

Task Analysis

"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail" – Benjamin Franklin.

In academic writing, **task analysis** refers to the process of breaking down your essay question or assignment topic into a **series of smaller sub-tasks or steps**. This will allow you to **clearly understand** the essay question or assignment topic, **identify what the question is asking for** and ensure that the **correct focus is met** in the answer.

How to approach the essay question:

1. Identify the **action words or phrases** (for example: analyse, criticise, discuss, evaluate, comment) – *What are they asking you to do and/or what approach are they asking you to take? (Note: each action word is asking for a particular approach to the topic – see Table below for more information)*
2. Identify the **main content area(s) of focus** – *These are the words/phrase associated with the action words. Highlight or mark these clearly on the essay question and include them in your mind-map or essay outline.*
3. Identify the **scope of response** – *Does the question ask you to look at the key area(s) from specific perspectives (for example: particular time periods, authors, articles, contexts)? Mark these clearly and add them to your mind-map.*
4. **Re-write** the question in your own words – *Can you re-write the essay question in the simplest way possible?*
5. Look at the **Learning Outcomes** for your course/programme – *Ensure that you understand how this assignment is intended to support your learning journey/process.*
6. Carefully read through the assignment **rubric** – *Pay attention to practices and attributes that are encouraged, and those that will be considered problematic.*

Example:

Essay question:

Reflecting on your future as a healthcare professional, discuss the value of being an Integrated Health Professional (IHP) who is knowledgeable, empathic, and reflective while also practicing the ABC and D of dignity conserving care.

In your answer:

Briefly describe what is meant by an IHP and the three related dimensions.

Briefly describe what is meant by the ABC and D of dignity conserving care.

Discuss your thoughts and feelings about the value of being an IHP and practicing the ABC and D of dignity conserving care, and the implications for your behaviour/future practice.

Describe what you have learnt about yourself as an emerging IHP and link your learnings to the three dimensions.



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1. **Action words or phrases:** Reflecting, discuss, briefly describe
2. **Main content area(s) of focus:** IHP and its three dimensions, ABCD of dignity conserving care, the value of being an IHP who practices ABCD of dignity conserving care, what you have learnt about yourself as an emerging IHP
3. **Scope of response:** Your future as a healthcare professional, your thoughts, feelings, and implications for your future practice
4. **Re-write question in simplest way possible:** Provide a detailed description about being an IHP, its three dimensions and the ABCD of dignity conserving care. Thereafter, provide arguments/thoughts about the importance of being an IHP, who practices the ABCD of dignity conserving care. Finally, provide a description of what you have learnt about yourself as an emerging IHP, by linking it to the three dimensions.

After analysing the task:

1. **Read with purpose** – *Select and read your sources with your simplified essay question in mind. Take notes that will help answer the question or provide evidence for your stance.*
2. **Plan your essay** using an outline or mind-map – *Organise your thoughts and key information that you have collected in a logical fashion, making sure that you are answering all aspects of the essay question.*
3. **Write your essay** – *As you write your essay (and at the end of the writing process), refer to your simplified question and mind-map to ensure that you are answering (or have answered) the question fully.*

Some additional tips:

- Start earlier than you think you need to; this will give you enough time to reflect between bursts of activity.
- Be honest about which sub-tasks you find particularly challenging. You may want to save these tasks for when you are at your most productive and creative.

Action words or phrases:

Action word or phrase	Meaning
Analyse	You are expected to take an idea, concept or statement apart and examine the elements of which it comprises. Your answer should be methodically and logically organised.
Comment on	This type of question expects you to state your opinion on a topic, situation or idea. Your opinion should be informed by your reading.
Compare	Here you must set items/ideas side by side to show their similarities and differences. A balanced, fair and objective answer is expected. You are not expected to give your opinion.

Contrast	Here you are expected to show only the differences between two or more topics/ideas etc.
Criticise	Requires an answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses, and which also indicates any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. It requires a balanced answer.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your assessment of which opinions, theories, models or items are preferable.
Define	A definition of something means that your answer must explain the precise meaning of something.
Describe	Here a simple description of the attributes or characteristics of a topic or idea must be given. A definition answer must include a discussion of the concept and should also state the limits of the idea being defined.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; examine the implications.
Evaluate	Assess and give your judgement about the merit, importance or usefulness of something using evidence to support your argument.
Examine	You must investigate or inspect closely and give an opinion on your observation.
Explain	You must show how or why something happens or is constructed in a particular way. The explanation should increase the reader's understanding of the topic or idea.
Explore	Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints.
Illustrate	Such an answer consists mainly of examples which demonstrate or prove the subject of the question. Another directive word will usually be included in the question.
Justify	Give evidence that supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made.
Outline/Summarise	Give the main points/features/general principles; show the main structure and interrelations; omit details and examples.
State	Give the main features briefly and clearly.
To what extent	Consider how far something is true or contributes to a final outcome. Also consider ways in which it is not true.

Adapted from:

UCT Writing Centre. Task analysis. Available at: <https://uctthewritingcentr.wixsite.com/mysite> (accessed: 3rd June 2021)

Massey University, New Zealand. Understanding essay questions. Available at: <https://www.massey.ac.nz> (accessed: 29th June 2021)

University of Birmingham, England. A short guide to understanding your assignments. Available at: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk> (accessed: 29th June 2021)

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