UNDERSTANDING ESSAY QUESTIONS

One of the main reasons students do badly in assignments is that they do not understand the question. This brochure will help you interpret the question properly so that you will understand what it is you are expected to do in the assignment.

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Helping you get the most out of your time at university.

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http://www.international.mq.edu.au/pdfs/TaskWords
INTRODUCTION

Answering essay questions can cause problems for most students. It may be that the topic you are expected to write about is extremely difficult to understand. However, most times it is the question itself which is a source of confusion.

Essay questions usually contain TASK or DIRECTIVE words. These direct the writer to answer the question in a particular way.

This brochure will introduce you to the key task words which are often used in essay questions. Knowing what these words mean will assist you in answering the question which has been set.

Task/directive words, as the name implies, give you directions as to what task is expected of you. Below is a list of the most common task/directive words, along with their meanings.

ACCOUNT FOR
You are expected to give reasons for something, or explain why something has occurred.

ANALYSE
You are expected to take an idea, concept or statement apart and examine the elements of which it comprises. Your answer should be methodically and logically organised.

ARGUE
This question requires you to present a case for and/or against a concept or situation.

ASSESS/EVALUATE
This involves you making a judgment about an idea or a topic. After acknowledging the points for and against the idea, you need to state, with reasons, whether the topic/idea being discussed is valid or not. Your judgment should be based on other author’s views on the subject, as well as your own opinion of the merits of the idea/subject.

COMMENT ON
This type of question expects you to state your opinion on a topic, situation or idea. Your opinion should be informed by your reading.

COMPARE
Here you must set items/ideas side by side to show their similarities and differences. A balanced, fair and objective answer is expected. You are not expected to give your opinion.

CONTRAST
Here you are expected show only the differences between two or more topics/ideas/etc.

CRITICISE
This answer requires you to point out flaws or weaknesses in an argument/idea, but also you are expected to indicate any positive aspects of the subject in question. Your answer must not be biased, and should give a balanced answer. Any decision or judgment you may make must be supported with evidence. Sometimes the directive words used are: CRITICALLY EXAMINE

DEFINE
A definition of something means that your answer must explain the precise meaning of something.

DESCRIBE
Here a simple description of the attributes or characteristics of a topic or idea must be give. A definition answer must include a discussion of the concept and should also state the limits of the idea being defined.

DISCUSS
Here the answer must explain a topic or concept, and then give details through supporting evidence, examples, points for and against, and explanations for the facts put forward from various points of view. This can be one of the most difficult types of essay questions.

EXAMINE
You must investigate or inspect closely, and give an opinion on your observation.

EXPLAIN
You must show how or why something happens, or is constructed in a particular way. The explanation should increase the reader’s understanding of the topic or idea.

HYPOTHESISE
A hypothesis is a theory which is confirmed or rejected through testing. This type of question requires you to give reasons for, and explain why an event occurs.

ILLUSTRATE
Such an answer consists mainly of examples which demonstrate or prove the subject of the question. Another directive word will usually be included in the question.