

How to get started with your assignment

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The aim

To go from this:



To this:



Before you begin...

Check...

- Assignment length
- Deadline
- Assessment criteria
- Requirements for presentation, referencing and bibliographies.

The one question you'll never be asked....

**“Write down everything you know
about this topic.”**

Assignment tasks ask you to answer a
question or solve a problem.

Quality not quantity!

Academic writing

- Assignments ask you **to do something with** what you have learnt.
- It is **not enough** just to tell your reader what you have read/ learnt.
- An academic text is usually an **argument** which makes reference to the work of others and is **evidence-based**.

IT'S NOT ABOUT SHOWING WHAT YOU KNOW...

IT'S ABOUT SHOWING WHAT YOU UNDERSTAND

Approaching your assignment

1. Write down in your own words what you think the assignment is asking you to do.
2. What do you already know about the subject matter of the assignment?
3. What do you need to know to help you complete the assignment successfully?
4. How do you think this assignment differs from or is similar to other assignments that you are working on at the moment?
5. How are you going to choose your reading material?

(Creme and Lea, 2003: 42)

Interpreting the task: The 'TAP' model



Topics- the central or key theme

Actions- what you need to do

Parameters- what are the limitations?

“Writing Essays”, Learning Development, University of Plymouth (2010)

Anatomy of an essay question

Action

Parameters

Examine and compare the nature and development of
the tragic figures of **Macbeth and Dr Faustus**.

Topic

Anatomy of an essay question

Action

Parameters

Examine and compare the nature and development of the tragic figures of **Macbeth and Dr Faustus** in the first act of each play.

Parameter

Topic

Instruction Words

Account for

Analyse

Assess

Compare and contrast

Comment on

Consider

Critique

Define

Describe

Discuss

Evaluate

Explain

Examine

Identify

Illustrate

Justify

Review

Show

Summarise

State

www.uefap.net/preparing -> 'Understanding the Task'

Instruction Words

Define in your own words what is meant by the following terms.

- Discuss
- Identify
- Assess
- Summarise

Different versions of the same thing

- Why might birds be described as “glorified reptiles”?
- Is it accurate to describe birds as “glorified reptiles”?
- “Birds are glorified reptiles”. Discuss.
- To what extent might birds be considered “glorified reptiles”?
- Critically consider the view that birds are “glorified reptiles”.

Ways to approach the task

- If it isn't a question, turn it into a question.
- Break it down into smaller questions, each of which you need to answer in turn, in order to answer the main question.
- Break this question down into sub-questions, each of which you need to answer in turn, in order to answer the main question.
- Perhaps use these sub-questions to develop a list of instructions to yourself.
- Have in mind your ultimate answer (your 'thesis').

Analysing an essay question

Compare and contrast current social issues as seen through Spanish Cinema with social problems facing Britain today.

- I am being asked to select films that are typical of current Spanish Cinema and analyse them to identify the social issues they characteristically portray.
- Then I have to draw on sources (which? Film? The Media? Scholarship?) and identify the main social problems in Britain, and their characteristics.
- Then I am being asked to discuss which of these characteristics are alike (and how), and which are different (and how).
- I may need/want to express an opinion on whether the two sets of issues are more alike or different, overall.

Breaking down the question

Discuss the contribution of Stephen J Gould to science.

- Who was he? (what kinds of detail would be relevant and helpful?)
- What were his main discoveries?
- What were the applications of these discoveries?
- How useful were these applications? What problem did they solve?/ How important was this problem? What can we know/do now as a result?
- How does he compare to other scientists?
- So, what was the contribution of SJG to science?

History

To what extent can the Spanish Civil War be interpreted as a social revolution?

- Why does the Spanish Civil War need interpreting?
- What is a ‘social revolution’? What are its defining characteristics?
- What are the defining characteristics of the Spanish Civil War?
- How many of these meet the criteria for a social revolution, and why?
- How many of them do not fit the criteria for a social revolution, and why?
- Is it helpful to interpret the Spanish Civil war as a social revolution?
- How accurate is it to do so? How misleading would it be?

