Analysing assignment tasks

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What is the assignment task asking me to do?

The first thing you need to do when you are about to start working on an assignment is read the question very carefully. This might sound obvious but many students lose marks unnecessarily because they don’t pay enough attention to what the assignment question is asking them to do. To get the maximum marks for the effort you put in you need to answer the question that is set.

As well as reading the question you also need to analyse the question. Assignment questions usually have a lot of information in them and you can use this information to help you with your answer. The information in this guide will help you to interpret what your assignment questions are asking you to do.

Content and instruction words

Assignment questions usually have quite a lot of information in them about both what you need to be writing about and how you should structure your assignment.

The words which tell you the topic of what the assignment should be about are commonly called content words. The content words tell you what.

The words which tell you how to go about answering the question are commonly called instruction words. Instruction words tell you how.

The instruction words give you information on what type of assignment you need to write. For example, are you being asked to discuss, argue, describe, explain, report or compare and contrast?
Each of these instruction words tells you that you need to write a different type of response to the question. For example, in a description you are asked to focus on what something is like or what happened. On the other hand, if you are asked to explain, you will need to focus on how something happens or happened. If you are asked to argue you will need to present a case either in favour of or against something. In an argument assignment your role is something like a barrister in a court case. Your job is to convince your audience to either believe something or do something. You do this by presenting one side of a case in the best possible light and countering arguments that might be put against your case. If you are asked to discuss your role is more like that of a judge. You need to consider all the evidence you have, weigh it up and come to a decision.

How do you analyse your assignment task?

When you are analysing your assignment question you need to ask yourself questions like:

- What is the overall topic the task is asking me to address?
- What specific sub-topic within that bigger topic do I need to focus on?
- Does the assignment task provide an orientation to the topic?
- What kind of answer are the instruction words asking for?

Here is an example of an assignment task (Rolls & Wignell, 2009, p. 44):

Traditionally in many societies mothers are expected to stay at home and take care of their children. However, the financial pressures of modern life have forced many mothers to find jobs outside the home and rely on childcare for their children.

With reference to one particular type of childcare facility discuss whether this arrangement is damaging for children or not.

As you can see there is a lot of information in this task. We can use orientation, topic, focus and instruction to break the task down.
Orientation:
Traditionally in many societies mothers are expected to stay at home and take care of their children. However the financial pressures of modern life have forced many mothers to find jobs outside the home and rely on...

Topic:
... childcare for their children

Focus:
With reference to one particular type of childcare facility ... whether this arrangement is damaging for children or not.

Instruction:
Discuss

The orientation gives you background information on the topic. It can also help you to identify some of the points you might want to investigate in your research. For example, you might want to:

- identify some examples of societies where mothers are expected to stay at home
- find information about financial pressures in modern life
- investigate other reasons why mothers might go to work.

The topic gives you the broad area you will be researching in. In this case it is childcare. Words which give you the topic are also often referred to as content words.

The focus tells you the specific part of the bigger topic you need to focus on. In this case you will need to look at one particular type of childcare facility and whether it damages children or not.

The instruction word, discuss, tells you that you will need to research and find evidence about the effects of childcare on children. In a discussion you need to find all the evidence you can and then assess which side of the case the evidence supports. Does the evidence suggest that this one particular type of childcare is harmful or not to children? Your conclusion will be based on how you have interpreted and evaluated the evidence you have found.

Here is another example for you to practise on. Have a go at breaking the question down into orientation, topic, focus and instruction.
In all workplaces people must communicate with each other in order for the workplace to function. Some communication practices are productive while some others are counter-productive. Analyse and evaluate communication practices in one workplace. Are they effective or not?

Orientation:

Topic:

Focus:

Instruction:

Checklist for analysing assignment tasks

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Possible answer to the practice exercise
Orientation:
In all workplaces people must communicate with each other in order for the workplace to function. Some communication practices are productive while some others are counter-productive.

Topic:
workplace communication practices

Focus:
in one workplace

Instruction:
analyse and evaluate, ‘yes’ or ‘no’

A link to Assignment Navigator: Understanding the Task

Related Quick Guides
Common instruction words

Reference