

## *Writing Right*

# **Introduction to Academic Writing: Different Questions, Different Answers**

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*I had six honest serving men-they taught me all I knew: Their names  
were Where and What and When and Why and How and Who.*  
– Rudyard Kipling

In writing any essay, we are guided by questions. These questions help to remind us of where we are headed. However, at times, we may lose track of the central question and the writing becomes confusing for the reader. At other times, we may have misunderstood the question and thus head in the opposite direction. Therefore, understanding the question is of paramount importance. It would certainly be worthwhile investing the time to analyse what the task requires before embarking on any writing.

In this section, we will cover some of the fundamental skills involved in understanding what a question asks for.

## **Different Questions, Different Answers: How to NOT answer the wrong question**

### **Learning Outcomes**

At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Analyse the different requirements in a question as indicated by instruction words (e.g., discuss, evaluate, explain)
  - Identify and describe key terms in the question that require a definition or description by the writer (e.g., ‘effects of media’ or ‘evaluate the impact’)
  - Identify and evaluate certain key words in a question that suggest a certain value (e.g., ‘It is good to exercise’ or ‘It is detrimental to our health’)
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## Reading and understanding the key problems/issues behind analysing a question

In analysing a question, we should first identify the instruction words.

Let's look at the following questions:

- *Describe* the education policies of Singapore from 1965 to the present.
- *Evaluate* the education policies of Singapore from 1965 to the present.
- *Analyse* the education policies of Singapore from 1965 to the present.

On the surface, the statements are similar because there is only one word that is different. However, that difference is key as it determines what the essay should focus on. For example, if you were asked to describe a country's education policies then you might list the policies and elaborate on their main ideas. You could also write about the sequence of the policies. However, if you were asked to analyse the policies, then you would need to break the policies down into smaller components and describe them to illustrate how and why they are related to one another.

**Here is a table of instruction or task words and what they might mean.**

Instruction words	Meaning
<b>Describe</b>	To provide details and the main ideas of a topic
<b>Analyse</b>	To break down a concept or idea into smaller parts and examine them closely
<b>Argue</b>	To build a case using relevant evidence and attempt to persuade others to share a certain perspective
<b>Compare</b>	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing more on the <i>similarities</i> )
<b>Contrast</b>	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing more on the <i>differences</i> )
<b>Examine</b>	To investigate a concept or idea in detail
<b>Explain</b>	To illustrate and provide reasons for an event or how something works
<b>Evaluate</b>	To assess a concept or idea and form an opinion or judgement about its value or truth
<b>Outline</b>	To provide the key features of a given concept or idea

## **Reading and understanding the key concepts involved in analysing a question and generating a meaningful response**

### **Identifying the key concepts in the question**

After identifying the instruction words, we should identify the key concepts that the question is focussed on. This involves digging deeper into the question and asking ourselves what exactly we need to focus on. An academic essay question will almost certainly involve some important concepts and ideas that you will be required to tackle. Before researching or writing anything, think about the specific concepts or ideas that you will focus on.

*Working from home has become the new norm in 2021 and employers should continue to offer workers the option of working from home given the risks and negative impact of spreading Covid-19. Analyse and evaluate this perspective.*

In this question above, there are two main scenarios: Working from home and working in the office. To compare the two scenarios, we would need to look at certain concepts like productivity and trust between employer and employee. In other words, we should not simply list the pros and cons for each scenario but rather, look at the different concepts that apply across both scenarios. This will then allow us to analyse and evaluate the scenarios objectively.

Apart from looking at the key concepts behind the question, it is also important to identify some key terms that might require a common definition. Writers should keep in mind that readers may understand certain terms differently or have a different opinion of something that is subjective. For example, in the question above, the term 'new norm' would require some definition of what this means. What exactly is new and how has it changed? Likewise, the word 'risks' may be easily understood as situations that involve some danger or harm. However, different people have different appetites for risk.

In short, it is worthwhile investing the time to identify the key concepts and define important terms in each question because this will guide us in writing our essay.

## **Reading and understanding the key concepts involved in analysing a question and generating a meaningful response**

### **Deciding on an argument or thesis statement for the essay**

After you have thought about the key terms and concepts behind the question, it is time to generate your own thesis and argument for the essay. Do note that this thesis may be a tentative one because it might change depending on the evidence that you uncover as you do your research. However, having a working thesis will help you to stay focussed on the key questions that you are trying to answer.

In coming up with your thesis statement, it may be useful to consider the three basic ideas of A-B-C:

**Argument:** What is your central argument? A thesis does not only involve you describing other perspectives. There should be a central source of tension or argument that you are exploring and eventually making a stand on.

**Balanced:** In many arguments, there are two sides of the coin. Try to explore both sides and offer a balanced perspective to the argument. If a writer is too dogmatic, then there is a possibility that the essay will become too one-sided and simplistic in its arguments.

