

Understanding an assignment topic

Assignment questions or topics require careful reading and analysis. You need to be sure you understand what the topic means before doing detailed research or reading. While this may seem obvious, not fully grasping the topic, and therefore misinterpreting the question, and therefore including irrelevant information, is one of the main reasons assignments fail.

How to analyse an assignment topic

There are several types of key words and phrases in an assignment topic that you need to consider:

- **content words** refer to the content or topic area
- **limiting words** limit the scope of the topic. Sometimes there are no limiting words
- **instruction/direction** words refer to the task itself and what you are required to do

The following steps can help analyse the assignment task.

1. Highlight the key content words; highlight them in colour and then, underline any limiting words.
2. Identify the instructional words (use a different colour).
3. Check
 - how many parts there are to the question?
 - how important is each of the parts?
 - are any of the parts more important than others?
4. Find the word limit? How many words are needed for each part?
5. State the topic in your own words.
6. Check with the lecturer if you are not certain about the requirements.

Content words

To answer an assignment question appropriately, it is necessary to carefully address the question that is asked. The question generally refers to only part of the course content. To properly understand the content words, you need to relate it back to your course work and may even need to do some background reading.

Think about the following:

- Which part of the course content does the question relate to? (refer to your course guide and learning outcomes)
- Which concepts or ideas from your course that apply to this topic (refer to your lecture or class notes and any other readings)?
- What broader context is this question a part of?

Limiting words

The question or topic is generally specific in its focus. The limiting words set the scope of the topic and narrow down the topic area. The limiting words indicate the aspects of the topic that should be included and the boundaries of your discussion.

Examples

- Discuss the implications of family members being present during emergency interventions *involving children*.
- Outline the key factors affecting the provision of aged care services *in rural Australia*.
- Analyse the role of the team leader *on the functioning of teams in hierarchical organisations*.

Instruction words

A clear understanding of instruction words is vital for answering the question the way the lecturer expects. Look for the key verb or verbs in the topic. These words set the task – what you are to do when addressing the essay topic. In an assignment, the lecturer is not only assessing what you know, but also your ability to respond to the content in a particular way.

Assignments may require you to:

- describe or give information about a topic or idea
- how or explain the relationship between topics or ideas
- describe or explain a process
- argue a point of view
- compare and evaluate different points of view

A good understanding of the meaning of instructional words is vital. Below is a list of definitions of instructional words.

Meanings of instructional words

account for	give reasons for; explain
give an account of	describe; state what something is like breakdown
analyse	into parts; examine; explain present a point of
argue	view
assess	evaluate; show the value of
comment on	evaluate; show the value of
compare	show similarities
contrast	show differences
critique	evaluate; show the benefits and limitations of
define	state what something is
demonstrate	show with evidence
describe	state what something is like
determine	find out; investigate
discuss	present different points of view
establish	show with evidence
estimate	work out
evaluate	demonstrate the value of
examine	look at carefully
explain	give reasons for
identify	show and describe
indicate	show and explain
interpret	analyse and explain
illustrate	give evidence or examples
justify	give reasons and evidence
list	present in a sequence
outline	briefly describe
quantify	measure
relate	describe
speculate	give an opinion
suggest	present possibilities
summarise	present the main points