**Approaching a Question & Research**

***The first step to writing a good essay***

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| **AIMS:**   * Teach students to decode/understand Essay Questions and what is expected of them in order to fully answer the question. * Teach students HOW to do effective research; the research process. |

**Lecture:** A common complaint from markers is that students write a lot of information but do not answer the question, one of the reasons for this is that students do not fully comprehend the question and therefore what they are expected to discuss. This lecture is aimed at tackling this issue.

Outline the four components of the lecture: What is the question asking you to do?, Instruction/action words, Research (The Research Process, Where should you look for information? Reliability of Sources), along with the overall aims of the lecture (as stated above).

**What is the question asking you to do?**

Before rushing straight into researching, students some spend some time on analysing the question. Questions that you are presented with might often appear complex, difficult and even a bit daunting. One of the key purposes of breaking the question down to its component parts is that it inevitably forces you to simplify the question. Before you begin writing or even researching for your essay you should figure out exactly what it is you are being asked to do.

There are usually clues within the essay question to tell you how you should approach writing your essay. Hence, the idea here is to learn to look for/identify these clues that can guide you as you organize and write your essay.

**Step 1:** Begin by reading the question carefully. This is very important as it will familiarise you with the general focus of the question.

**Step 2:** Cautiously examine and underline the key words and concepts in the question. These could be the name of a person or event, a political theory or approach, or the name of an author. If you do not understand what these key words mean, research them.

**Step 3:** Explain the question to yourself to make sure you fully understand: paraphrasing the question then checking to see if the paraphrased version and the original question match up is a good way to do this. To rewrite the essay question, simply ask yourself what you must do to answer the question (e.g. first I must define the key concepts, then compare them) and write this down.

**Instruction/action words**

Pay attention to the Instruction or Action words, as they are an indication of what it is you must do with the key terms you’ve identified.

Below are the common instruction/action words you will encounter. Bear in mind that more than one of these may be used in the same question.

**Common Action Words**

*Illicit responses from the students for the meaning of some of the more commonly used action words that are not on the slides.*

* Describe: give a detailed and comprehensive account of (something).
* Criticise: give your considered and informed judgment about a statement or a body of work. You may also explore its implications, discussing all the evidence which is available. In addition, look for flaws in the theory or areas where it may be incomplete.
* How: entails the need to find the origins and history (background) behind your topic.
* **Compare:** examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their similarities and differences; make a list of the similarities and differences that you can discuss in detail.
* **Contrast:** examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their differences.
* **Analyse:** requires you to consider the various components of the whole and explain the relationships among them; look for underlying assumptions and question their validity (legitimacy).
* **Discuss:** present the different aspects (sides) of a question and problem.
* Evaluate: examine the various sides of a question. To evaluate asks you to present opinion and to apply your judgement in response to the topic. Here your point of view (thesis) must be supported by clearly stated evidence. Phrases such as to what extent or in what way also ask for an evaluation.
* **Argue** (meaning to agree or disagree) also asks you to state your opinion based on your analysis of the evidence. The major difference here is that you will need to consider other possible opinions or viewpoints (counter-argument), and defend your own position in comparison to those other viewpoints (rebuttal).
* Account for: means explain the reasons for a particular situation. Be wary of confusing it with ‘Give an account of’ which asks only for a detailed description of something.
* Assess: examine closely. Consider in a balanced way the strengths and weaknesses or points for and against a proposition. In conclusion, state your judgment clearly.
* Comment: state clearly your opinions on the material in question but also support your views with reference to suitable evidence.
* Summarise: give a brief account of the main points of a matter, meanwhile omitting details and examples.
* Why: suggests that you should discuss the causes, to be able to recognize relationships such as cause and effect.

**Researching**

Once you fully understand the essay question, you can now begin to do your research.

**What is research?**

Research refers to looking for information on a particular topic or field. This search involves looking at what others have written on this topic or field (called secondary research), which you will then use to form and support your argument/response to a question.

