

Understanding an assignment brief

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Using this guide

Understanding your assignment brief is key to helping you achieve the best grade possible.

This guide aims to provide you with an overview of the importance of fully understanding your assignment briefs as well as offering guidance on how to digest your assignment brief and what it is asking from you.

We recommend that you take some time to work through this guide prior to starting your essay as a good understanding of the techniques discussed will help you to elevate your writing. It is important to note that not every technique will work for you and you should take whichever approach suits your needs best.

This guide has been compiled by the Student Experience and Engagement team with the help of other academic resources.

What is an assignment brief?

Assignments are used in Higher Education for a variety of important reasons that contribute to effective learning, skill development, and overall educational quality.

Your assignments are an opportunity for you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of a particular topic, relating to your chosen subject.

Your assignment brief is essentially a 'road-map' which includes everything you need to know about the task you are being asked to complete. This may include:

- Essay question/task
- Learning objectives
- Formatting instructions and structural guidelines (e.g. font, word count, referencing style)
- Grading descriptors and assessment criteria
- Academic conduct information (e.g. late submission, plagiarism)
- Submission date and method

Why is it important to understand an assignment brief?

Students sometimes receive feedback from their tutors that they have not answered the tutorial or question set, leaving students perplexed. ‘The question was about democracy,’ a student might wail, ‘and I wrote ten pages on democracy!’ (Oxford Study Skills Centre, 2023)

Your work is marked on how well you’ve responded to the assignment brief and whether you have met the grading criteria. This means that it is **vital** for you to have full understanding of what you’re being asked to do.

Before you start researching or writing, you must ensure that you have a thorough understanding of what the brief is actually asking you.

Why is it important to understand an assignment brief?

Before you make a start on your assignment, you should answer the 5 questions in the table below. This will help to ensure you are meeting the technical guidance and academic expectations of both your tutor and HE study.

Question	Answer
What is the style/format of the assignment? (e.g. report, essay, presentation)	
What is the word limit?	
What is the criteria being used?	
Is there reference to any specific resources?	
What is the deadline?	

What are the key words in an assignment brief?

Key 'instruction' words

Understanding the "instruction" words in your assignment brief is really crucial. Words such as, "explain," "compare," or "analyse," tell you exactly what you need to do in your assignment. When you know what each word means, you can make sure you're doing the right thing.

It's like following a recipe – if you understand the steps, you can make a delicious meal. Similarly, if you understand the instruction words, you can write a great assignment that gets you good grades.

'Instruction' words may also be referred to as 'directive' 'task' or 'action' words.

What are the key words in an assignment brief?

Key 'instruction' words

It is important that you take time to **analyse** the key words within your assignment brief. The 'instruction' words tell you exactly what is being asked of you and will dictate the approach you need to take. A lack of understanding may result in you not answering the question and meeting the assignment criteria.

Instruction word	What you need to do
Analyse	Break into parts; investigate, examine, question.
Compare	Look for the similarities between two things. Show the relevance or consequences of these similarities concluding which is preferable.
Contract	Identify the differences between two items or arguments. Show whether the differences are significant. Give reasons why one is preferable.
Critique	An examination or judgement of something. Requires an answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses and indicates favourable aspects of the subject. A balanced answer is required.
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	Give the exact meaning of. Where relevant show you understand how the definition may be problematic.
Describe	Provide a detailed explanation as to how and why something happens or happened.

What are the key words in an assignment brief?

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 value, importance, or usefulness of something using evidence to support your argument.
Examine	Look closely into something
Explain	Make clear why something happens or is the way it is; interpret and account for; give reasons for.
Explore	Examine thoroughly; consider from a variety of viewpoints
Illustrate	Make something clear and explicit, giving examples of evidence
Justify	Give evidence that supports an argument or idea; show why a decision or conclusions were made.
Outline	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
Summarise	Draw out the main points only; leave out details and examples
To what extent...	Consider how far something is true or contributes to a final outcome. Also consider ways in which it is not true.

Understanding an assignment brief

All assignments briefs include a task/question which you are required to complete. Within that task/question, there will be keyword which will help you to understand what it is that you're being asked to do. These can generally be broken down into three categories:

Directive

Content

Limiting

Directive: also known as your 'instruction' word. This informs how you should approach your writing

Example question: Analyse the socio-economic impact of renewable energy adoption in urban areas within the last five years.

Content: this is your topic and starting point for the question

Limiting: this gives your content a focal point

Understanding an assignment brief

Use the following examples to identify where the 'directive', 'content' and 'limiting' is.

Directive

Content

Limiting

Compare and Contrast the portrayal of love and relationships in "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen and its 2005 film adaptation.

Evaluate the effectiveness of a recent public health campaign, within the last two years, aimed at reducing sugary beverage consumption.

