QUESTION ANALYSIS and TASK WORDS for written assignments

To complete an assignment you must first know what you have to do. **Question or task analysis** is the first step. The process is also called **unpacking** or **deconstructing** the question. Successful question analysis will tell you the task you have to undertake and the key content topics you have to research.

Unpacking the question requires you to be able to identify **directive** or **task** words, **key** or **topic** words and **limiting** words.

Task or directive words are words that direct your actions and tell you the depth of the assignment you are expected to write.

To help recognise the task and express it in your own words, do the following steps
- Ask yourself: What is my task in answering this question?
- Write down: This question/task asks me to?

See list of task words over the page.

Key or topic words are the subject or focus of your assignment and therefore also of your research.

Examples include: parliamentary system, government sector, pedagogy, functional literacy, opportunity cost, audit, binomial distribution, literary symbolism, identity.

Limit or limiting words tell you which specific area of the subject you should focus on in your assignment. These words also therefore limit the extent of your research.

Examples include: education sector, mining industry, European theatre, in the last twenty years, current, in the United States, Australian.

ACTIVITY

Read the question below and see if you can identify the following: directive/task words, key/topic words, limiting words. Ask yourself:
- What is the task I am being asked to do?
- What is the topic?
- What is it limited to?

Outline the issues involved in the current welfare debate in Australia between politicians and social activists. Discuss the processes in place to restrict access to support and decide whether it represents an accurate reflection of the situation.

RESOURCES

- Other QUICK TIPS FOR STUDENTS http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/tips.htm
- Online resources:
http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/alsonline/acwrite/quest.htm
- Library Finding Information Tutorial http://libtute.usq.edu.au/
- Talk with a tutor at The Learning Centre (tlc@usq.edu.au)

The answers are:

Task words: Outline. Discuss.
Key or topic words: … the processes in place to restrict access to support
*Limit words***:** …whether it represents an accurate reflection of the situation

TASK WORD[1]	MEANING
Analyse	Identify the components of the whole and explain the relationship between them; demonstrate how a Machine, principles, theory or ideas works, apply theory to practice (as in a case study) or through the use of specific examples; rather than just describe discuss how and/or why.
Argue	Persuade the reader that your position/stance/argument is logical and acceptable. Support and provide evidence to prove your stance or point of view
Classify or Divide	To organise a group of ideas into a system with the purpose of explaining it fully; to catalogue.
Compare	Demonstrate and explain how ideas, objects and systems are similar – to look for the similarities in the context of the subject matter. A comparison can be organised as a series of steps: the two phenomena to be compared are analysed; points of comparison (likeness) are identified; the degree of likeness is evaluated; and evidence supporting the evaluation presented.
Contrast	Demonstrate how ideas, objects and systems are different – to look for differences in the content/subject matter.
Comment	Express an opinion on the issue that forms the basis of the topic or question. This opinion should use evidence both supporting and opposing the proposition with your preference clearly stated.
Critically (appraise)	Act as a judge – appraise, analyse. Your judgements should always be backed up with evidence.
Critically (analyse)	Investigate and explain the nature of the components, definitions or concepts of a question or topic and explain the way they are interrelated. Includes discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the definitions and concepts. Provide supporting evidence (i.e. references to opinions, facts, reports)
Critique	Evaluate the merit of theories, opinions and degree of truth observed and support your judgement by the evidence you have from your research on the topic.
Define	Explain precisely the meaning of a word, theory, principle, idea, subject or object. There can be multiple definitions for some concepts, in which case you need to formulate a working definition which applies to your particular assignment.
Describe	Give an account of – to write about how something looks and acts, how an event has taken place, or how a place appears. This is about providing an objective account, rather than your opinion.
Discuss	Examine all aspects of the topic in detail. Usually this requires that you present the different aspects of a situation or issue – present the pros and cons.
Evaluate	Give your opinion or judgement of the topic's validity or value based on research of subject matter.
Explain	Make plain or clear for your reader; to advise the meaning; to interpret.
Illustrate	Use a figure or diagram, or examples, to explain your meaning – to make a point or contention and emphasise it with various examples.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of something, usually including your own judgment.
Justify	Give adequate grounds or examples from the subject matter to support your position or conclusions.
Narrate	Comment on an event that occurred; to relate an incident you know about; to relate a sequence of events leading to something. This is similar to describing, except that it is done more in the form of a story.
Outline	Give the important facts of a subject or a situation.
Relate	Tell or show how some facts are related to others.
Review	Make a survey, examining the subject critically. For example, a review of the literature of a particular subject means that you explain the merits or value of books, journal articles or websites about that subject.
State	Present in brief, clear form.
Summarise	To briefly go over the essential facts or briefly describe the main arguments.

[1] Based on *Developing student communication skills* (USQ 1993, pp. 10–11), Vallence & McWilliam (1989, pp. 261–2)