In order to decide how to answer an essay question, you need to identify what the question requires in terms of content and genre. This guide outlines some methods to help you analyse essay questions.

Analyse the question using key words

Assignment questions can be broken down into parts so that you can better understand what you are being asked to do. It is important to identify key words and phrases in the topic.

What are key words?

Key words are the words in an assignment question that tell you the approaches to take when you answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Words</th>
<th>Content Words</th>
<th>Limiting Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• tell you what to do in order to answer the question</td>
<td>• tell you what the topic areas are</td>
<td>• narrow a broad topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• are usually verbs</td>
<td>• help you focus your research</td>
<td>• indicate aspects to focus on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make sure you understand the meaning of key words in an essay question, especially task words. As Task words are verbs that direct you and tell you how to go about answering a question, understanding the meaning helps you know exactly what you to do.

Content words tell you what the topic area(s) of your assignment are and take you halfway towards narrowing down your material and selecting your answer. Content words help you to focus your research and reading on the correct area.
Limiting words make a broad topic workable. They focus the topic area further by indicating aspects you should narrowly concentrate on.

If you’re not sure about any aspect of the question, ask your tutor/lecturer for clarification. Never start any assignment until you know and understand exactly what you are being asked to do.

How to use key words

- Look for the keywords in your essay question.
- Underline them.
- Spend a little time working out what they mean. Use the Glossary of task words to help you.

Example Question

Computers have had a significant impact on education in the 20th century. Discuss the changes they have made.

Task Words  Answer

DISCUSS. Look up the meaning in the glossary of task words to find out what it means.

Content Words  Answer

EDUCATION, COMPUTERS. Content words help to direct your research and reading towards the correct area(s), in this case on computers and on education.

Limiting Words  Answer

CHANGES, SIGNIFICANT IMPACT, 20TH CENTURY. Limiting words further define the topic area and indicate aspects you should narrowly concentrate on. For example, in this question, do not just write about computers in education, Discuss the significant impact they have had, and the changes computers have made to education during a certain time: the 20TH CENTURY.

See next: Implied or complex questions