



Decoding the Question

Study Development Worksheet

How to break it down

In order to decide how to answer an essay title it might be helpful to break it down. You can do this by sorting the words into three categories: directive words, content words and focus words.

- **Directive words/ phrases** tell you what to do; the action you need to perform.
- **Content words/ phrases** tell you what areas to cover, i.e. the subject matter of the essay
- **Focus words/ phrases** tell you more information on how to cover areas.

A simple example would be (this is not the type of an essay title you would get at university but is a useful starting point):

‘Analyse the changes computers have made to education.’

Directive word: **Analyse**

Directive words indicate what you are being asked to do. In this question the action word is ‘analyse’. If you look the definition in the glossary of task words used in essay titles below, you will see that to analyse (in an essay) means ‘examine in very close detail; break down into its component parts and identify the important parts.’

Content words: **computers, education**

Content words set and define the essay. This helps focus your research on the correct area, in this case on ‘computers in education.’

Focus words: **changes**

Focus words tell you what perspective you should cover the content from. In this case you should concentrate on the changes that computers have made to education.



Glossary of directive words

Understanding the meaning of directive words helps you know exactly what you are being asked to do. Here is a list, with their definitions, of the most common ones.

- **Analyse** = examine in very close detail; break something down into its component parts and identify the important parts.
- **Assess** = Consider an idea or claim in order to make a judgment about its value or worth.
- **Compare** = Show how two or more things are similar. Indicate the relevance or consequences of these similarities.
- **Contrast** = Set out two or more items or arguments in opposition so as to draw out the differences. Indicate whether the differences are significant.
- **Define** = Set down the precise meaning of a word. Where relevant show that you understand why the meaning might be problematic or significant.
- **Discuss** = Write about the most important aspects of (probably including criticism); give arguments for and against; consider the implications of.
- **Evaluate** = Assess the value or worth of something using evidence. Possibly include an element of personal opinion.
- **Examine** = Put the subject 'under the microscope' looking at it in detail.
- **Justify** = Give evidence which supports an argument or idea; show why decisions or conclusions were made, considering objections that others might make.
- **Outline** = Give only the main points; omit minor details and show the main structure.
- **State** = Give the main features in very clear English.
- **To what extent** = Consider how far something is true or contributes to the final outcome. Consider ways in which the proposition is not true.

The list is not exhaustive, so you can add to it too!

Based on Cottrell, Stella (2008) *Study skills handbook*. 3rd ed. London, Palgrave MacMillan.



Identifying Directive, Content and Focus Words

Exercise:

Using three different coloured pens/ highlighters mark all the:

Directive words/phrases in [_____] (fill gap with colour)

Content words/phrases in [_____]

Focus words/ phrases in [_____]

Discuss what influence recent international events have on the roles and responsibilities of civil engineers.

1. Assess the effects learning to read has on speech perception.
2. To what extent was the South's refusal to give up slavery responsible for the American Civil War?
3. Evaluate the role of studio potter/ ceramic artist in past and contemporary societies.
4. Compare and contrast the role of the Buddha in Buddhism with that of Jesus Christ in Christianity.
5. Outline the concept of active reading and assess its relevance to study at university.

Tips:

It might be worth 'unpicking' the content words.

Looking at our previous example - **Analyse the changes computers have made to education** – what does the word *computers* mean? e-mail? cloud storage? internet based learning? is it not a little vague – old fashioned even?

And *education*? Does this mean *university* education? Or *nursery* education?



Take for example: **Should sport be compulsory at school?** what do we mean by sport? does this include non-competitive sport, for instance hill walking or yoga? does school include colleges of further education or nursery schools?

The same principle applies to questions you are more likely to be set at university: **Assess the role of non-competitive sports in the school curriculum.**

This will help define or limit the scope of your research and ultimately plan your essay.

Take for example this question from the previous activity: ***Evaluate the roles of studio potter/ ceramic artist in past and contemporary societies.***

Here is a sample of some the questions you might ask yourself:

- *What is a studio potter/ ceramic artist?*
- *Are they the same thing?*
- *Was the role the same in past?*
- *What is it like now?*
- *What do they do in their day to day jobs?*
- *How important is the role now? how important was it in the past? how has it changed?*
- *Did they make objects for everyday living in the past? do they do this now?*
- *How has the technology changed?*
- *Can I make a judgment about the merits of the role in the past and present?*

Think you can apply the same methods to make similar enquiries of your next essay question or assignment brief? Give it a try!

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