

# 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. Essay questions can be broken down into parts and this can help you understand what you are being asked to do.*

## Analysing a Question: 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.
- **Limiting Words** These limit and define the essay, making it workable.
- **Content Words** These tell you what the focus is and what you should write about.

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 some time working out what they mean. Use the glossary of Task words below to help you.

### An Example:

*Question:* Examine the changes computers have made to education

#### **Task word:** *Examine*

Task words indicate what you are being asked to do. Task words are usually verbs.

In this question, the task word is *Examine*. Look up the definition in the glossary of task words (below) and see what *examine* (in an essay) might require you to do.

#### **Limiting words:** *education, computers*

Limiting words set and define the essay. They are usually about the topic areas. Limiting words help you to focus your research and reading on the correct area, in this case on computers in education.

#### **Content word(s):** *changes*

Topic words define the topic area further, indicating aspects of the topic you should narrowly concentrate on. For example, in this question, you should not just write about computers in education, but focus on describing the *changes* computers have made to education.

## Implied or Complex Questions

Some assignment questions are more complex than the example above. Many do not include a clear task word, which can make them appear confusing. If this is the case, you need to work out your task from the rest of the question; look for clues in the relationships between words and phrases in the assignment topic, and in the limiting words, to understand what you must do to address the question.

Some questions consist of 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.

Sometimes there may be several parts to the question, including a number of task words or specific questions. In this case, you need to ensure you address each part of the question, and also recognise the relationship and links between the different parts of the assignment when forming a conclusion.

## Read through the sample assignment questions below which are examples of implied tasks.

### Questions which require a discussion or explanation:

'Legal procedures in each country are not universal. Discuss.'

'Account for the economic success of the newly industrialising countries of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea during the 1960s.'

### Questions which imply a comparison and /or contrast:

'The development of Bioethics 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:

'The inequity of health status of people between developed and developing countries is politically, socially and economically determined. Discuss with reference to one developing country in the Asia Pacific region.'

### 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'?

'Australia is not highly regarded by other nations for its contribution to the greenhouse effect. Why is Australia seen as a major contributor to the perceived problem?'

## 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.

## Glossary of Task Words

<b>Account for</b>	Explain, clarify, give reasons for. (different from 'Give an account of' which is more like 'describe in detail').
<b>Analyse</b>	Break an issue down into its component parts, discuss them and show how they interrelate.
<b>Argue</b>	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence for and/or against some given point of view.
<b>Assess</b>	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.
<b>Comment on</b>	Too vague to be sure, but safe to assume it means something more than 'describe' or 'summarise' and more likely implies 'analyse' or 'assess'.
<b>Compare</b>	Identify the characteristics or qualities two or more things have in common (but probably pointing out their differences as well).
<b>Contrast</b>	Point out the differences between two things (but probably point out their similarities as well).

<b>Criticise</b>	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.
<b>Define</b>	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.
<b>Describe</b>	Spell out the main aspects of an idea or topic or the sequence in which a series of things happened.
<b>Discuss</b>	Investigate or examine by argument. Examine key points and possible interpretations, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against. Draw a conclusion.
<b>Enumerate</b>	List some relevant items, possibly in continuous prose (rather than note form) - and perhaps 'describe' them (see above) as well.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Like 'assess' (see above).
<b>Explain</b>	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).
<b>To what extent</b>	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.
<b>How far</b>	Similar to 'to what extent...?' (see above).
<b>Identify</b>	Pick out what you regard as the key features of something, perhaps making clear the criteria you use.
<b>Illustrate</b>	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.
<b>Interpret</b>	Clarify something or 'explain' (see above), perhaps indicating how the thing relates to some other thing or perspective.
<b>Justify</b>	Express valid reasons for accepting a particular interpretation or conclusion, probably including the need to 'argue' (see above) a case.
<b>Outline</b>	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.
<b>Prove</b>	Demonstrate the truth of something by offering irrefutable evidence and/or logical sequence of statements leading from evidence to conclusion.
<b>Reconcile</b>	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).
<b>Relate</b>	Either 'explain' (see above) how things happened or are connected in a cause-and-effect sense, or may imply 'compare' and 'contrast' (see above).
<b>Review</b>	Survey a topic, with the emphasis on 'assess' rather than 'describe' (see above).
<b>State</b>	Express the main points of an idea or topic, perhaps in the manner of 'describe' or 'enumerate' (see above).
<b>Summarise</b>	'State' (see above) the main features of an argument, omitting all superfluous detail and side-issues.
<b>Trace</b>	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

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

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