Understanding your Assessment Question

To understand your assessment question, you need to analyse it so that you understand every component in detail. This helps you to gain a clear idea of what you are meant to write before you start your research. It is common for students to lose marks because they 'didn't address the topic properly'. To avoid that possibility, try this step-by-step process to break the task down.

The steps

The process for understanding a task is best done with paper and pen so you can write all over it. This will help you identify what to focus on. A detailed description of each step is outlined below.

1. **Check the meanings of words**
2. **Circle the instructional words**
3. **Underline the key words**
4. **Bracket the limiting words**
5. **Divide the question into sections**

1. Check the meanings of words

Ensure you understand every word in the question. Check unfamiliar words with your textbook or a dictionary to clarify their meanings. For example, do you understand what is meant by 'theoretical perspective' or 'critique' in the example below?

After you've checked the meanings, it may help to rewrite the question in a way that you better understand it, especially if you've been asked to respond to a quote. This not only helps to cement your understanding of what the question/quote is asking, but it can also provide you with a version that is clearer to you, to which you can refer later.

2. Circle the instructional words

These words tell you 'how' to respond to a question, such as 'outline' or 'discuss'. Once you have circled the instructional words, check their definition.

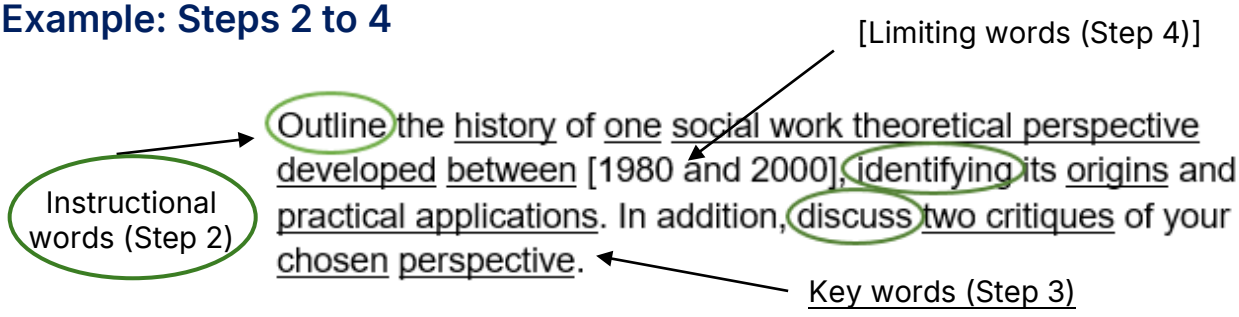
Example: Instructional words

- Analyse – methodically examine in detail to explain, interpret and discuss
- Describe – give a detailed account to illustrate the question; explain in sequence or order
- Discuss – give both sides of an argument (plus evidence) and then your own opinion
- Evaluate – look at reasons for and against, draw conclusions, form an idea of the value of something

Usually, an assessment will require you to focus only on presenting ideas and providing evidence. Some may expect you to present your own opinion, or to identify one outcome as better than another. This is why identifying the instructional words is important.

Find a detailed list of instructional words in the helpsheet, *Glossary of Instructional Words*.

Example: Steps 2 to 4



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3. Underline the key words

These words are the 'focus' that you will need to explore or examine in detail in your assignment. You may also need to define the key words in your writing. Try using the key words as a starting point in your research strategy.

Remember that key words:

- may need to be defined, e.g., Piaget's theory; Tort; Therapeutic communication
- tell you what to focus on, e.g., benefits, challenges, application

4. Bracket the limiting words

These words can also be viewed as key words, but limiting words have a specific focus. Limiting words relate to who, where and when, for example:

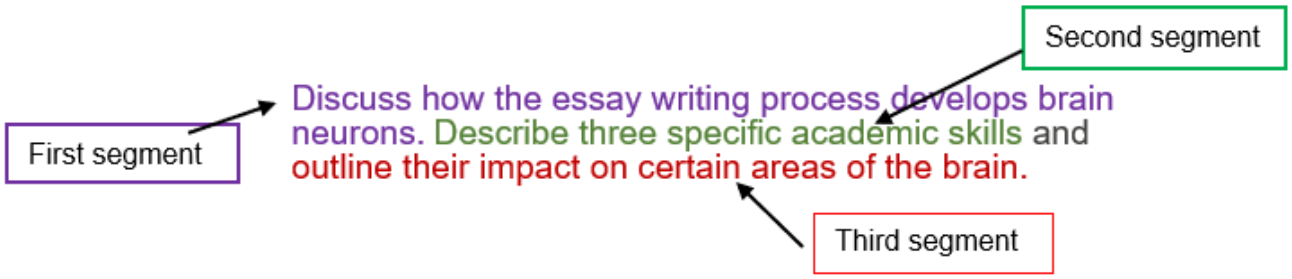
- A population (the elderly, business managers, etc.)
- A place (Rural Australia, Cambodia, etc.)
- A period in time (1960s, the Gold Rush, etc.)

5. Break the question into sections

This step identifies parts of the question around which you might organise your ideas. Divide the question into smaller segments, making it easier to understand and address. This process can also help you to sort out the content of your main paragraphs so that the structure of your response is clear.

Example: Segments of a question

Discuss how the essay writing process develops brain neurons. Describe three specific academic skills and outline their impact on certain areas of the brain.



Related Helpsheets

- Glossary of Instructional Words
- Structuring your Essay
- Paragraphs

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