

1.11 Understanding questions

When you are given a written assignment for coursework or when you are taking an examination, it is vital that you always look very closely at the question or task. Failure to answer the set question is one of the main reasons for low marks or for failure. The most common mistake is to write too generally around the topic of the question, without paying attention to the specific instructions and parameters of the question. You will never be given a title such as “Globalisation” and asked simply to write everything you know about it. Instead, you will be asked to “discuss” or “analyse” aspects of globalisation, such as its impact on certain countries, its advantages and disadvantages, its development during a certain period etc. You must stick very closely to the instructions you are given; other aspects of the topic may well be very interesting, but if part, or all, of what you write is irrelevant to the question, you will definitely lose marks. Keep referring to the question and asking yourself if what you are writing is relevant. If it isn't, don't write it.

When you given an assignment brief, or when you open your exam paper, you must spend time carefully analysing your question or task. This will be time very well spent. You need to look closely at almost every word, using a dictionary whenever possible to check exact meanings. If there are still parts of the question which are still not clear, discuss it with colleagues or ask your tutor for clarification. You should be in no doubt at all what it is you are being asked to do. Misunderstanding just one word may mean that what you write is irrelevant.

Remember that your introduction and conclusion should indicate very clearly that you have understood the question.

Components of a question

It is useful to be aware of the components which may make up a question:

Subject/topic

The main area that you are to write about, usually related to part of your course. You should be able to summarise this in a word or two.

Instruction words

These are words like *outline; account for; discuss; evaluate; compare and contrast* etc. You must do exactly what you are being told to do: a very common mistake is to simply *describe* when you're being asked to *discuss*; different instructions entail different types of answer. And remember that there may be more than one of these words, so make sure you answer all the parts. If you're not completely sure of the meaning of the word,

look it up in a good dictionary. There is a list of these instruction words at the end of the guide.

You will not always have an instruction word; sometimes you will just be asked a direct question, such as “Should the jury system be abolished?”

Key aspects

These are the main areas of the topic that you will be concentrating on; for example, the “impact” or “economic consequences” of globalisation.

Other significant words

These are words or phrases which define the scope of your answer; for example, particular time periods, places, people, laws etc. Obviously, if you’re asked to write about Europe, don’t write about Asia.

(Based on Williams, K. *Writing Essays* Oxford Centre for Staff Development. See this book for some practical activities on analysing questions.)

Types of question

As we have seen, specific instruction words dictate how you need to go about your task. It is important to distinguish between questions, or parts of questions, which require factual information or some kind of description, and others which are asking you to make a judgement, to discuss or evaluate something. You will rarely be asked to simply produce a piece of descriptive writing; there will usually be some element of discussion. A fairly typical question may begin by asking you to outline the main facts related to a topic, but will then go on to ask you to discuss or evaluate an aspect of this. This second part will usually represent a higher proportion of the marks. For example:

Outline the main changes made to the laws of adoption in the UK in the 1990s. To what extent have these changes been successful?

The first part of this question is simply asking you to show that you are aware of what these changes were, and should be easy to answer. The second part is asking you to make a judgement, to argue a case, and as such requires more thought and research.

The following words and phrases in a question indicate that a judgement is required:

- Discuss
- Argue
- Evaluate
- Critically evaluate
- Critically analyse

- To what extent
- How far

Or, you may be given a direct question to answer; for example, "Should?"

It cannot be overemphasized how important it is to avoid simple description when you are being asked to make a judgement.

Instruction words

Account for - Answer the question "Why?" (you may need to answer where? when? and what? along the way). Show how the situation came about. Summarise how things are and give evidence to explain why they are so.

Analyse - Consider something carefully and in detail in order to understand or explain it.

Argue - Persuade by showing evidence that something is true, or the course of action which should be taken. Give reasons why something should or should not be done.

Comment on - Don't just describe it! Offer your own opinion on the issue. Remember to make it clear what you are offering your opinion on. You could offer other opinions and compare them.

Compare - Identify similarities. Concentrate on the similarities and list as many as you can. It is worth including something on the differences - especially if the wording is "compare and contrast".

Contrast - Identify differences. Deliberately single out and emphasise the differences between two or more things.

Criticise - Make decisions. Analyse and make a judgment. Referring to the opinions of other people (particularly acknowledged experts) is useful when supporting your judgment. When offering criticism, always try to include constructive suggestions as to how any problems could be overcome.

Define - Give a very short answer to the question "What is it?" Give a precise statement (or mathematical equation or model) to provide a short, unambiguous explanation of the meaning of a term, a concept or a word. A definition should only contain essential information.

Describe - What is it? How does it work? Within the word or time limit available give a detailed account of the subject. Give an overview and make it as clear as possible.

Discuss - Debate advantages and disadvantages. List pros and cons. Argue the merits of different points of view about something. Don't just explain or describe.

Evaluate - How valid is it? How good is it? How well does something work? Come to a conclusion after analysing the evidence. Give your opinion, quote supporting evidence. Give arguments against your opinion and your view of their validity.

Explain - Answer the question "How?". What is the principle? You may also need to answer the question "why?" and/or "where?" and "when?" as part of your description of "how?".

How far – To what extent? Up to what point? It's usually best not to be 100% in agreement or disagreement, nor to be in the middle: show you're aware of different, opposing opinions, but come down clearly on one side in your argument.

Illustrate - Show what something is like. Give some clear examples. In many subjects use diagrams and graphs to help.

Interpret - What does it mean? Explain what something means and give your opinion. Make sense of it. Pull the threads together. Come to a conclusion.

Justify - Give solid evidence for. Go on to a conclusion and support it with facts and figures. Maybe also give evidence against opposite interpretations.

Outline - Draw "the big picture". Give an overview of the main factors or the most important ideas.

Prove - Show that..... Support with facts, figures, evidence, or examples. Give references.

Relate - Tell the "story" of OR show how things are connected, how they affect each other.

Review - Make a survey of, examining the subject in a critical way

State - Put it "in a nutshell". Present in a short, clear sentence or two. This could be followed by justification if the question requires support of your statement.

Summarise - Give a short account of the main conclusions or ideas. Don't introduce any new ideas.

To what extent – How far? Up to what point? It's usually best not to be 100% in agreement or disagreement, nor to be in the middle: show you're aware of different, opposing opinions, but come down clearly on one side in your argument.

Trace - "How did it come about?" Give a short description of the order in which events happened. Comment on the causes and effects.

This is not a complete list. Check in a good dictionary any other words in your essay/report/assignment questions which you are not completely sure of.