

Understanding assessment tasks

What is the assessment task asking me to do?

The first thing you need to do when beginning an assessment is **read** the task or question very carefully. This might sound obvious, but many students lose marks unnecessarily because they don't pay enough attention to what the assessment task is asking them to do. To get maximum marks for the effort you put in, you need to answer the question that is set.

You also need to **analyse** the question. Assessment tasks usually contain a lot of information and you can use this information to help you with your answer. The information in this guide will help you to interpret what your assessment tasks are asking you to do.

Content and instruction words

Assessment tasks usually have quite a lot of information in them about both *what* you need to be writing about and *how* you should structure your response.

The words which tell you the **topic** of the assessment are commonly called **content** words. The *content* words tell you what the assessment is about.

The words which tell you how to go about answering the question are commonly called **instruction** words. Instruction words tell you **how**. The instruction words give you information on what type of assessment you need to write. For example, are you being asked to *discuss, argue, describe, explain, report* or *compare and contrast*?

Each of these instruction words tells you that you need to write a different *type* of response to the question. For example, in a *description* you are asked to focus on *what* something is *like* or *what happened*. On the other hand, if you are asked to *explain*, you will need to focus on *how* something happens or happened. If you are asked to *argue* you will need to present a case either in favour of or against something in order to convince your audience to either believe something or do something. You do this by presenting one side of a case in the best possible light and countering arguments that might be put against your case. If you are asked to *discuss*, your role is more like that of a judge; you need to consider all the evidence you have, weigh it up and come to a decision.

How do you analyse your assessment task?

When you are analysing your assessment task you need to ask yourself questions like:

- Does the assessment task provide an orientation to the topic?
- What is the overall *topic* the task is asking me to address?
- What specific sub-topic within that bigger topic do I need to *focus* on?
- What kinds of answers are the *instruction* words asking for?

Here is an example of an assessment task (Rolls & Wignell, 2009, p. 44):

Traditionally in many societies mothers are expected to stay at home and take care of their children. However, the financial pressures of modern life have forced many mothers to find jobs outside the home and rely on childcare for their children.

With reference to one particular type of childcare facility discuss whether this arrangement is damaging for children or not.

As you can see there is a lot of information in this task. We can use *orientation*, *topic*, *focus* and *instruction* to break the task down.

Orientation:

Traditionally in many societies mothers are expected to stay at home and take care of their children. However, the financial pressures of modern life have forced many mothers to find jobs outside the home and rely on ...

Topic:

... childcare for their children

Focus:

With reference to one particular type of childcare facility ... whether this arrangement is damaging for children or not.

Instruction:

Discuss.

The *orientation* gives you background information on the topic. It can also help you to identify some of the points you might want to investigate in your research. For example, you might want to:

- identify some *examples of societies* where mothers are expected to stay at home
- find information about *financial pressures* in modern life
- investigate *other reasons* why mothers might go to work.

The *topic* gives you the broad area you will be researching in. In this case it is *childcare*. Words which give you the topic are also often referred to as *content* words.

The *focus* tells you the specific part of the bigger topic you need to focus on. In this case you will need to look at **one** particular type of childcare facility and whether it **damages** children or **not**.

The *instruction* word, *discuss*, tells you that you will need to research and find evidence about the effects of childcare on children. In a *discussion* you need to find all the evidence you can and then assess which side of the case the evidence supports. Does the evidence suggest that this *one particular type of childcare is harmful or not* to children? Your conclusion will be based on how you have interpreted and evaluated the evidence you have found.

Here is another example for you to practise on. Have a go at breaking the question down into *orientation*, *topic*, *focus* and *instruction*.

In all workplaces people must communicate with each other in order for the workplace to function. Some communication practices are productive while some others are counter-productive. Analyse and evaluate communication practices in one workplace. Are they effective or not?

Orientation:**Topic:****Focus:****Instruction:**

Checklist for analysing assessment tasks

Analysis Checklist	Yes/No	What?	Comment
Orientation			
Topic			
Focus			
Instruction			

Possible answer to the practice exercise

Orientation:

In all workplaces people must communicate with each other in order for the workplace to function. Some communication practices are productive while some others are counter-productive.

Topic:

workplace communication practices

Focus:

in one workplace

Instruction:

analyse and evaluate, 'yes' or 'no'

Check the *SCU Learning Zone* for more related Quick Guides.

Reference

Rolls, N. & Wignell, P. (2009). *Communicating at University: Skills for Success* (3rd ed.). Charles Darwin University Press.