(Briefly remind students how important referencing is, so they do not get accused of plagiarism. As they do research, they must note the specific details of where they get this information)

**The Research Process**

These are the main things you must bear in mind when researching.

**First you must break down the question into its different parts/ sections**. This enables you to decide what material/sources are relevant to the topic/essay. Sometimes a question will ask you to do more than one thing. It may ask you to refer to more than one text, or more than one literary device. By dividing the question into parts, you will be able to generate ideas for your essay, and structure the sections of your essay so that each part of the question is answered.

**Then you must determine if it is a closed/open-ended question.** If it is an open-ended question, you will need to narrow it down, and in your introduction you would them explain how and why you’ve limited it to those specific issues/themes, so that the reader know that you appreciate the wider issues but that you know how to be selective. If it is a closed question: stay within the scope of the question.

**Refer back to your paraphrased & original essay question:** Which components would an appropriate answer focus on? What would a student look to do in the essay?

**Start searching**: Typing in the whole essay question on a search engine will most likely return an overwhelming number of results, which will not necessarily be relevant to the specific topic. Students need to use keywords to get relevant sources from the search. These keywords may not necessarily always be found in the question, they must have a general idea of the topic before they start researching so they can identify what is relevant and what is not, but also so they can search for the ‘right’ information. The course reader should give a basic idea of the topic and therefore they can search for more information based on what they already know.

**Where should you look for information?**

It’s easy to miss key information online because of the volume of information a search returns. Knowing where to look, and what to look for is therefore important.

Good places to look:

- **The Library:** You can access a great deal of books, journals, articles and other resources at the library.

- **The UCT Library Website** ([www.lib.uct.ac.za](http://www.lib.uct.ac.za)) grants you access to a wide variety of academic platforms such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost and JSTOR, which are databases containing a large volume of academic work across disciplines. These databases can be accessed while students are off-campus via the library’s off-campus log in.

Most students should have been to the library tutorial during orientation. If not, the website is very simple to use and the library provides some very useful online tutorials that teach you how to search for books and journal articles. To access these, follow the links below:

For how to find journal articles online: <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/how-to-find-journal-articles/>

For how to find books online: <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/research-help/library-guides-andtutorials/how-to-find-a-book/>

**Reliability of sources online**

The printed resources in the library have almost always been thoroughly evaluated by experts before they are published. The sources online, however, are not always reliable, so it is important that you learn to identify the reliability of an online source.

Anyone can have a website, which means that they can put up whatever they want on it –whether credible or not. Think about this before you use a website as a source in a research paper or for academic purposes. Be aware that what goes on a website is often not reviewed by anyone and may be very opinionated and misleading or even completely false.

**Blogs** are open forums for anyone from any part of the globe. Anyone can have a blog. Blogs are very similar to opinion articles in newspapers and magazines, but are not chosen by editors to be placed in a publication. However, some blogs can be useful. Several contemporary Politics scholars use blogs to explain new ideas that may be useful for your understanding in research of the field. But because these are not peer-reviewed you should be very sceptical and very careful when using blogs for your assignments and you are advised NOT to reference these in your essay.

Do not use **Wikipedia** as one of your references/sources in an assignment/essay. This is because Wikipedia is NOT an academic source. You may use Wikipedia to research a topic that you do not understand and need background information on. This will allow you to have a general picture on the topic before you make use of academic sources.

Knowing how to identify facts, interpretations, and evaluations will assist you in assessing the reliability of a source.

* **Facts** are objective. Like your body weight, facts can be measured observed, or independently verified in some way.
* **Interpretations** spell out the implications of facts. Are you as thin as you are because of your genes – or because you exercise every day? The answer to this question is an interpretation.
* **Evaluations** are debatable judgements about a set of facts or a situation. Attributing a person’s thinness to genes is an interpretation, but the assertion that “one can never be too rich or too thin” is an evaluation.

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