

ANALYSING AN ESSAY QUESTION

Other Handouts:

- Planning Your Essay
- Drafting Your Essay
- Mind Mapping

Step 1: Choosing an essay question

Look at the essay question/s and ask yourself:

- What do you already know about the topics in the set question/s?
- Are there any questions of immediate interest to you?
- Write for one minute about what your immediate response to that question would be.

Is there enough there to build an argument?

Hint:

In essay writing an argument is a 'case' that someone makes.

This argument must be backed up by data to persuade readers of its strength.

Step 2: Identifying key instructions

What are the *key instruction words* in the essay question? These are sometimes called directive words as they direct or tell you what to do. Clarify their meaning using these definitions¹:

- **Analyse:** Show the essence of something and break it down to its component parts, examining each part in detail.
- **Argue:** present the case for/or against a particular proposition.
- **Compare:** look for similarities and differences between propositions.
- **Contrast:** Explain differences.
- **Criticise:** Give your judgement about the merit of theories or opinions, about the truth of these facts and back your judgement by a discussion of the evidence.
- **Discuss:** Investigate or examine by argument, sift and debate, giving reasons for and against.
- **Examine:** Present in depth and investigate the implications.

¹ Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. 2006 *A Guide to Learning Independently*, 4th edn, Pearson Education Australia, Sydney, p98.

Look at your essay question and consider if you are being asked to:

- examine a set of issues,
- critically analyse something, or
- should your focus be to argue for a position?

Step 3: Identifying the key parts of the question

Break the question up into its component parts and identify the scope of the question.

For example:

Question: Recently, human genetic material has been fused with non-human animal cells and cloned. This opens up the possibility of developing organ banks for 'spare parts'. What are the ethical and social implications of this technology? Discuss in 1200 words.

There are 3 key sections to the question:

1. A statement of fact or value is made: *Recently, human genetic material has been fused with non-human animal cells and cloned.*
2. Next, a question directs your attention towards a particular aspect/problem or understanding of that statement. *This opens up the possibility of developing organ banks for 'spare parts'.*
3. Finally you are told to discuss, which means to 'examine by argument' *the ethical and social implications of this technology* and give reasons for and against your position.

Step 4: Brainstorming the question

Take each section of the question and brainstorm a series of questions around them. Do not worry if these questions are unanswerable at this stage. This is a process of thinking creatively.

For example: Where would they keep 'organ banks for 'spare parts'? Would they have a use-by date? Is there a difference between growing a pig to eat for bacon and growing a pig for a cloned pig-human kidney? If we create an organ that is part human and part pig does that make the pig more human-like and are we becoming more pig-like?

Step 5: Constructing a mind map

Take your brainstorm and pick out what you think is the most interesting and important question or idea. Place that in the centre of a blank page and then put other ideas and content around that to create a 'mind map'. A mind map is a useful tool you can use to move a creative collection of ideas and questions into a pattern. Do at least two mind maps from your brainstorm and then choose one to move to the next stage and rephrase the original question.

Tip!

See the handout on Mind Mapping.

Step 6: Rephrasing the question

Rewrite the question in your own words and use simple straightforward language. This assists you to make sure you have clearly understood what the question is asking you to do.

Tip!

Don't worry if your question does not sound too academic. This will come later!

For example: *'What are the ethical and social implications of this technology?'* could be written as: Is it the right thing to do, to make organs that are part human and part animal? If I think about a society that has all these part human and part animal organs available, what effect might it have on, for example, the health system?

Step 7: Researching the issues

Read over the notes from any of the lectures and/or readings that cover this idea/theory/ concept. Look at the recommended texts and ask yourself: what issues are highlighted in these readings?

- What was the emphasis in the lecture/readings?
- What were the key points in that lecture/readings?
- How do those key points link to the essay question?

Tips!

*Use the handout on **Improve Your Reading of Academic Texts** to assist you.*

After collecting your notes from your readings and lectures you are now ready to plan your essay.

*Use the handout on **Planning Your Essay** to work through the next stage in academic writing.*

Reference

Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. (2006). *A guide to learning independently* (4th ed). Sydney: Pearson Education Australia.