

Info skills



Understanding your assignment title

Introduction

The key to getting the best marks is being able to understand what you are being asked and then doing the research to be able to answer the assignment. It may sound simple, but never underestimate it. Interpretation of the question is very important to getting a good mark in your assignment. This guide will provide you with the key steps to understanding your assignment title.

Example assignment title:

Discuss the impact of the National Minimum Wage on the UK economy with particular reference to the effect on employment in the UK. (2000 words)

Stages of understanding your assignment title

1. Read and assess your assignment title and identify the action words.

Look at what the title is asking you to do and identify action words. In our example this would be 'Discuss'.

A list of action words and their meanings is provided below.

Action word	Definition
Analyse	To break down a topic to discuss and appraise it.
Assess	To look at the strengths/weaknesses, pros/cons, advantages/disadvantages similarities/differences of something.
Compare	To illustrate the similarities and differences between two things.
Contrast	To assess two or more opposing ideas and to focus more on the differences between them.
Critically evaluate	Evaluate a concept/issue/theory in a critical way. Make sure that you look at the idea from various viewpoints. Use different viewpoints to critique the idea.
Critique	To look specifically at the strengths and weaknesses of something.
Describe	To define something.
Discuss	Examine the topics from several angles and say what you feel are the key aspects of the debate. This is testing your ability to evaluate an argument from a variety of viewpoints to form a debate.
Evaluate	Weighing up the advantages/disadvantages or pros and cons of an argument/situation/policy/business model or whatever else you are being asked to evaluate.
Explain	To define something and to assess the reasoning behind something.

2. What it is asking you to look at?

Look closely at the assignment title and pick out exactly what the questions is asking you to look at. The words underlined in the assignment title example are the key elements of the question.

Discuss the impact of the National Minimum Wage on the UK economy with particular reference to the effect on employment in the UK. (2000 words)

You can always try reforming and some times you need to streamline down to the heart of what the question is actually asking.

So in this case the assignment is asking you to debate the economic impact of the national minimum wage on employment in the UK. The other side of this is that you may also need to look at some of the impact on unemployment as a related factor.

3. Ensure you are clear about the question and how you plan on answering it.

Make sure you are clear in your own mind what you are being asked to do and how you are going to go about answering it. Does the assignment ask you for current information? Is the assignment asking for proof/facts? In this example you may need to provide some employment/unemployment figures.

If you are unsure; this is the time to perhaps have a talk with your tutor for some further clarity. They will appreciate that you have taken the time to sit down and try and assess your assignment title already.

4. Look at other factors.

- Pay attention to the word counts.
- Know when your deadline is and ensure you plan your time effectively.

5. Begin your search.

Now that you have a clear understanding of your assignment title, proceed to search for the necessary references you will need, eg books, statistical sources, journal articles, newspapers and so on. See the section on 'Boolean searching' for information on how to combine keywords when searching for articles on online databases.

Tips:

- give your self time
- do not panic
- use quality materials provided by your library
- ask your tutor for clarification if not sure
- ask your librarian for help with finding materials.