



## Interpreting Essay Questions

Very often the reason students receive bad grades for essays they have worked hard on is that the essay doesn't answer the question. As a result it is very important that you spend enough time interpreting the question. If you don't understand what the question is asking, how can you hope to write an essay that answers the question?

In order to cover the issues associated with question interpretation, we'll be looking at this sample question:

*Global warming will bring more serious economic consequences for Asia than Europe. Discuss.*

There are four principle aspects of most essay questions:

**Topic:** This is the general subject area of the essay. So, in the above example question, the **topic** is *global warming*.

**Focus:** This specifies which aspect of the topic the essay wants you to write about. Global warming is a huge topic, but the **focus** of the example question is *economic consequences*. So, the question wants you to write about the economic effects of global warming. It would be wrong to write about, social, political or any other type of effect in answering this question.

**Limit/Viewpoint:** Sometimes an essay will ask you to write about an issue from a certain point of view or within a particular context which might not automatically be your own. So, you might be asked to about adult education from the point of view of mentally ill former offenders or the effects of traffic pollution in Rome. In the example the question requests a comparison of *Asia* and *Europe*. This is the **limit**, and so it would be incorrect to talk about North American or Australasian perspectives in answering this question.

**Precept:** Most questions contain a word which indicates how the essay should be organised. In the example, the **precept** (command word) is *discuss*. This means that you should write a balanced paper that considers the arguments for the statement in the question and also the arguments against that statement.

Take a few minutes to analyse these essay questions in terms of the concepts discussed above. Underline the key elements and try to rephrase each one in your own words.

- I. What objections are there, if any, to genetic engineering?
  
- II. Parking on double yellow lines should incur the death penalty. Discuss.
  
- III. Examine stigma in relation to one aspect of social identity. Provide some explanation as to why this occurs and ways that this may be tackled.



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Let's go back to the original question. Now that it is clear what the essay is asking for, it is important to plan what reading needs to be done rather than going to the library and getting out all the books on global warming.

The first thing that is required is a definition of global warming so that the boundaries of the essay are set straight away. This term is more specific than climate change as it excludes the idea of global cooling and so on. There is also a question of time scale. When the question states 'will bring', not only is this an assumption, but there is also no statement of by when these consequences will occur. These questions need to be answered before serious work on the essay can begin.

In addition, it would be impossible to talk in any detail about all the countries of Europe and Asia. Therefore, it is important to refine your interpretation of the question by selecting one country from each of these continents to use in the essay.

So, the first areas that need research are:

Definition of Global Warming	A specific time scale	One European Country	One Asian Country
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Once you have established this information you can make an outline plan. This involves constructing your argument point by point.

**Introduction:** An introduction must answer three basic questions.

-**What?** (Topic of essay and your interpretation of the question – definitions, countries chosen etc)

-**Why?** (Justification for the relevance of this issue at this point in time)

-**How?** (Description of the issues covered and their organisation within the essay)

**Body:** The body contains the main arguments that are made and support for them. The body of the sample essay would involve arguments for and against the statement in the question but remember that different questions require different organisations.

Section A: For	Section B: Against
Argument 1	Argument 1
Argument 2	Argument 2
Argument 3	Argument 3

**Conclusion:** This final section contains a summary of the main arguments of the essay. You shouldn't include any new points or dramatic revelations. Put simply, the conclusion must provide an answer to the original essay question!

Having made an outline plan in this way, it is now easier to target your research to your specific needs. Instead of researching the whole essay in one go, go to the library and find material that will provide you with information for section A of the essay and so on.

Produced by the Effective Learning Advice Service, Brunel University. To book an appointment with an adviser email [elas@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:elas@brunel.ac.uk) or call **01895 266547**