

## **LSE LIFE PODCASTS: Essay-writing - questioning the question**

In the previous podcast on academic writing, I mentioned that an essay was an answer to a question. Answering a question seems quite straightforward. However, one common observation that markers make about weaker essays is that the writer talked *about* the topic, but did not sufficiently address the question.

This podcast will describe ways you can “question” your essay question. By questioning, I mean analysing the language of the question carefully and interpreting it, in order to make the question meaningful to you. This will help prepare you to write an essay that addresses the question thoroughly. Clarifying your essay question involves at least three things: understanding the terms of the question, understanding what you are being asked to do, and taking a stand. This is what we’ll be discussing today.

### **Understanding the terms of the question**

First things first. Start by identifying and considering the terms in the question or topic that is set. I suggest that you read every single word of the question. Be on the lookout for any colloquial language, figures of speech, cultural or historical references that may be important to interpret the question.

It is important not to take questions and statements at their face value or jump to conclusions about what a question means. Remember that many questions and topics are written in a way that can justifiably have more than one interpretation. If you have a doubt, read your question out to a few different people and ask them to paraphrase it. If the question lends itself to more than one interpretation, consider the alternative interpretations and be prepared to explain how you understand it, and why you opted for this interpretation.

In addition to analysing each word carefully, you may need to read “between the lines” – that is, you might need to make inferences about what does not appear in the question! Be on the look-out for assumptions, purported facts, or value judgements that are expressed in or implied by the question. Ask yourself whether you agree with any propositions or claims made by in the question, and whether the validity of such claims can or should be challenged. Are there broad, sweeping statements in the question? Terms like “never” or “always” are virtually an invitation for a debate. Consider also what is not in the question - are there hidden questions? Further questions raised by the question?

In addition to general terms in a question, be alert to the key terms. Make a note of any technical terms or phrases that could have a specific meaning in the context of your field of study. Note any particular 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 to consider any relationships between these key terms or structures that are explicit or implicit in the question. This could be how one thing is linked to another, how it relates to another: 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.

Once the general language and the key terms of the question are clear to you, try rewriting the question in your own words. Where some terms or parameters might be very broad, consider narrowing in on a more specific aspect. If the question offers a very broad concept, consider the various ways the concept has been

defined or approached by others and decide how you define it in your essay. The idea of “defining your terms” is important in this stage of developing your argument. Decide how the terms in your essay will be used – and then use them that way consistently. (This idea is developed this further in tomorrow’s podcast on writing introductions).

Understanding both the general terms and the key terms in your question help you define what you will write about. Next, it is important to understand the instructions of the question.

### **Understand your instructions**

Understanding the instructions, which are often conveyed in the verbs of the question, helps you know what you are expected to do. Sometimes this is quite straightforward. Some essay questions give clear instructions, such as compare A to B, apply the X model to case of Y. Many essay questions do not. Instead, you may find an essay question that makes a broad statement, followed by a somewhat ambiguous verb: consider, reflect, or discuss.

Identify the words in the question/topic that ask you to do something. In the hand-out that you’ll find together with this podcast, you’ll find a list of typical essay question instruction verbs and what they often mean. I’d like to take a few moments to talk about one particular instruction: discuss.

In this context, “discuss” doesn’t mean “have a discussion”, as in a “chat”. Instead, it refers to a developing a written debate where you use your skills of reasoning, analysis, synthesis, and critique. In other words, you investigate something by considering various sides of the issue or by considering both advantages and disadvantages (pros and cons). “Discuss” in this context also requires you to make a reasoned analysis, based on evidence that you have carefully selected, and attempt to clarify the matter, arriving at a conclusion.

Once you have worked on interpreting the various terms and directions in your essay question, re-write the question, in your own words, in a way that makes clear sense to you. I highly recommend that you keep your essay question (the original and your interpretation) close by while you work on your essay. I like to tape mine to the window in front of my desk. The reason to do this is so you do not lose sight of your question and the argument you are working towards. It is remarkably easy to be swept up in reading and writing that is very interesting – but unrelated to the question at hand. By keeping a close eye on your question as you select readings, take notes, and draft your essay, you are more likely not to lose time and energy with material that is irrelevant to your argument.

Once you’ve understood what you’re going to write about and what you are going to do, another very important part of using the question to help prepare you for researching and writing your essay is to ask yourself what you think?

### **Take a stand**

Remember that your essay should make a point. You should be able to formulate clearly what you would like your readers to be convinced of (or at least consider) once they’ve read your essay. Another way to

describe this is your position, your view on the question. In the early stages of essay-writing, take time to think about the question. Do you have a gut feeling about whether you agree or disagree with the statement? Based on what you already know about the general topic, or observations you have made in the past, do you lean to “yes” or “no”? If so, try to make this “hunch” more explicit in writing. Consider whether your initial answer would apply in all circumstances, or if there are situations in which you might feel differently.

There are two things to note here. First, having a position does not mean that the issue is simple to you and that there is a simple “black and white” answer to the question. Nor does it mean that you should be dogmatic and blind to those with whom you do not agree. In an essay, you are expected to be aware of both sides of the story (or more than two, in fact) and to weigh the evidence and arrive at a reasoned conclusion.

The second thing is that your “answer” to the question at the beginning of your essay-writing process may not be same as the final position you develop once you’ve talked, read, and written more about the question. Don’t feel pressured by coming up with your final answer immediately. It’s just a matter of thinking about the question analytically from the outset. It is fine to refine your thinking as you go along. Formulating some initial view of your own – as a response to the essay question BEFORE you set off to the library and read everything available about the topic – will help you develop your own “voice” in your essay. If you take the approach of reading “everything about x” without having thought of what you actually think about x, you are far more likely to write an essay that contains “everything about x”. On the other hand, if you take the time think about what you will try to argue, you set yourself up to write a more reflective piece of work – even if your view evolves along the way.

We’ve talked about understanding and analysing the question – both with respect to what you are being asked about, and what you are being asked to do. I’ve also suggested that you think about your position, your answer to the question quite early, which can be challenging! When you take the time to interpret the question, to narrow down which aspects you would like to focus on, and most importantly, to formulate what you think you will try to argue, you gain two important benefits. First, you reduce the entire set of things you might need to read to a targeted set of texts – which helps you use your time and energy wisely. Second, you prepare yourself to read actively and write critically-with your sights on building an argument.

I hope this has been useful. Remember, you can always call in to your teachers’ office hours with questions about essay topics and questions. Also, writing support is available at [LSE LIFE](#) from the Royal Literary Fund Fellows and our study advisers.

In the next podcast, we’ll talk about how to get your essay off to a good start in an effective introduction. Thanks for tuning in!