

Analysing an essay title

Students often do less well than they could on formal writing tasks, not because their writing skills are weak, but because they have not realised what it is they are asked to do. It is often helpful to teach them how to analyse essay titles. The analysis technique below has been tried out with a large and varied selection of essay titles.

1. TOPIC

Topic in an essay title is the same as ‘topic’ in a text, i.e. what, in the most general terms, the essay should be about. In the titles below the ‘topic’ appears in italics.

- *Happiness*
- *Pollution* is man’s greatest enemy.
- Describe the life-cycle of *the moth*.
- Define a *fulcrum* and give at least two examples.
- Discuss the principal methods of controlling *noise at work*. Provide examples of each method.

2. FOCUS

Focus in an essay title is the detailed limitation of the topic: it tells the student more specifically, sometimes very specifically, what the essay should be about. In the titles below the ‘focus’, if there is one, appears in italics.

- Happiness (no focus)
- Pollution is *man’s greatest enemy*.
- Describe *the life-cycle* of the moth.
- Define a fulcrum and give at least two examples. (no focus)
- Discuss *the principal methods of controlling* noise at work. Provide examples of each method.

3 COMMENT

Comment refers to the instruction word or phrase or (in some cases) more than one instruction: these instructions tell the student what text-type they should produce. Where applicable, the ‘comment’ is in italics in the examples:

- Happiness (no ‘comment’ – free response essay)
- Pollution is man’s greatest enemy. (no ‘comment’ – but probably intended to be a discussion text)
- *Describe* the life-cycle of the moth.
- *Define* a fulcrum and *give* at least *two examples* (two ‘comment’ requirements)
- *Discuss* the principal methods of controlling noise at work. *Provide examples* of each method. (two ‘comment’ requirements)

4 **VIEWPOINT**

Viewpoint is an element of essay titles which often is not present. When it is present, it probably makes the whole task quite a lot more difficult. The term 'viewpoint' refers to the requirement, in the essay title, that the writer writes from a point of view dictated by the setter of the essay title. If you do not really agree with that point of view it is difficult for you to write as you. All these titles contain a 'viewpoint' element:

- a) Write a report arguing that smoking should be banned in all public places.
- b) Show how over-population is a result of poverty rather than a cause.
- c) 'Violence on television and in films has encouraged violence among today's young people.' Give reasons why the above statement is not true.

To analyse the title students should follow these steps:

- 1 Identify the **Topic**.
- 2 Identify the **Focus** and be sure you are clear about how it relates to the **Topic** (is it an example of it? a stage in its sequence? the cause or an effect? one of the solutions to it as a problem? etc.)
- 3 Identify the **Comment** and be sure you know what this instruction requires them to do.
- 4 Check whether there is a **Viewpoint** and if so, if it is the same as your own. If it isn't, and there is a choice of task, you should avoid this one. If there isn't, you should plan very carefully *how* to answer the question with the required 'viewpoint'.

In planning the essay, **Comment** decides the text-type (discussion, definition, etc.); **Topic** determines the overall range of subject matter but **Focus** determines the particular content; **Viewpoint** dictates which argument, pro or con, to use; the interaction between **Comment** and **Focus** will lead to decisions about the organisation of the essay.

Analysing the essay title only helps the student when:

- a) the essay is a fairly formal one, with a clearly specified title
- b) the essay is expository, or information-based (stories, poems, etc. do not fit this analysis; completely open titles like the 'Happiness' one do not usefully fit either)

Overleaf is a list of common COMMENT key-words with an explanation for each:

1. **Compare**: requires an answer which sets items side by side and shows their similarities and differences. A balanced (fair, objective) answer is expected.

2. **Contrast:** requires an answer which points out only the differences between two items.
3. **Criticise:** requires an answer which points out mistakes or weaknesses, and which also indicates any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. It requires a balanced answer.
4. **Define:** requires an answer which explains the precise meaning of a concept: a definition answer will include definition structure, probably expanded.
5. **Analyse:** requires an answer which takes apart an idea, concept or statement in order to consider all the factors it consists of. Answers of this type should be very methodical and logically organised.
6. **Discuss:** requires an answer which explains an item or concept, and then gives details about it with supportive information, examples, points for and against, and explanations for the facts put forward. This is one of the most difficult types of essay question.
7. **Evaluate:** requires an answer which is similar to one with the key-word 'Discuss', but the conclusion in this type is expected to make a judgement, either 'pro' or 'contra' (for or against) the concept being discussed and evaluated.
8. **Illustrate:** requires an answer which consists mainly of examples to demonstrate or prove the subject of the question. It is often added to another instruction.
9. **Justify:** requires an answer which gives only reasons *for* a position or argument. Note, however, that the proposition to be argued may be a *negative* one (e.g. Justify the abolition of the death penalty).
10. **Prove/Disprove:** both of these require answers which demonstrate the logical arguments and/or evidence connected with a proposition: *prove* requires the 'pro' points and *disprove* requires the 'contra' points.
11. **Summarise/Outline:** require an -answer which contains a summary of all the available information about a subject, i.e. only the main points and not the details should be included. Questions of this type often require short answers.
12. **Trace:** is found most frequently in historical questions (but not only in History courses); it requires the statement and brief description in logical or chronological order of the stages (steps) in the development of e.g. a theory, a person's life, a process, etc.
13. **State:** requires an answer which expresses the relevant points briefly and clearly without lengthy discussion or minor details.
14. **Explain:** requires an answer which offers a rather detailed and exact explanation of an idea or principle, or a set of reasons for a situation or attitude.

TASK: Create 14 essay titles using the comment key-words on this page. In each title, include Dr Johnson's statement 'When a man is tired of London he is tired of life'. After you have completed your essay titles, compare them with the examples on page 4.

EXAMPLES

1. **Compare:**

1. In the 18th Century Dr Samuel Johnson stated ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’. Compare Dr Johnson’s London with 21st Century London.
2. **Contrast:**
In the 18th Century Dr Samuel Johnson stated ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’. Contrast the positive characteristics of 18th Century London with the negative characteristics of 21st Century London.
3. **Criticise:**
Criticise the statement made by Dr Johnson ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’ in the light of subsequent developments in London.
4. **Define:**
Define what Dr Johnson meant when he said ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life.’ Refer to Johnson’s writings, other 18th century writers and Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* to explain why Dr Johnson held such a view.
5. **Analyse:**
Analyse what characteristics of life in 18th century London and of Johnson’s own personality would have lead him to write ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.
6. **Discuss:**
Dr Johnson wrote ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’. Discuss this view of London.
7. **Evaluate:**
Dr Johnson wrote: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’. Evaluate this view of London in the light of the London portrayed in Dickens’ *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.
8. **Illustrate:**
Illustrate some of the reasons for believing Dr Johnson’s view ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.
9. **Justify:**
Justify Johnson’s view ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’ by referring to the works of other 18th century writers and artists.
10. **Prove/Disprove:**
Prove that Johnson’s view of London: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’ is still tenable today.
In the light of subsequent developments, disprove Johnson’s view: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.
11. **Summarise/Outline:**
Outline some of the arguments for still believing Johnson’s affirmative view of London: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.
12. **Trace:**
Trace the development of differing views of London, starting with Johnson’s affirmative statement in the 18th Century: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’ and ending with a late twentieth century writer’s **view**.
13. **State:**
State the main reasons for disputing Johnson’s view: ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’
14. **Explain:**
Explain why a 21st century commuter to London might have a very different view of London from the 18th century writer and lexicographer, Dr Johnson, who wrote ‘When a man is tired of London he is tired of life’.