

The importance of analyzing the essay question

Interpreting essay questions can reveal the structure which you should adopt, and also reveal what the instructor (or examiner) would like to see in your essay. To learn to interpret saves time, giving you a clear roadmap for how to approach your writing assignment. It also guides your thinking when preparing the sources of your answer.

Understanding essay questions

As you will see in the examples below, the questions come in different *types* and integrate *key concepts*, *facts* or *opinions*. Key concepts are generalized notions, emotions, acts or desires (e.g., *love*, *honor*). Depending your essay instruction and course subject, you might see key concepts which you need to explain, argue for/against or analyze. Each essay question has a function around which the structure can be shaped.

As a rule of thumb, always approach your analysis with *clarity*, *insight*, and *sensitivity*. Below are some examples of essay questions:

- 1 Do the narrators of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* speak with the same kind of irony? (English Literature)
- 2 Discuss the management of health needs within a population group in the Primary Care setting. (Nursing & Applied Clinical Studies)
- 3 What is bribery and can it be justified as an acceptable business practice? (Business Administration)
- 4 Explain Paul Grice's (1975) 'cooperative principle' and the related four 'maxims.' Think of situations from your own life where Grice's maxims are flouted. (Linguistics – Pragmatics)
- 5 The centerpiece of Austin's general theory of speech acts was the three facets of a speech act: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. It is argued, however, that the latter two classifications are not exclusive because one can expect to find an innumerable range of possible uses of speech acts. Discuss. (Linguistics – Pragmatics)

Three simple steps

Step 1. Analyze the key concepts

Question #1 has two concepts, **narrator** and **irony**. Many questions now may arise if we try to identify these concepts. For instance, who is the narrator? Is it the author herself? Or is it an omniscient narrator in the story? In what point of view is the narrator portrayed, first-person or third-person, etc.?

In the same breath, we can ask the same thing about irony. What is the definition of irony? Does it apply to both novels, one of them or none of the above? Notice that the question is asking whether "**the same kind of irony**" applies to the novels.

Step 2. Gather relevant examples

Now gather sources for answering the question. Make sure they are relevant to the essay question. Remove anything not in related to your assignment. Here is a scribble to a hypothetical answer:

Key concept: Narrator	Key concept: Irony
Who exactly is the narrator of <i>Pride & Prejudice</i> ? Who exactly is the narrator of <i>Great Expectations</i> ? What is the nature and role of each narrator in their respective novel?	What is the definition of irony? (Sources: scholars' expert opinion, literature textbooks, etc.)
To what extent do the narrators in both novels share similarities? To what extent are they different?	What is the definition will I apply on the novels? Why did I choose it? Is the definition I've chosen relevant to the question?
How does each narrator use irony? Compare and contrast them.	Why this definition applies/doesn't apply to <i>Pride & Prejudice</i> and/or <i>Great Expectations</i> (Your point of view).

Step 3. Analyze your examples

Look at the question again, "Do the **narrators** of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* speak with **the same kind** of **irony**?"

Analyze your generated ideas of irony and see if they fit the narrator(s) column. Again, do not shy away from removing any idea that serves no purpose to answering the essay question.

Now, test your **identified** concepts. To do that, think of the followings: Does your definition of irony work on a novel outside the essay question? Can you compare the definition you've chosen to apply with another one? You can do the same thought exercise for the narrator. Apply a similar thinking process to the key concepts you identify in your course's writing assignment.

Understanding instructional verbs

What is the difference between *discuss* and *explain*? Not many can provide a clear-cut answer, as these verbs are often ignored in the essay analysis. Verbs are crucial in analyzing the essay question and applying the appropriate thinking skills to your essay. Here is a list of definitions for each instructional verb:

Analyze	Separate an argument, a theory or a claim into its basic components, to reveal the general principles/observations of the concept
Compare	Look for similarities and differences between two or more things, problems or arguments.
Contrast	Set in opposition to each other, two or more things. This shall help you show the general differences and individual characteristics of each classification.
Criticize	Identify the weakness of certain arguments, theories or opinions. Give your judgment about its merit. Support your judgment with evidence and appropriate reasoning.
Define	Outline the precise meaning of a word or a phrase. Also think of how scholars/scientists in your field use a certain definition.
Describe	Give a detailed or graphic account of something. Stick to the facts or to the instructions you are given to describe something.

Discuss	Investigate or examine an argument. Survey the arguments and the evidence that goes against or supports the notions. In many instances, you will have to give your own side of the argument and back it up with reason and evidence.
Evaluate	Appraise the worth of an argument or a set of beliefs about a particular topic. How true is the argument/belief about this certain topic? Evaluating an argument also means giving reasons of your opinion about it.
Explain	Often confused with <i>describe</i> , the word ‘explain’ is about giving reasons of why something happened, whereas ‘describe’ is to tell <i>what</i> happened as it was – without explaining the reasons.
Illustrate	Explain or clarify something by the use of diagrams, figures or concrete examples.
Justify	Show adequate grounds or the merits of a conclusion. Provide support (e.g., reasons, evidence) for the conclusion.
Outline	Give the main features or general principles of something. Emphasize its structure and how it’s organized.
Relate	In some questions, you need to tell how something happened in sequence. In other questions, it can mean that you need to show how certain things are connected or affected by each other.
Review	Examine closely a subject or a case that’s been put forward as an argument or a proposition. Depending on the instructions, you may need to examine its strength and weaknesses or simply, some details of the topic, in general.
State	Outline briefly and clearly the facts of an argument or a statement. Simply, present the facts for each aspect of the question. It goes without saying that this doesn’t involve your own account.
Summarize	Give a clear and concise account of the main points of a problem or an argument. Leave the minor details and focus on the broad points.
Trace	Outline the stages in the development of a particular issue – or the history of the topic.

What if, as in the case of Question #1, there is no instructional verb like discuss and explain? Question #1 is no doubt a yes-or-no question, most commonly known as an interrogative question. How can you base your essay answer without an instructional verb?

In this case, you’ll have to read certain phrases which determine the possible approach to your essay answer. For instance, Question #3 contains two parts, “*What is bribery?*” and “*Can it be justified as an acceptable business practice?*” Neither is it enough to analyze the first part alone. Nor is it sufficient to look only at the verb “justified” because it is preceded by the modal “can”. The phrase “Can it be justified...” instructs us to see if it’s possible to defend the ethics of bribery – or argue against it.

Further Reading

Bryan, G. (2008). How to write better essays. *Second Edition*.