 1960s.'

Questions which imply a comparison and /or contrast:

'The development of ethics is as important to medicine as the development and use of antibiotics.'

Questions which ask for the cause and/or effect relationships to be exposed:

'Indigenous Australians experience lower levels of access to health services than the general population. Discuss the factors determining access.'

Questions which imply an opinion needs to be given:

'Why did the ideas of Martin Luther cause such an upheaval in 16th century Europe? Would there have been a Reformation without him? How would you measure the success of the Lutheran Reformation? Give reasons for your view.'

Questions which imply evaluation:

'To what extent did the subcultural research project demonstrate that youth cultures were "counter-hegemonic"?''

'What traits distinguish Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism from each another? Has society influenced these religions or have these religions influenced society?'

Glossary of Task Words

Understanding the meaning of words, especially task words, helps you to know exactly what is being asked of you. It takes you half way towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Task words direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question. Here is a list of such words and others that you are most likely to come across frequently in your course.

Words	What they (might) mean
Account for	Explain, clarify, give reasons for. (Quite different from 'Give an account of' which is more like 'describe in detail').
Analyse	Break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them and show how they interrelate.
Assess	Consider the value or importance of something, paying due attention to positive, negative and disputable aspects, and citing the judgements of any known authorities as well as your own.
Argue	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence for and/or against some given point of view.
Comment on	Too vague to be sure, but safe to assume it means something more than 'describe' or 'summarise' and more likely implies 'analyse' or 'assess'.
Compare	Identify the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
Contrast	Point out the differences between two things (but probably point out their similarities as well).
Criticise	Spell out your judgement as to the value or truth of something, indicating the criteria on which you base your judgement and citing specific instances of how the criteria apply in this case.
Define	Make a statement as to the meaning or interpretation of something, giving sufficient detail so as to allow it to be distinguished from similar things.
Describe	Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal or the worth of something, in the light of its apparent truth; include your personal opinion. Like 'assess'.
Enumerate	List some relevant items, possibly in continuous prose (rather than note form) - and perhaps 'describe' them (see above) as well.
Examine	Present in depth and investigate the implications.
Explain	Tell how things work or how they came to be the way they are, including perhaps some need to 'describe' and to 'analyse' (see above).
To what extent	Explore the case for a stated proposition or explanation, much in the manner of 'assess' and 'criticise' (see above), probably arguing for a less than total acceptance of the proposition.
How Far	Similar to 'to what extent . . .?' (see above)

Words	What they (might) mean
Identify	Pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use.
Illustrate	Similar to 'explain' (see above), but probably asking for the quoting of specific examples or statistics or possibly the drawing of maps, graphs, sketches, etc.
Interpret	Clarify something or 'explain' (see above), perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing or perspective.
Justify	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to 'argue' (see above) a case.
Outline	Indicate the main features of a topic or sequence of events, possibly setting them within a clear structure or framework to show how they interrelate.
Prove	Demonstrate the truth of something by offering irrefutable evidence and/or logical sequence of statements leading from evidence to conclusion.
Reconcile	Show how two apparently opposed or mutually exclusive ideas or propositions can be seen to be similar in important respects, if not identical. Involves need to 'analyse' and 'justify' (see above).
Relate	Either 'explain' (see above) how things happened or are connected in a cause-and-effect sense, or may imply 'compare' and 'contrast' (see above).
Review	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe' (see above).
State	Express the main points of an idea or topic, perhaps in the manner of 'describe' or 'enumerate' (see above).
Summarise	'State' (see above) the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail and side-issues.
Trace	Identify the connection between one thing and another either in a developmental sense over a period of time, or else in a cause-and-effect sense. May imply both 'describe' and 'explain' (see above).

Other Useful Definitions

Words	What they (might) mean
Assumption	Something which is accepted as being true for the purpose of an argument.
Issue	An important topic for discussion; something worth thinking and raising questions about.
Methodology	A system of methods and principles for doing something. Often used to explain methods for carrying out research.
Objective	It is the point or the thing aimed at. It is what you want to achieve by a particular activity.

