**TLC PODCASTS: Worksheet on essay-writing - questioning the question**

Essay questions are sometimes difficult to interpret. Understanding and analysing a set essay question thoroughly requires time and practice. Remember, though, questions are not written this way to make students’ lives difficult. They are formulated in a way that allows you to exercise your own judgement and use the knowledge you have developed in your coursework. There is no one “right answer” to most essay questions; instead there is a range of possible interesting responses.

It is important to take time to consider the question or topic carefully, to take it apart word by word, and to “appropriate” it for yourself before you set out on researching and drafting your essay. Appropriating the question means to reflect on what the question is asking you to do, what it means for you in the context of your course, and how your interpretation shapes the kind of position and response you will develop in your essay.

There is no one way to do this, but this worksheet gives a few suggestions on how to approach your essay question and begin to “read between the lines.”

First, write your essay question or topic, exactly as it was formulated by your course teacher.

List any colloquialisms, familiar expressions, or language you don’t quite understand.

List potentially ambiguous terms (auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, etc.)

*can, could, may, should, might, may, notwithstanding*

Note qualifying language or “hedging” language,

*claimed to be, apparently, said to be, thought to be, in some circumstances*

Note any absolute terms.

*never, always, absolutely (or similar, but milder versions, clearly, obviously, highly unlikely, rarely…)*

Make note of links or relations established or proposed in the question. These may be made explicit (expressed clearly in words) or they may be implied (suggested, but not clearly stated in words).

*role of x in y, impact of x on y, influence of x on y, importance of x in y, links between/among x, y/ and z*

Note also the absence of links or relations.

Identity key theoretical or technical terms, especially any broad “concept” terms that are important to your field of study.

*democracy, development, poverty, communication, culture, effectiveness, knowledge, totalitarian, identity, human rights*

How do you interpret this / these broad concept(s)?

Is this interpretation related to or inspired by a particular thinker?

Is it quite different from the definition of any particular thinkers (or “schools of thought?)

Which aspects of this broad concept will you address in your essay?

Which aspects will NOT be addressed in your essay?

Finally, note any instructions that you are given. Be sure you understand what terms like “discuss”, “critically evaluate”, “weigh”, etc. mean in the context of your essay question. If in doubt, ask!

Now, REWRITE your essay question, in your own words, in a way that makes sense to you.

(Note: your interpretation of the question may be longer than the original version. This is fine and may be a sign that you have done a thorough job in appropriating the question!)