



# Breaking down an exam question

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## Introduction

A common reason why students lose marks when they write exams is because they do not address the question that has been set. Typically, this is because students focus their writing upon certain words or phrases that link to the topics they have revised, without considering how this information should fit together. The first part of the exam process should therefore involve choosing, understanding and interpreting the question.

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## How to break down a question

It can be very useful to breakdown your exam question into the **action verb** (details how topic areas should be addressed), the **topic area** (what needs to be examined) and any **limiters** (such as context or timeframe) using different coloured pens.

In the following example, the action verb is highlighted in **blue**, topic area in **brown** and the limiter in **green**:

**Compare** and **contrast** **study skills teaching** methods that can be used in a **higher education context**.

Ask yourself:

### What does the **topic area** relate to?

- Study skills teaching – different ways that study skills can be taught (such as lectures, workshops, seminars, online or one-to-one appointments)

### What does the **action verb** mean?

- Compare and contrast – talk about similarities and differences

### What are the implications of the **limiter**?

- Higher education context – the focus of the essay should be upon how study skills are taught in universities. If the author focused upon teaching in schools or colleges this would not address the question

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## Understand question terminology

If there are topic areas or action verbs that you do not understand, it is important to bridge these gaps in your knowledge as soon as possible.

- If you do not understand the **action verb** – look this up in a dictionary
- If you do not understand the **topic area / limiters** – read around these areas in relevant academic textbooks (you are likely to find these in a recommended reading list which will be included in your unit handbook).

## Other aspects of the assignment question

The following are some things to consider when analysing the exam question:

<b>If you have to choose a topic / part of the topic, make sure it is:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Relevant to the assignment question</li><li>✓ Manageable (can be covered in the available word count)</li></ul>
<b>If your assignment comprises several questions / areas, make sure that:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ These areas are linked to each other</li><li>✓ This is reflected in the structure / order and</li><li>✓ This structure/ order is reflected in your assignment plan</li></ul>
<b>Demonstrating critical analysis in your work will always attract a higher grade. To develop critical thinking:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Challenge the information you read</li><li>✓ Question and evaluate the quality of information</li><li>✓ Focus on both positive and negative aspects, in other words</li><li>✓ Present a balanced view of the information and source</li><li>✓ Consider both strengths and weaknesses</li><li>✓ How different sources / opinions fit together in order to answer the assignment question(s)</li></ul>

## Next stages

Once you have broken down the question, you should have a clearer understanding of what areas you need to address in your answer. Pay particular attention to the limiter as this is what the examiner is looking for. Avoid writing down everything you know about the topic as this can waste valuable time and might not necessarily be relevant.

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### Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit:

**[lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub](http://lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub)**

