



Academic writing

Analysing an assignment question

1. The first step...
identify the key **topic words** (words that direct you in what to research).
2. The second step...
identify the **focus** of the assignment question.
3. The third step...
identify the **task terms** (words that tell how you are to deal with the content the essay will be about).
4. The fourth step...
rewrite the question in your own words. This will help you understand the meaning of the question and what is being asked of you. This will also help you to write a **title** for your essay.

Use the following table to help you make sense of your assignment question.

The first step... identify the topic	
The second step... identify the focus	
The third step... identify the task word(s) Refer next page	
The fourth step... anything that limits the assignment focus	
The fifth step... rewrite the question in your own words	

Common task words	Description
<i>Analyse</i>	Find the main ideas and show how they are related, what their function is and why they are important.
<i>Comment on</i>	Discuss, criticise, or explain the meaning.
<i>Compare</i>	Note the similarities and differences of what you are being asked to compare.
<i>Contrast</i>	Compare by showing the differences.
<i>Criticise</i>	Make a judgement about the merit of theories and opinions or about the truth of statements. Back this by discussing the evidence. It is not necessary to attack it. Discuss the strong and weak points and include your own analysis.
<i>Define</i>	Give the formal meaning of a word, term or phrase.
<i>Describe</i>	Give a written, detailed account or verbal picture in a logical sequence. Emphasise the important points. An explanation or interpretation is not required.
<i>Diagram</i>	Make a graph, chart, or drawing. Label it and include a brief explanation.
<i>Discuss</i>	Investigate and examine by argument giving the reasons for and against. Present a point of view - this will require both description and interpretation. Your opinion must be supported by carefully chosen authoritative evidence.
<i>Enumerate</i>	List the main ideas in point form.
<i>Evaluate</i>	Make an appraisal of the worth of something. Give the opinion of leading practitioners in the field of the truth or importance of the concept. Include the advantages and disadvantages. You may also include your opinion.
<i>Explain</i>	Interpret the facts; your main focus should be on the 'why' or 'how' with the aim of clarifying reasons, causes and effects. Do not just describe or summarise.
<i>Illustrate</i>	Use a figure, diagram or example (comparisons or analogies) to explain or make clear.
<i>Interpret</i>	Explore and clarify the meaning using examples and personal comment.
<i>Justify</i>	Give a statement of why you think it is so. Give reasons for your statement or conclusion.
<i>List</i>	Give a concise numbered list of words, sentences, or comments. Same as enumerate.
<i>Outline</i>	Give a general summary/description containing the main ideas supported by secondary ideas. Omit minor details.
<i>Prove</i>	Show by argument or logic that it is true. Establish certainty by evaluating and citing experimental evidence or by logical reasoning.
<i>Relate</i>	Show the connections and how one causes, or is like, another.
<i>Review</i>	Examine the subject critically. Analyse and comment briefly in an organised sequence on the major points.
<i>State</i>	Express the main points in brief and narrative form. Omit details or examples.
<i>Summarise</i>	Give a concise account of the main points. Omit details and examples.
<i>Trace</i>	Give the development, process or history of an event or idea.