

UNPACKING THE QUESTION

One of the biggest challenges that students face in both assignments and exams is not writing the answer, but understanding the question that is being asked. You would think that this should be the easiest part, but this is where most students make mistakes. Beautiful descriptive essays are handed in to lecturers, but the essays are often off point.

Steps to Answer the Question

The first thing that we have to do is read the question. Then read it again looking for the following parts:

1. Topic/ Content Words
2. Directional/ Task Words
3. Aspect/ Focus
4. Limiting Words/ Scope

1. Topic/ Content Words

These words tell you what the question is about. From this you can identify what, in the most general terms, is the question about. **It may include specific terms and you should consider what you know about these.** Remember you may need to define it for your first draft but the person correcting your essay probably knows the definition. **You should ask yourself how these specific terms have been referred to in lectures and tutorials.**

2. Directional/ Task Words

This refers to the instruction word or phrase. These instructions tell the student exactly what to do with the content words e.g. discuss, compare, contrast, evaluate or analyse. It is important to note, for example, discuss does not mean you include all you know about the subject matter and an academic argument needs to be kept in mind.

TOP TIP

Often, directional words are where students make mistakes and they are an important factor when answering the question asked. You should review the first online link below to define the directional words. It is relevant to make points on the specific terms but you must also keep in mind the aspect and the link between them.

3. Aspect/ Focus

You now need to make sure you know **how the aspect relates to the subject matter. The aspect or focus of a question can also contain a specific viewpoint or a theory. This refers to the requirement, in the question.** It may be the opinion of the writer of the question. You may agree or disagree or engage in a dialogue with the essay question setter.

TOP TIP

You will need to evaluate your specific terms and back them up with references and quotes. You need to show your corrector that you have read and understand the main commenters of the topic - you should build on their arguments.

4. Limiting Words/ Scope

These words limit the focus of the question e.g. a particular time period, theory, place or number.

TOP TIP

1. Highlight the Content or Topic words
2. Underline the Task words
3. Circle the aspect words
4. Identify the limitation words or those that refer to the scope of the piece.
5. Refer to you lecture and tutorial notes as the topic is drawn from familiar key notes and phrases found there.

How to Answer the Question

At UCC, in a typical essay or presentation, you may be required to:

- Present an **introduction**
- Answer the question throughout the **main body**
- Present **an argument**
- Draw up a **conclusion**

For a typical essay, every paragraph in **the main body MUST directly answer the question.** So, it is important to break the question down.

TOP TIP

The main body of a typical essay should be used to answer the question. At UCC for a typical essay, the introduction is the place to give some background and show how you will answer the question, the main body is for answering the question directly and the conclusion is to say what you have done and give your overall argument.

The Role of the Introduction

The introduction is important because it is the first thing your corrector will see. A typical essay introduction should contain the following elements:

- The **general topic**
- A **focus**
- **How** you will answer the question.

A thesis statement is very important in the introduction and should reflect all parts of the question.

TOP TIP

You should avoid repeating the question asked, in exactly the same way, in your introduction. Try to let the reader know how you will be answering the question. They should be able to follow your train of thought or your process. It should follow the structure of your main points in the body of the essay.

Don't assume that it is the same as how you have done it before! You can always speak to your tutor or lecturer if you feel you may not be answering the question as you should be.

Questions using Quotes

Assignments questions can be presented as quotes. **Once you have unpacked all the elements you need to think about your response.** Usually, a quote or statement in the question is used to provoke a response from you.

TOP TIP

Exploring variations of a statement or a quote can help you to develop your academic argument and a focus.

Statements & Further Research

Once you have your variations of a statement, you should think about your viewpoint. Do you agree or disagree? You should try to have at least three or more versions of the statement and follow the next steps:

1. **Make a list of statements** or questions.
2. **Order them** as you might order paragraphs in a piece of writing.
3. **Does this make an essay plan?** If not, what do you need to add?
4. **Are you missing a vital link** or point to prove your thesis?

Useful Sources

- <https://www.monash.edu/rlo/research-writing-assignments/understanding-the-assignment/assignment-direction-words>
- <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/sites/default/files/docs/learningguide-writingessays.pdf>
- https://web.wpi.edu/Images/CMS/ARC/Answering_Essay_Questions_Made_Easier.pdf
- <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/essay-terms>
- <https://www.oxford-royale.com/articles/how-to-answer-essay-questions.html#ald=68bb7430-21b7-481a-8e97-1c1f0559662b>
- Bailey, S (2011) *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*, 3rd Edition, Routledge: London & New York. Available at: [https://www.kau.edu.sa/Files/0013287/Subjects/academic-writing-handbook-international-students-3rd-ed%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.kau.edu.sa/Files/0013287/Subjects/academic-writing-handbook-international-students-3rd-ed%20(2).pdf)
- Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural Thought Patterns In Inter-cultural Education. *Language Learning*, 16(1-2), pp.1-20.
- Waylink-english.co.uk. (2017). *Making links between paragraphs in academic writing*. [online] Available at: <http://www.waylink-english.co.uk/?page=61180> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2017].
- www2.le.ac.uk. (2017). *Writing essays – University of Leicester*. [online] Available at: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/writing-essays> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2017]

Other Relevant Online PDFs

- Paragraph Structure
- Sentence Structure
- How to Write an Essay
- How to Build an Academic Argument