Essay and Assignment Planning

Is planning really necessary? Shouldn't I just be able to sit down and write?

Writing is an iterative process and planning is an essential part of that process. A great essay doesn't flow out fully formed from the mind of the 'perfect student'; nor do coherent, well-developed arguments. Good essays are produced through hard work, thinking and (usually) writing and rewriting. Although it can feel chaotic, planning will ultimately save you time and unnecessary confusion.

Constructing an essay plan is a way to provide yourself with an outline or 'road map' to help work out which direction to take. A plan can focus and define your ideas, provide a starting point and help break the assignment into manageable parts. Drafting a quick initial plan is a great way to avoid procrastination and to get started.

When should I make an essay plan? Will I need to write more than one?

Before you start any journey, it is best to plan your trip. Sketch out a brief initial plan BEFORE you head for the library to spend days or weeks reading. A second plan, one you write AFTER research and reading, will strengthen and clarify your ideas and give you a solid framework from which to begin writing. So, assume that you will draft a couple of plans over the course of writing your essay or, at the very least, revising your initial one.

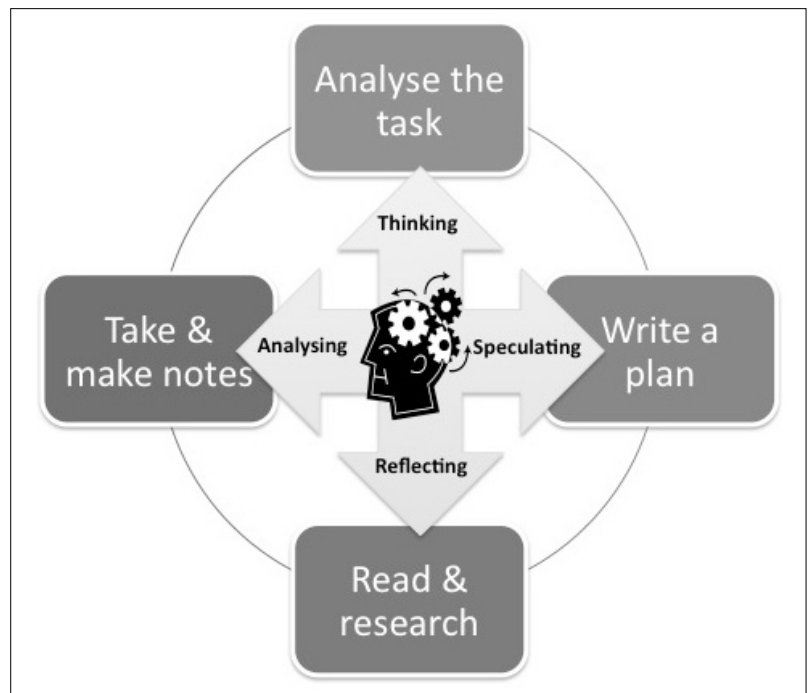


Figure 1: The Essay Planning Process

What should a plan look like?

An essay plan should allow you to see the shape the essay might take. It can range from a brief sketch of main ideas to a detailed point-by-point outline, complete with draft paragraphs and topic sentences (the sentence that conveys the main idea of a paragraph). How much detail you include will depend on how developed your ideas and your knowledge are.

In terms of how it should look, an essay plan can take a number of forms: a list of bullet points, a mind map, a diagram or a few rough paragraphs. Like notes, plans can take whichever shape you find most helpful and meaningful.

Getting Started

Step 1: Analyse the Task

Confirm what you have to do by establishing some basic information. Check your course outline for assignment guidelines and be certain about the following:

- **The format your assignment should follow.** Find out whether it is an essay, report, annotated bibliography, critical review etc. Each assignment has a specific purpose, distinctive components and conventions that you will be required to follow.
- **The length.** This will affect the amount of research and how much depth you should go into.

