

Analysing the Question

You need to use question analysis for assignments, exam essays, and short answer questions. If you learn the steps for question analysis and take 10–15 minutes to think through the question in this systematic way, then you will have a good start to writing a successful essay—one that pleases the lecturer! The following information can be applied to all question analysis:

1. Read the whole question twice
2. Look for instruction words
3. Look for topic words
4. Look for any other words that restrict the topic in any way
5. Follow the steps, then rewrite the question
6. Instruction words – what they mean

1. Read the whole question TWICE

It is important that you interpret the question accurately and clearly. First impressions can lead to an error that may fail to meet your marker's expectations.

2. Instruction words (see examples on back page)

In most of your university essay questions, you will find **one or more** instruction words that tell you what your essay should do. Therefore, to interpret the question accurately, you must understand exactly what these words mean. On the back of this page, you will find a list of commonly used instruction words with an interpretation of the process you must undertake in your assessment tasks.

3. Topic words

Topic words are usually easy to locate. They tell you what you have to write about.

4. Restricting words

Restricting words are words or phrases that narrow the topic and make it more specific.

5. Follow the steps, then rewrite the question

For the question, “What is meant by ‘economic dualism’ in the Japanese context? Discuss the impact of colonial rule on British Burma before 1870”, the following shows how to categorise the words::

1. Instruction words	2. Topic words	3. Restricting words
1 What is meant by	2 ‘economic dualism’	3 in the Japanese context?
1 Discuss	2 the impact of colonial rule on British Burma	3 before 1870

Once you have analysed the question, check your understanding. Try to rewrite the question using your own words by completing the following sentence in no more than 25 words: The question is asking me to . . .

6. Instruction words – what they mean

Words such as what, how, and why are, of course, commonly used in questions. Other instruction words are:

Account for	Give reasons for something.
Analyse	Focus on the 'how' and 'why' of an issue or topic. Do not simply describe or summarise.
Compare	Find similarities and differences between two or more objects, ideas, events, or theories.
Contrast	Similar to compare, but differences should be emphasised.
Criticise	Assess the merit of something. Consider both good points and bad points and give the results of your analysis.
Define	Give precise meanings with key details. Examples may be useful.
Describe	Recall specific details about size, cost, texture, appearance, etc.
Discuss	Present a point of view after considering both sides of an issue or question. Your opinion should be supported by arguments and evidence.
Evaluate	Consider both strengths and weaknesses and make a judgement.
Explain	Relate how something happens in the order in which it occurs, or clarify reasons, causes, and effects.
Illustrate	Use examples to demonstrate a point.
Interpret	Express in your own words. Examples may be useful.
List	Write your answer as an itemised series that may be in point form.
Outline	Provide main points and leave out minor details.
Prove	Give factual evidence, examples, or clear logical reasons that demonstrate the validity of a statement/idea.
Relate	Tell the story in clear sequence, or show how things are connected or similar to each other.
Review	Examine a subject critically, analysing and commenting on the main points.
State	Present the main points in brief, in clear sequence.
Summarise	Give the main points or facts in condensed form.
To what extent	Consider both sides, make a judgment and defend it. Similar to evaluate or discuss.
Trace	Relate the progress, development, or history of a subject.