
UNDERSTANDING ESSAY TOPICS: A Checklist

Before you plunge into research or writing, invest some time in thinking through the specific assignment you are dealing with. Remember, you are not being asked just to collect facts, but to develop and display your powers of reasoning. You can save yourself time and frustration by beginning this reasoning early in the process. Here are some steps.

1. **Note which concepts or methods** the topic asks you to use. Is the main requirement to find and synthesize information, to argue a point with others, or to explore your own responses? Does the assignment ask you to go into depth about some material already covered in the course? Or does it suggest that you evaluate a theory or model by applying it to an example from outside the course material? Whatever the design, an essay assignment expects you to use course **concepts and ways of thinking**; it encourages you to apply course **methodology**. So if you are writing a paper in Sociology, for instance, write it using sociological concepts covered in the course. Or if you are asked to do a close reading of a literary text, concentrate on writing about the literary techniques seen in the text, not the author's biography.
2. **Note the key terms in the assignment sheet**, including those **naming parts of the topic** and those giving **directions** for dealing with it. Look especially for words that define the kind of reasoning you should be using: *why, how, analyse, compare, evaluate, argue*, etc. Be sure you understand the specific meanings of these terms.
 - **Analyse** means look behind the surface structure of your source material. See the relationship of parts to whole. Be able to recognize relationships such as cause and effect, even if it's unstated in what you read. Look for underlying assumptions and question their validity. **How** and **why** imply an answer reached by analysis.
 - **Compare** means find differences as well as similarities. You will need to formulate the aspects which you are looking at in each item; consider organizing your paper by using these aspects as headings.
 - **Evaluate** emphasizes that you are to apply your judgement to the results of your analysis. It asks for an opinion based on well-defined criteria and clearly stated evidence. Wording such as *to what extent* also asks for an evaluation of an idea.
 - **Argue** (or **agree or disagree**) likewise asks you to take a stand based on analysis of solid evidence and explained by clear reasoning. You will need to consider other possible viewpoints and defend your own in comparison.
3. To generate ideas from which you can choose the direction of your research or preliminary analysis, **ask yourself questions** about the specific topic in terms of the concepts or methods that seem applicable. Look for **controversies** in the material to find issues that need discussing. You may want to look early on at some general discussions in reference works such as encyclopaedias or handbooks to see how others have framed questions or seen problems to discuss. Do all your reading looking for questions and issues, not just information.
4. For an essay of argument, formulate a **tentative thesis statement** at a fairly early stage (that is, a statement of your own likely position in the controversy that most interests you, or your preliminary answer to an important interpretive question. You do not have to stick to this answer or statement, but it will help focus your investigation. (See the handout **Using Thesis Statements** for advice on how and when to centre your papers on thesis statements.)

Now you will have some sense of direction –even if you eventually choose another path than the one you have mapped. You are ready to begin gathering and analysing your specific material. See also the handouts **General Advice on Essay Writing** and **Taking Notes from Research Reading**.