Analyse the assignment question: read it carefully and make sure you are clear about what you are supposed to do and the key words, terms and concepts

Step 2: Work out your initial thoughts and ideas about the topic(s)

- Do you have any initial responses to the question? What could a possible answer (or answers) be?
- Do you have any opinions at all about the topic(s)? Write them down, no matter how 'creative' or non-academic they may be.
- What do you already know about the topic(s)? Do you have knowledge that can be built on, such as familiarity with related areas, sources or frameworks for thinking about similar topics? Write everything down—you may know more than you think.

Further your thinking by 'questioning the question'. This helps you focus by drawing out sub-questions about the question and topic.

- Question the terms – Is there a generally agreed-upon response to the question or approach to take?
- If not, how do different approaches/ theories/ arguments differ? Which ones could/ should you use?
- What are the key concepts? How do they relate to each other?

Generate ideas through brainstorming. Come up with as many ideas as you can as quickly as you can. Do not evaluate or discard anything – you can do that later – just jot them down. Use mind maps, drawings and lists; whatever comes to mind and stimulates your thinking. Look at what you have noted down. Pull out the points that are relevant to the question and discard the rest.

I am supposed to write an essay plan for my course—what should it consist of?

Students are sometimes asked to submit a preliminary essay plan or outline as part of their course. This might be done as a prelude to completing a major essay, or it might be an individual form of assessment.

The purpose of setting this kind of assignment is to encourage students to start engaging with the essay topic early in the semester and to provide feedback to help them proceed.

If you have been asked to submit an essay plan or outline as a course assignment, there will usually be guidelines to follow. A plan usually requires a thesis statement and an indication of main points. Other than that, clarify what your tutor/ lecturer has in mind. You need to know:

- What form the plan should take. Should it be a list of points, a diagram etc.?
- The amount of detail required. Should you indicate sources for research, should you provide references, etc.?

Step 3: Construct an initial essay plan

After you have generated some ideas, it is important to write an initial plan before you head for the library. This can feel strange, after all, how can you answer a question when you haven't done any research?, but starting with an initial plan helps you order your ideas and focus your reading. Without a sense of which direction to head in, it is easy to get lost in the research process. This initial plan will be provisional and might consist of:

- a provisional answer to the question (or *thesis statement*)
- a brief outline of possible main points.

As you research and develop your understanding of the topic, your ideas will likely change, and your answers may change with them. Try to see your essay plan as something that evolves as you engage further with your topic.

While it's a good idea to write an initial plan before you start researching, if you really know nothing at all about the topic, some initial skimming and browsing through recommended or assigned readings can provide a few ideas. However, the initial planning stage is not the time for a lot of intensive or detailed reading.

Step 4: Research and gather information

Your initial plan should raise a series of questions and identify key words and topic areas which you can use to orientate your research for the essay. While reading informs your thinking, knowing what you need to find out will give your reading a purpose.

- Be sure to examine any assigned course readings that are relevant to your essay topic.
- If there was a lecture on the essay topic, did the lecturer recommend or refer to any particular author?
- Is there a list of recommended readings for the course? Refer to it for sources of information. Who has written what on the topic(s)? What is essential to read?
- Use the key words and topics gleaned from your initial plan for library keyword searches.
- Note taking as you read helps you record how you know something and helps you avoid plagiarism.

What elements should an essay plan consist of?

A thesis statement

A plan should indicate the answer to the question: write a 1-2 sentence thesis statement.

A *thesis statement* is a sentence (or two) that answers the essay question. A clear and well-written thesis statement will help you to determine the direction and structure of your argument.

In the initial plan, the thesis statement is usually provisional. However, after you've done some research, you will need to work on your thesis statement until it is clear, concise and effective.

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is:

- a clear and direct answer to the essay question
- a claim that can be discussed and expanded further in the body of the essay
- one or two complete sentences
- part of the introduction

Tips: Try introducing your thesis statement with the phrase 'this essay will argue' or 'this essay argues'. Paraphrasing the assignment question can help ensure that you are answering it.

Main Points

A plan should indicate possible main points.

Once you have a thesis statement, follow it with a paragraph or a set of points that indicate the 'reasons why' for your answer. The 'reasons why' can be developed into the main points of your essay.