Biochemistry

Explain how immunisation allows us to fight diseases we may come into contact with. Illustrate your answer with discussion of the MMR vaccine.

- How does immunisation allow us to fight disease?
- What is immunity? Immunisation?
- What is a disease? How does it affect the body? (molecular, cellular, physiological)
- What is MMR? How does it affect the body? (molecular, cellular, physiological)
- How does the (immunised) body respond – generally, and to MMR? How do antibodies work to counter this effect?
- So how does immunisation help us fight disease?

Social science

Discuss the contribution of Maslow to social science.

- What was the contribution of Maslow to social science?
- Who was he? (what kinds of detail would be relevant and helpful?)
- What were his main theories?
- What were the applications of these theories?
- How useful were these applications? What problem/gap did they solve? How important was this problem? What can we know/do now as a result?
- How does he compare to other figures?

Open questions

Why?

Explain the reasons.

What?

Could be asking for a straightforward fact. Or it could be a part of 'why' ('what reasons....')

Which?

Identify/ Select and explain (like 'what')

How?

Could be asking you to explain a process, or evaluate something ('how important...', etc)

To what extent?

*This is asking you to evaluate something.
Is it or isn't it? How much?/ How far?*

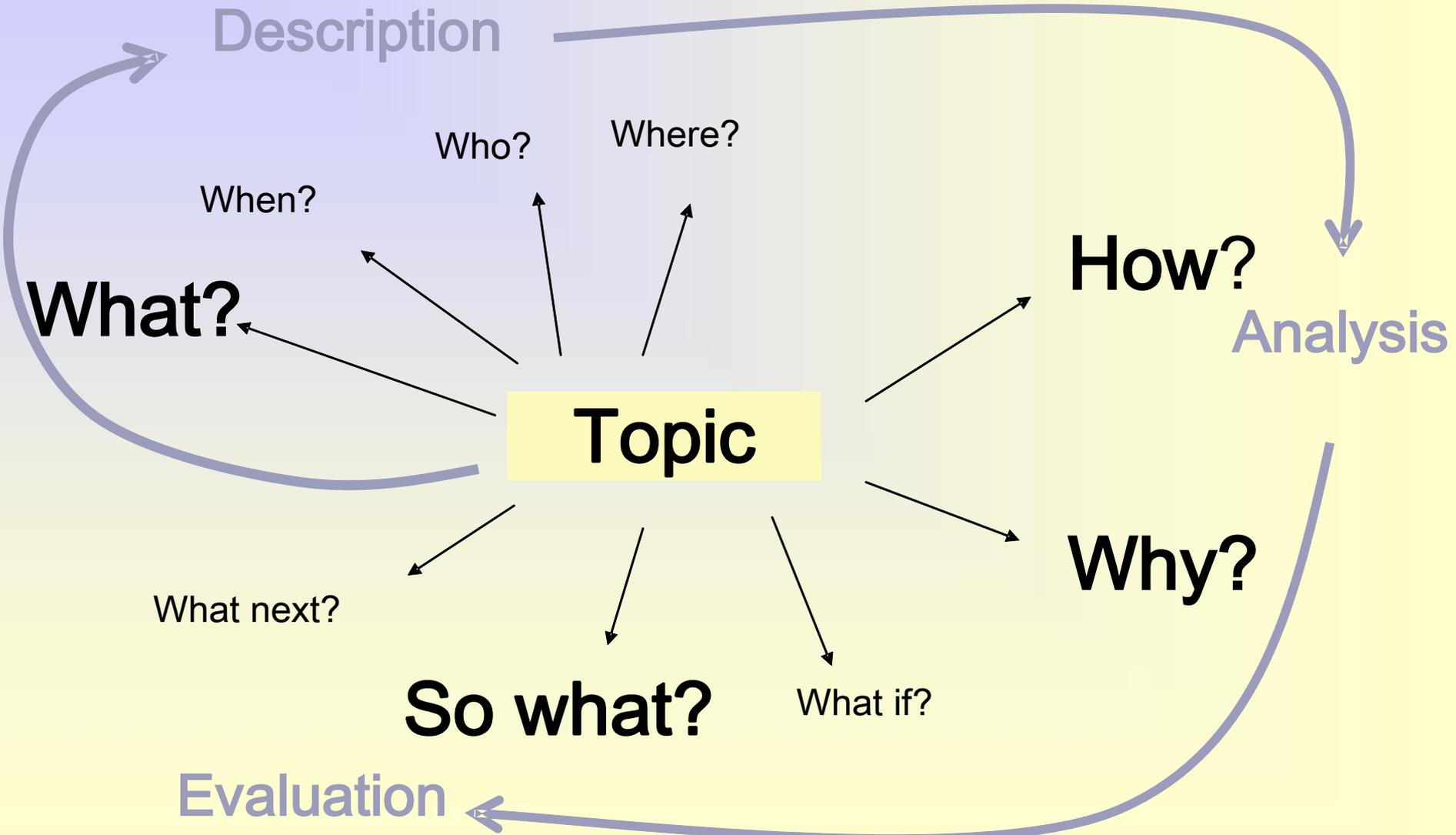
Closed questions

Answers are predetermined options: yes/no, a/b, very/not very, etc.

- Do/does...?
- Is/are...?

You will still need to justify your answer!

Model to Generate Critical Thinking



What could I read for my assignment?

- Use the question as a focus. Begin with the basic reading:
 - lecture notes
 - handouts
 - relevant chapters in core texts.
- Select more detailed and specific texts - journal articles, texts referred to by your lecturer etc. Follow up useful references in handouts or core texts to widen your reading.
- Read selectively. Use skim reading as well as abstracts, summaries, chapter headings and the index, rather than reading everything in detail.
- Focus on what is directly relevant to your essay question

