Focus your topic

It is important to take time to clarify what is expected of you in an assessment item before you start researching and writing. The following provides an overview of the process involved in careful analysis of the assignment question or topic. This is the first step towards researching and writing an assignment that effectively addresses the question/topic and assessment criteria.

Understand the main focus of the assignment

Why are you being asked to do this assignment? Think about your topic in relation to the learning outcomes, aims or objectives of the course. Read the course guide and ask yourself:

- Why has this topic been set?
- What course aims or objectives is this topic testing?
- What lectures, workshops or weekly readings relate to this topic?

Think about your topic in relation to the marking criteria. Ask yourself:

- Which parts are allocated the most marks?
- What additional clues does the marking criteria provide in regards to the assignment task?

Understand what you are being asked to do

Key words

Key words in the topic help you to decide on the approach you should take.

Key words include:

- **Topic** words highlight the major concepts (subjects) in the assignment or research topic.
- **Directive** words give directions to the approach you should take, and the kind of response required in the assignment (e.g. ‘examine’, ‘analyse’, ‘compare’).
- **Limiting** words limit the scope of your research and writing; set boundaries.

Turn the topic into questions

Turning an assignment or research topic into questions that you will answer in your essay helps to:

- Guide your reading and therefore research more effectively;
- Organise your material more efficiently; and
- Plan an overall argument in response to the topic.

Working in groups to develop these questions can be especially productive, allowing for different perspective on the same assignment.
Primary Question
First turn your topic into a main (primary) question. Your answer to this question will be your overall argument.

Secondary Questions
In order to answer the primary question, you will also need to consider other questions. It is important that you think about analytical as well as descriptive questions.

- **Descriptive questions** (where? when? who? what?) provide background or contextual information.
- **Analytical questions** (how? why? to what extent?) help to show a deeper understanding of the topic, and generally assist you in developing an analytical response to the assignment.

To illustrate how to turn an assignment into questions see the example below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment topic</th>
<th><strong>Compare</strong> two organizational interventions that improved nurses’ work engagement.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary question</td>
<td><strong>What</strong> two organizational interventions improved nurses’ work engagement?</td>
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</table>
| Secondary descriptive questions (examples) | **What** is meant by organizational intervention?  
**What** is meant by work engagement?
**What** did the interventions consist of?
**Where** did the interventions take place?
**How** was improvement in nurses’ work engagement measured? |
| Secondary analytical questions (examples) | **Why** did nurses’ work engagement improve?  
**To what extent** was an improvement in work engagement experienced by all the nurses?  
If there were differences in the outcomes of the organizational interventions, why were there differences? |

Brainstorming: mapping the research territory

Brainstorming is a way of producing ideas by letting the mind think freely about an issue. It can be done individually or as a group process.

- Think about any answers you already have to your questions.
- As you reflect on the topic, you might even find some more questions that need to be asked.
- It may help to use a concept map or another form of graphic organiser to organise your thoughts.

These questions can now be used as a basis for your research.

Further Reading


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