Understanding Assignment Questions

Often the most difficult parts of answering an assignment question – writing an essay or report, describing a procedure, answering short answer questions, preparing an oral presentation – is working out exactly what you are supposed to do. It is heartbreaking to spend a lot of time collecting information and writing your answer or giving your presentation only to have your teacher comment “This is not what the question asked you to do”. How can you be sure that you correctly understand what an assignment question is asking you to do? Here are some tips that can help.

Instruction words

Look carefully at all the words involving what is to be done, i.e. the verbs, in the question. Among these verbs are the instruction words that tell you what to do. Instruction words are words like describe, analyse, prepare, explain etc. A list of common instruction words is in Study Skills pamphlet Key terms in Exam and Assignment Questions. You must get clear what these instruction words you’re looking at mean.

Specialist Words (terminology)

It’s also most important to know what the specialist words (= terminology) of your subject in the assignment question mean. There are hundreds of specialist words in every subject. A few examples are: ideology (SACS); Abstract Expressionism (Art & Design); product life cycle (Marketing); balance of payments (International Trade); field (Info. Technology); double entry bookkeeping (Accounting); reagent, base, titration (Chemistry); negotiable instrument (Business Law). Usually you cannot find the meanings of these specialist words in a general English dictionary.

Often a subject has a special dictionary which gives the meanings of specialist words in that subject – for example, The Oxford Dictionary of Business English. Often a textbook has a list of specialist words and their meanings at the back. This list is called a glossary. Look for it in your textbook; if your textbook does not have a glossary, go to the library and look in another textbook in the same subject area.

Sometimes the teacher in your subject has a glossary of terminology which he/she can give you. If you can’t find a specialist dictionary or glossary to help you, take your assignment question to your teacher so that he/she can explain it to you. Do not start preparing the answer to your assignment until you understand what every word in the assignment question means. If you don’t understand every word in a question, there will be some part of the question that you don’t answer, or don’t answer adequately.

General Background Knowledge

Sometimes you will need to have some general background outside the subject you are studying to answer an assignment question in that subject. For example, you may need to know something about the society and history of Europe if you are going to answer a question in Art History; you will have to be aware of current discussion of global warming if you are writing about industrial pollution. If you feel you know very little about a topic, ask your teacher if there is any general background knowledge that would be useful for you to have before you start collecting specific information to answer a question on that topic. If there is general background information you need, ask your teacher to recommend books or journal articles or videos in the library that can give you the necessary background. One of the librarians can be a very useful person here also!
What Kind of Answer or Response?

Check what kind of response the question is asking for. Do you have to write an essay or a report or a dot-point summary? Make sure you hand in the type of answer that you have been asked for. This will often involve responding in the format of the expected type of writing (the correct genre). A critical account of a social movement should be shaped differently from a review of a chapter in a textbook on the same topic. The layout and writing approach of an essay is different from that of a formal report. Most departments of the Institute have preferred formats for reports and essays. Ask your teacher what the preferred formats for her/his subject is.

Assessment Criteria

Sometimes an assignment is followed by the Assessment Criteria. These criteria are usually written as a series of dot points or numbered points. They set out the goals that your assignment must achieve. If you do not attempt to achieve every one of these goals, you have not fully answered the question. A list of Assessment Criteria is extremely helpful because it tells you exactly what the teacher marking your assignment is looking for.

For example, here is an essay topic and its assessment criteria from a course in Social and Community Services:

Write a 1000 word essay on a social movement of your choice. Your essay should be properly referenced with a bibliography. Examples of social movements are the women’s movement, the peace movement, the union movement, the Aboriginal land rights movement. There are many others. Negotiate your chosen topic with your teacher.

You will be assessed according to the level at which your essay

- explains the development and activities of the social movement chosen
- identifies experiences and issues which contribute to the development of social movements
- identifies strategies used by social movements to instigate change (ie, action taken by the groups)
- identifies implications for community development practice of social movements

Unstated Expectations

Often a teacher will have expectations about the way students should answer a question that are not stated explicitly. For example, when you write a laboratory report most verbs should be in the ‘passive voice’ (that is, the slides were examined, not we examined the slides). This is the way formal scientific reports are always written and the teacher may expect you to know this.

Another example of unstated expectations may involve how you should research and shape the response to a question. For example, a marketing assignment asks you to review a chapter on catalogue marketing from a textbook on direct marketing. Well shaped responses will introduce the topic with one or two sentences on the general topic, direct marketing, drawing on the early chapters of the book to do so. After this introduction, you can now examine the specific topic, and review the specified chapter.

If you think that there may be some unstated aspects to an assignment question, discuss the assignment with your teacher.

Keep Checking the Question

As you answer an assignment question, check back frequently to the question to make sure that you have done everything that you have been asked to do. If you have been asked to examine three cases, make sure you examine three; if you have been asked to critically compare two explanations for Australia’s unemployment, make sure that you do not simply describe them. After you have completed each paragraph in an essay or report it is a good idea to ask yourself: “What does this paragraph say about the topic? Am I still on track and connecting up, or have I written something that is not really connected with the question?”

Remember … If there is a part of an assignment question that you think you may not understand, ask your subject teacher or a Study Skills Support teacher for help! Don’t just start writing…

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