

Understanding the Question

When you write an essay, it is important that you don't overlook the key features of the question. The first thing you should do is identify the "direction" and "scoping" words in the question, as well as the "content" the question is asking you to explore. These components are the most crucial aspect of any essay question, as they determine **what** you should be saying, and **how** you should be saying it!

Before you start planning your essay, you should always:

- Highlight the "content" words and ensure you understand what they mean. If in doubt, ask questions!
- Identify the "scoping" words.
- Pay attention to the "direction" word. The "direction" word is the VERB in the question that tells you exactly what you need to do.

Direction words:

The "direction" word is the VERB in the question that tells you exactly what you need to do. Here are some examples:

Direction Word	
Compare	Show the similarities and differences between two or more items.
Contrast	Present only the differences between two or more items.
Define	Give the definition and expand it with more examples and greater details.
Trace/Outline	Discuss the sequence of events in chronological order.
Summarize	Identify and discuss the main points or the highlights of subject. Omit in-depth details.
Evaluate/Critique	Offer your opinion or judgment then back it up with specific facts, details, or reasons.
Analyze	Identify the different parts of something. Discuss each part individually, [and highlight different points of view].
Describe	Give a detailed description of different aspects, qualities, characteristics, parts, or points of view.
Discuss/Tell	Tell about the parts of main points. Expand with specific details.
Explain why	Give reasons. Tell why. Show logical relationships or cause and effect.
Explain how	Give the process, steps, stages, or procedures involved. Explain each.
Illustrate	Give examples. Explain each example with details.
Identify	Identify specific points. Discuss each point individually. Include sufficient detail.

(Wong, 2015).

Content words:

The content words in an assignment question are the words that identify the **topic** or **subject** of the assignment, and tell you exactly what you need to write about.

Scoping Words:

Scoping words specify the **limits** of your discussion. They are designed to focus your research and indicate the depth of response required.

Here is an example:

High school education in New South Wales has changed dramatically over the last ten years, and these changes have affected a range of identity groups. Discuss this statement with specific reference to TWO identity groups.



Once you have identified the **direction** word and the **scoping** words, and defined the **content** words, it is a good idea to put the essay question into your own colloquial words. This will enable you to better understand what, exactly, it is asking you to do.



Breaking the Question Down

Your Essay Question:

Content Words (what subject/issues do I need to write about?)

Scoping Words (what are the limits/focus of the question?)

Direction Word (what does this question want me to do?)

Interpretation of Essay Question: