

Understanding a task

Audio transcript

One of the biggest mistakes that students can make is rushing into a task before they understand it, or before they have made a basic plan. This video will cover understanding assignments and basic planning techniques. Getting these skills down will save you tonnes of time and stress in the long run, so let's jump straight into it.

The very first thing you should do is determine what kind of task it is. Each assignment type has its own structure, expectations, and purpose. Most of the time it will be clear from the assignment sheet or rubric, and sometimes an assignment may include elements of multiple types.

By becoming familiar with the common assignment types, it will be easier to plan your work, writing style, and overall approach. There's a brief practice below.

Once that is sorted, you should analyse the prompt or question in a focussed way. These have been carefully written and they deserve close attention. Overlooking even small parts can result in writing that does not fulfill the requirements. Start by looking out for three types of words in the prompt: task words, content words, and scope words.

Task words are verbs that tell you what the task is asking you to do and they guide the type of response required. "Discuss" requires you to explore a topic by presenting multiple perspectives and considering each side.

Content words indicate the paper's subject or focus. They tell you what you need to write about. In this case you should focus on how social media affects students' studies, both positively and negatively. Scope words narrow the boundaries of the work, keeping you focussed on certain time frames, locations, or groups of people. In this case, you should narrow your discussion to the university student demographic.

Make sure you understand exactly what each part of the prompt is asking of you. If you're ever in doubt, ask your lecturer or tutor. They're there to help.

There's a quick activity below.

Pay close attention to the task words in a prompt. They can have subtle differences in meaning, and it is useful to learn them. "Discuss", for example, requires you to explore a topic by presenting multiple perspectives and considering each side. While "analyse" asks you to break down the topic into its components and explore their interrelationships.

Task words also differ in the cognitive demand required to perform the action. It's quite easy to define or describe something, but much more challenging to critique or propose something. Become familiar with the common task words and their differing meanings.

Read over the list, and complete the activity below.

It's also critical that you consult the marking rubric in the beginning because it can help to shape your work. Rubrics may seem overwhelming, but they are actually your best friend; a map that shows you how to get the best grade possible.

Rubrics show the criteria for assessing the task, and these aren't always evenly weighted. In this simple sample you would get a grade for the information, the organisation, the vocabulary, grammar, and referencing.

They also show the standards for assessing the task. It's very useful to become familiar with rubrics in the planning stage because they show what is valuable to the marker, and they also give clues about how your work could be organised.

Complete the activities below, and in the next section we'll learn how to do basic planning and outlining.