Understanding Essay Questions

The most important job when answering an essay question is precisely that: *to answer the question*.

Most essay questions are not questions at all, but rather are instructions: "Discuss….", "Analyse….", "Consider….." In these cases, the most important job is to follow the instruction. Many are questions: "To what extent….?", "What were….?", "How influential was….?" The term "essay question" is used to refer to all essay tasks, whether they are instructions or questions.

For academic essay questions there is no single "right" answer. Often two quite different answers might be equally good because each will present a coherent argument. Take this simple question as an example:

> *Describe the five most important moments in the 2010 Football World Cup grand final between Spain and the Netherlands.*

The key to a good answer is not correctly guessing the five moments that the lecturer has decided are the most important, but rather arguing a good case for the selections that you make. The best answers will all do the following:

❑ Justify each selection;

❑ Link the five selections intelligently to present an analysis of the game as a whole; and

❑ Explain this analysis carefully and persuasively, using clear, formal English and a structure that makes logical sense to the reader.

As you can see, while the question only asks you to describe five important moments, you also need to analyse in order to show why they are the most important. While most essay questions will simply ask you to "describe" or "discuss" or "compare", the very best students will also show the connections between the different points in the essay.

The process begins with accurately interpreting the essay question.

Begin with TIF

As a very general rule, essay questions can be divided into their *topic*, their *instruction*, and their *focus* (TIF). The topic is the broad subject area of the question; the instruction tells you what, specifically, your entire essay is supposed to do; and the focus is the narrow aspect of the topic that the question asks you to address.

To take the example above, an essay question may be broken up like this:

Describe the five most important moments in the 2010 Football World Cup grand final between Spain and the Netherlands.

Topic: the 2010 world cup grand final

Instruction: describe

Focus: the five most important moments in the game

In your essay, you should *follow the instruction* and *focus on the focus*: if you do, you will automatically demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the topic. Typically, the topic will be most explicitly referred to in the introduction to give a context for the more focused discussion to come. However, a common mistake is to write generally about the topic throughout the essay without directly addressing the focus. The specific question is not clearly and explicitly answered.

Remember: each of your body paragraphs should follow the instruction and clearly address one aspect of the focus of the question.

Here are some further examples of essay questions broken down into their TIF components:

Discuss three distinctive characteristics of the New Zealand bird fauna.

T: the NZ bird fauna

I: discuss

F: three distinctive characteristics (of T)

The writer needs to concentrate on the three characteristics .A good analysis will demonstrate significant relationships among those characteristics. General knowledge of the topic will emerge naturally if the instruction is followed and the writer keeps to the focus.

Compare and contrast the painting of the High Renaissance in Venice with that in Rome.

T: High Renaissance painting

I: compare and contrast

F: Venetian painting vs. Roman painting

The writer is expected to focus on High Renaissance paintings from Venice and Rome and point out their similarities and differences. A good way to approach such an essay is to identify different aspects (in this essay, one might be, for example, use of colour) and show how the two subjects for comparison are the same and how they differ for each aspect.