

Task Analysis

How to approach an essay question.

STEP 1

Look at the **instruction words and phrases**. What exactly are they asking you to do? You need to decipher the instruction words before you begin writing. Here is a brief overview of some of the most common instructions and their meaning.

analyse	find and describe the main ideas through careful argumentation showing how they are related and why they are important
criticise	give your considered judgement or opinion in a well reasoned argument
discuss	explore the area/topic through argument and reflection showing your insight and grasp of the subject matter ¹

Taken from Glossary of 'Action' Keywords in Essay Titles. Please see this handout, available in the Writing Centre, for further examples.

STEP 2

What are the **key areas of focus**? Mark these clearly on the essay question and put them on a mind-map of the question.

STEP 3

What are the **minor areas of focus**? Does the question ask you to look at the key areas from specific perspectives? Limited to a particular time period? With reference to particular authors or articles? Mark these clearly and add them to your question mind-map.

STEP 4

Ask yourself whether the question requires you to take a firm **stance**. If it does, bear in mind that your opinion – supported with evidence and/or examples – must be clear to the reader by the time they have finished reading your essay.

STEP 5

Rewrite the main phrases of the question in your own words. Rewrite the whole question in your own words if you feel this helps.

STEP 6

Read with purpose. Use your question mind-map as a reading guide. Take notes that will answer the points encapsulated in your mind-map.

STEP 7

Plan. Draw up an essay outline, using the question mind-map as a guide and the key areas of information you have collected as a framework. Organise logically.

STEP 8

Write. Refer back to your question mind-map during and at the end of the writing process to make certain that you are answering the question.

¹ This is the most widely used of the action keywords. There is a wide range of possibilities for response. Please see *Glossary of 'Action' Keywords in Essay Titles*, a handout available in the Writing Centre.