Investigate the impact of sports participation on the physical and mental well-being of adolescents aged 13 to 18. Concentrate on a specific sport of your choice

Description vs. Analysis

In the context of an essay, description and analysis refer to two distinct approaches in presenting information or exploring a topic. Below are the key differences between description and analysis within an essay:

1. Purpose:

- **Description in an Essay:** The purpose of descriptive elements in an essay is to vividly paint a picture or provide a detailed account of a subject. It helps readers visualise and understand the topic through sensory details.
- **Analysis in an Essay:** The purpose of analysis in an essay is to delve deeper into the subject, examining its components, relationships, and implications. Analysis aims to uncover meaning, significance, or patterns within the information presented.

Description vs. Analysis

2. Focus:

- **Description in an Essay:** Descriptive elements focus on presenting facts, details, and features in a way that appeals to the reader's senses. It provides a foundation for the reader's understanding but may not necessarily explore the "why" or significance.
- **Analysis in an Essay:** Analytical elements focus on interpreting the information presented, exploring the reasons behind certain phenomena, and drawing connections between different aspects of the topic.

3. Depth of Examination:

- **Description in an Essay:** Descriptive passages are often more surface-level, providing a comprehensive but straightforward account. It creates a foundation for further exploration.
- **Analysis in an Essay:** Analytical sections involve a more profound examination, going beyond the surface to uncover the underlying meanings, causes, or effects related to the topic.

Description vs. Analysis

4. Integration of Evidence:

- **Description in an Essay:** Descriptive writing may involve presenting facts, observations, or examples to enhance the reader's understanding, but the primary focus is on presenting the information.
- **Analysis in an Essay:** Analytical writing integrates evidence to support arguments or interpretations. It involves critical thinking and reasoning to draw conclusions or make connections between different pieces of information.

5. Critical Thinking:

- **Description in an Essay:** Descriptive elements may not necessarily require extensive critical analysis. The emphasis is on presenting information rather than evaluating or interpreting it.
- **Analysis in an Essay:** Analytical elements require a higher level of critical thinking, as the writer evaluates information, explores implications, and draws conclusions based on evidence.

Description vs. Analysis

In an essay, both description and analysis can be important, and the balance between them depends on the essay's purpose and the writer's objectives. Descriptive elements can set the stage and provide context, while analytical elements contribute depth and insight, creating a more comprehensive and engaging essay.

Read the example assignment questions below and circle whether you think it requires a descriptive or analytical answer.

Provide an account of the main features and elements that define Renaissance art, highlighting what distinguishes it from art in earlier periods.

Descriptive / Analytical

Examine how shifts in cultural and historical circumstances have shaped the development of modern dance forms, investigating their choreographic styles, thematic focuses, and reflections of changing notions of gender and identity.

Descriptive / Analytical

Description vs. Analysis

Outline the various stages of the digestion process, detailing the roles of key organs and enzymes involved in breaking down food.

Descriptive / Analytical

Investigate the factors contributing to the rising prevalence of obesity in developed countries, analyzing the intersections of sedentary lifestyles, dietary habits, and socioeconomic disparities in relation to this health issue.

Descriptive / Analytical

Examine the potential benefits and risks of adopting cloud computing solutions in businesses, considering factors such as scalability, data security, cost-effectiveness, and the impact on traditional IT infrastructure.

Descriptive / Analytical

Top tips

1) Read Thoroughly: Begin by reading the entire assignment brief carefully. Take your time to understand its requirements, objectives, and any specific guidelines.

2) Highlight Key Points: Use highlighters or underline key instructions, deadlines, objectives, and any essential criteria. This will help you quickly refer back to important details.

3) Identify Directives: Pay attention to action words like "analyse," "compare," "evaluate," or "propose." These directives guide the type of response expected from you.

4) Clarify Terminology: If the assignment uses unfamiliar terms or concepts, clarify their meanings through research or by asking your instructor.

5) Note Restrictions: Identify any limitations or constraints mentioned in the brief, such as word counts, specific resources, or a focus on certain aspects

A final note

If after working through this booklet you are still unsure about how to understand an assignment brief, please do not hesitate to contact our Student Engagement Officer who can offer additional advice and guidance to build your confidence and skill-set.

- You can contact us via our central email - **studyskills@ucenmanchester.ac.uk**
- One-to-one appointments are available through **Microsoft Bookings**.
- See the digital screens at your campus for drop-in session information

Have your say.

Your input is invaluable in helping us to enhance the Study Skills package we provide. Your honest responses will enable us to identify areas of improvement and tailor our approach to better support your learning journey. After you have completed this booklet, please take 5 minutes to let us know what you thought!

You can do this by scanning the QR code below!