You will never, ever be asked to 'write everything you know about X'

Reading critically

- What is the writer saying?
- How are they saying it?
- Why do they say it this way?
- Who are they saying it to?
- What do I think about what they say?
- Why am I reading it?
- What am I looking for?
- What will I use the text for?
- What question or problem is the writer addressing?
- Are the claims based on good evidence?
- Are the claims specific? Can they be generalised?
- Is this part of a wider debate?
- How does it compare with what other people say?

Taking a stance

- Tell me what you think and **why you think it**
- **Show me the evidence** (dates, names, statistics, data, examples) – **and how all this relates to your argument**
- Ask yourself what arguments there are ***against*** what you are saying – **how can you address these?**

Being self-critical

For every part of your writing (chapters, sections, paragraphs, sentences) ask yourself...

- What am I saying?
- Why am I saying it?
- Why am I saying it now?
- Why am I saying it in this way? How else could I say it?
- How does it relate to the bit before it?
- How does it relate to the bit after it?
- How does it relate to my main argument?

Summary

To develop an argument remember to:

- Be analytical** (ask the right questions – esp. **how, why** and '**so what**')
- Judge **strengths and weaknesses**
- Assess **all sides** of a debate
- Take a **stance**
- Use **evidence** to support your views

Learning Enhancement Team



Develop strategies to improve your:

- **study skills**
- **mathematics and statistics**
- **academic writing**
- **use of English**

Resources

Study guides, videos, webcasts and worksheets on our website

Workshops

Group sessions, delivered centrally or embedded in degree programmes

Tutorials

Expert tuition to help you study more effectively and improve your work

What we offer

- **Drop-ins** Mon-Thurs, 4-5pm (10 minutes)
- **Tutorials** Available by appointment (50 minutes)
- **Workshops** In Schools or centrally organised
- **Resources**
 - Website <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>
(Study guides, webcasts, links to other resources)
 - Blackboard:** 'Learn' tab -> 'Learning Enhancement Team'