

EAP Worksheets

Understanding the question

Introduction

Students often do worse than they should in examinations or when writing assignments in English in the UK, not because their writing skills are weak or because their knowledge of the subject matter is insufficient, but because they have not fully understood what they have been asked to do. To score high marks in an examination or an essay, it is important to fully understand what a question means and how it should be answered. In order to understand the question it is useful to analyse the questions and to search for certain components. The following technique is very useful (Swales, 1982).

The components of a question

Most essay titles or examination questions contain the following components:

1. *Subject matter* or *topic*. What, in the most general terms, is the question about?
2. *Aspect* or *focus*. This is the angle or point of view on the subject matter. What aspect of the subject matter is the question about?
3. *Instruction* or *comment*. This refers to the instruction word or phrase. These instructions tell the student exactly what to do.

Some questions also contain the following components:

4. *Restriction* or *expansion* of the subject matter. This is the detailed limitation of the topic. What, in specific terms, is the question about?
5. *Viewpoint*. This refers to the requirement, in the question, that the writer writes from a point of view dictated by the setter of the question.

Analysing the question

To analyse the title, it is useful to follow the following steps:

1. Identify the *topic*.
2. If the *topic* has a *restriction* or *expansion*, identify it.
3. Search for the *aspect*. This is the angle or point of view on the subject matter. Often, the *aspect* is a phrase ending in 'of', e.g. 'the importance of', 'the contribution of'. Be sure you are clear about how the *aspect* relates to the subject matter. It can be an example of it, a stage in its sequence, the cause or effect, one of the solutions to it as a problem etc.
4. Identify the *instruction* (which often comes at the beginning) and decide what it means and what it requires you to do.
5. Check whether there is a *viewpoint* and if so, if it the same as your own.

Examples of questions

1. Account for the large-scale immigration into Malaya in the late 19th Century.
2. Analyse the changes in US policy towards China during the 1970s.
3. Assess the contribution of Asoka to the spread of Buddhism in India.
4. Explain the concept of 'role'. Of what use is the concept to a practising manager?
5. Compare and contrast cellulose and lignin decomposition in soil.
6. List the criteria you would apply to the presentation of government expenditure policy.
7. Critically discuss economies and diseconomies of scale.
8. What deductions can be made after studying the cell exhibited at C?
9. Evaluate the contribution of political parties to the development of public policy in the United States and Canada.
10. To what extent does the British public participate in the political process?

Planning the answer

In planning the answer, the *instruction* decides the text-type (discussion, explanation, etc.); the *topic* (with its *restriction* or *expansion* if there is one) determines the overall range of the subject matter but the *aspect* determines the particular content; *viewpoint* dictates which arguments, for or against, to use. The interaction between *instruction* and *aspect* will lead to decisions about the organisation of the essay.

Exercise

Analyse the example [questions](#) above.

1. Identify the *topic*.
2. If the *topic* has a *restriction* or *expansion*, identify it.
3. Search for the *aspect*.
4. Identify the *instruction*.
5. Check whether there is a *viewpoint*.