

LSE LIFE PODCASTS: Essay-writing - questioning the question

Analysing the language of your essay question/topic carefully enables you to interpret the question, to make it meaningful to you. It will also help you plan and write an essay that addresses the question thoroughly. This hand-out, together with the podcast, offers some tips on how to “question the question” by thinking about what are being asked to write about, what you being asked to do, and what position you will argue.

Understanding general language

- Read every single word of the question. Do not take questions and statements at their face value or jump to conclusions about what a question might mean.
- Be on the lookout for colloquial language, figures of speech, cultural or historical references that could be important to interpret the question.
- Consider alternative interpretations of your question and be prepared to explain how you understand it, and why you opted for this interpretation.
- Be aware of assumptions, purported facts, or value judgements that are expressed in or implied by the question, and ask yourself whether you agree or not.

Understanding key terms

- Note key technical terms or phrases in the question that could have a variety of different interpretations in the context of your field of study.
- List any names of places or people, events, situations, or other phenomena that are mentioned in the question. Pay attention to any thinkers, schools of thought, theories, concepts, or models that are mentioned. Be sure all of them are addressed in your essay.
- Consider any structures of relationships between/among these key terms (e.g. how A relates to B: A influences B, A causes B, A is an obstacle to B, A is an example of B, A plays a role in B, A and B are required for C). These might be explicit or implicit in the question.
- Decide how you interpret the terms in your question, how you will use these terms throughout your essay, (which you will then convey to your reader in your introduction).

Understanding the instructions and staying focussed

- In the context of academic writing, “discuss” does not mean “have a chat” or “describe”. Ask for guidance if you have a doubt about what you are being asked to do.
- Once you have worked on interpreting the set essay question, re-write the question, in your own words, in a way that makes clear sense to you.
- Keep your essay question close by while you work on your essay – at the top of the page, or taped on the wall.

Take a stand

- Take time to think about the question and ask yourself what you think the answer could be.
- If you have a gut feeling or even if you’re just leaning towards one side or another, try to formulate this answer in writing at the very outset of working on your essay.
- Having a position does not mean that there is a clear cut “yes” or “no” answer or that the issue is simple and straightforward.
- Your position may change! And this is a natural part of learning about the issue you are studying.

Don't feel pressured by "coming up with the answer" before you've had the chance to do research. It's just a matter of thinking about the question analytically from the outset.