**Clarity:** It should be clear right from the start what your central argument is. This clarity may sound simple, but it does take much thought and refinement to eventually reach this point. Do remember that if you are not clear about what your thesis is, it would be impossible for your reader to know what your argument is all about.

## Topic Review and Exercises

### Analysing sample questions and identifying various key terms and words in the question

In this section, we will look at several questions and apply the ideas covered in the sections earlier. After reading each question, spend a few moments to identify the key points.

- What are the key instruction words and what do they instruct you to do?
- What are the key terms in the question that might require you to define or scope?
- What are the key concepts that you might wish to focus on?

**Question:** *Evaluate different ways to increase creativity during early childhood.*

In this question, the instruction word is 'evaluate'. This requires the writer to assess a concept or idea to form an opinion. As such, it is not sufficient to list the different ways to increase creativity during early childhood. The essay should include the writer's assessment of its efficacy and impact on creativity.

Creativity can be a rather subjective term and different people may interpret it differently. The writer should define this term early in the essay to establish a common understanding of what it means. Another key term is 'early childhood' and this could also be defined right from the beginning so that the limits of the essay are established.

In thinking about the question statement and formulating a thesis, the creative writer could also consider the flipside of the question which is whether there are certain ways that seem to promote creativity but may actually end up stifling it. For example, a kindergarten teacher could teach the SCAMPER technique which is quite popular in terms of solving a problem creatively. However, the technique may be too advanced for their young minds and ends up confusing them. Therefore, the writer could include nuanced arguments that qualify the ways to increase creativity.

## Evaluating short paragraphs and matching them to possible topics for an essay

### Exercise 1

In this exercise, select the correct instruction words from the boxes below and match them to the closest meaning given. An example is provided in the first question.

<b>1.</b>	Describe	<b>3.</b>	Analyse	<b>5.</b>	Contrast
<b>2.</b>	Argue	<b>4.</b>	Compare	<b>6.</b>	Examine

No.	Meaning	Instruction word
<b>E.g.</b>	<i>To provide details and the main ideas of a topic</i>	<i>Describe</i>
<b>1</b>	To break down a concept or idea into smaller parts and examine them closely	
<b>2</b>	To build a case using relevant evidence and attempt to persuade others to share a certain perspective	
<b>3</b>	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing on the <i>similarities</i> )	
<b>4</b>	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing on the <i>differences</i> )	
<b>5</b>	To investigate a concept or idea in detail	



**Suggested answer key for Exercise 1**

No.	Meaning	Instruction word
1	To break down a concept or idea into smaller parts and examine them closely	Analyse
2	To build a case using relevant evidence and attempt to persuade others to share a certain perspective	Argue
3	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing on the <i>similarities</i> )	Compare
4	To identify and highlight the characteristics of various concepts or ideas in relation to each other (usually focusing on the <i>differences</i> )	Contrast
5	To investigate a concept or idea in detail	Examine

**Exercise 2**

In this exercise, identify the key terms in the question that might require a clearer definition or description by the writer. This includes key words that suggest a certain value that should be clarified. Write these key terms and words on in the column on the right. Try to anticipate some questions that might guide how you clarify or define the terms.

No.	Question / Question statement	Key words and/or terms What are the questions that the writer might wish to clarify early in the essay?
E.g.	<i>Describe the challenges that youths in Singapore faced during the Circuit Breaker in 2020.</i>	<b>Challenges:</b> <i>What kind of challenges? Physical, mental, emotional?</i> <b>Youths:</b> <i>What is the age range?</i> <b>Faced:</b> <i>Was it directly or indirectly?</i>
1	Discuss the costs and benefits of remote learning for students in SUSS.	
2	Evaluate the most significant legislative policy in Singapore between 1990 – 2000.	
3	Pharmaceutical companies should be allowed to manipulate prices as they deem fit because they are driven by profits. Do you agree?	

**Suggested responses for exercise 2**

No.	Question / Question statement	Key words and/or terms What are the questions that the writer might wish to clarify early in the essay?
1	Discuss the costs and benefits of remote learning for students in SUSS.	<p><b>Costs/Benefits:</b> What kind of costs? Financial, mental, learning?</p> <p><b>Remote learning:</b> Is this solely learning online or a hybrid model?</p>
2	Evaluate the most significant legislative policy in Singapore between 1990 – 2000.	<p><b>Most significant:</b> Is this the most important one? How would you define significant?</p> <p><b>Legislative policy:</b> What is meant by this?</p>
3	Pharmaceutical companies should be allowed to manipulate prices as they deem fit because they are driven by profits. Do you agree?	<p><b>Manipulate:</b> What is meant by this? Is there a negative connotation to this and how will you define it?</p> <p><b>they deem fit:</b> Who exactly does 'they' refer to? Would it be the CEO or the board or are they also influenced by the stockholders?</p>

For more resources on Academic Writing or English Language support,  
you may scan the QR code below.



<https://www.suss.edu.sg/academic-research-writing-resources>

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