In the initial plan, try to express the main idea of each point in a single, clear sentence. These can become *topic sentences* (the first sentence of each paragraph) when, in your second plan, you develop these points further.

Arrange your main points in a logical order and number them (is there one that would seem to go first or one that would seem to go last? Are there any two that are closely linked? How are the ideas connected to each other? Do the main points, when considered as a whole, present a unified discussion?).

What are main points?

- Main points make up the body of an essay.
- Each point should be developed in a paragraph. These paragraphs are the building blocks used to construct the argument.
- In a 1000-1500 word essay, aim for three to four main points.

What is a topic sentence?

The topic sentence is the main sentence of a paragraph, which establishes its central idea and indicates the direction the supporting sentences will take. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in a paragraph.

Structure

A plan should follow the structure of an essay (eg. Introduction, body and conclusion).

While you may not be ready to construct an introduction or conclusion, this three-part structure should be at least suggested in your plan.

The introduction is where you answer the question and provide an outline of the essay's main ideas.

The body is where you answer the question by developing a discussion through offering explanation and evidence.

The conclusion is where you restate the thesis and re-summarise the main points.

Research

A plan should include some indication of the evidence you might use.

Make a few notes about how each main point might be developed. Consider and if possible, specify the evidence you might draw on and which texts you might refer to. Jot down titles, authors, page numbers etc.

Step 5: Write a second essay plan

After you have researched and your ideas are more developed, it's time to write a second plan. This one might be a detailed point-by-point outline complete with paragraphs and topic sentences. How much detail you can include will depend on how developed your knowledge and ideas are. You can also return to your initial plan and revise it.

Questions to ask yourself:

- **In light of your research, has your answer changed?**
If yes, write a new thesis statement. Now is the time to ensure it is clear, concise and fully answers the essay question.
- **Are the main points still relevant?**
Are they still in line with your thesis statement? What should you add or change?
- **Is each main point expressed as a topic sentence?**
Specify each point the essay will make by writing the main idea in a single sentence.
- **How does each point relate to the question?**
Include a brief sentence explaining how each point relates to the question – doing this can make sure your discussion stays on course. If you cannot see how a particular point relates to the question, delete it.
- **How will you develop each main point?**
How will you explain and illustrate each one? What evidence or examples might you use?
- **Do you have specific evidence to draw on?**
Specify the texts you will refer to. Jot down titles, authors, page numbers.
- **How does each main point link together?**
How is each one connected? Are they in logical order?

When you have an outline, make a few rough notes to get the **introduction and conclusion** started. Start thinking about:

- how you will introduce and 'lead the reader in' to the topic
- how to conclude and 'close the door' on the topic

Do this last, as you cannot know how you're going to introduce or conclude something until you're clear about what you're going to say.

Should I write while I am researching?

YES. Writing is a means of thinking and working out ideas. A 'writing-as-you-go' approach helps you to avoid a 'split' process, where you do lots of reading, defer writing until the last minute, and so experience a lot of confusion.

Try the following strategies:

- During each study session, set yourself a goal and **spend 5-10 minutes writing**. As you think through ideas, try expressing them in short paragraphs. You might produce some that are well-developed and require little revision. Other fragments might require a lot of rewriting. That's fine—the point is, you're not starting with a blank page.
- Use the **split-page note taking method** to make notes and write as you read. In addition to noting specific information, write your comments and ideas. You don't have to write perfect sentences, but writing-as-you-go can mean that by the time you're ready to write a first draft, you'll already have a framework of notes and comments to build on.
- As you read, **write in response to these questions**:
 - ◇ in what ways is what I have been reading relevant to my essay?
 - ◇ What more do I need to find out and why?
 - ◇ How does what I am reading link into what I already know?
- Try **freewriting** (or 'stream-of-consciousness' writing) – a technique in which you write continuously for a set period of time. Write in full sentences and do not worry about spelling or grammar. If you cannot think of what to write, don't slow down, just repeat the last phrase you wrote. Freewriting is often used to collect initial thoughts and ideas on a topic, often as a preliminary to formal writing. It is also a great way to overcome writer's block.

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