

ACE Quick Guide to Understanding the Assignment Brief

1. Identify the Directive, Subject Matter, and Limiting Words

Before you start to research, plan, or write your assignment, it is important to understand what the brief is asking of you. You should begin by breaking down the task description, highlighting the **directive**, **subject matter**, and **limiting words**.

Directive Words

Tell you precisely what to do. Examples include **discuss**, **argue**, and **critically evaluate**.

Subject Matter Words

Describe **what** you should be writing about.

Limiting Words

Help to narrow the **focus** of your answer.

(University of Birmingham, 2023)

If you are unsure what the **directive word** is asking you to do, see the definitions included in this **glossary**:

Directive Word	Definition
Analyse	Examine a phenomenon in close detail and from several angles, making use of academic theory. Identify significant components and understand their relationships.
Apply	Put theory into practice.
Argue	Present a case for and against a theory, model, concept, or practice – contributing your opinion based on evidence.
Compare	Demonstrate the extent to which two or more theories, models, concepts, or practices are similar.
Contrast	Examine two or more theories, models, concepts, or practices – drawing out their differences. Explore the significance of these differences.

Critically evaluate	Consider the arguments for and against a theory, model, concept, or practice, assessing the strength of evidence on both sides. Use criteria to guide your examination of alternative theories, models, concepts, or practices, establishing which is preferable.
Define	Give the exact meaning of.
Describe	Provide a detailed account of the main components or factors.
Discuss	Explore the most important characteristics of a theory, model, concept, or practice. Offer arguments for and against its application, considering a variety of perspectives.
Evaluate	Assess the value, coherence, or usefulness of a theory, model, concept, or practice – using evidence to back up your claims.
Examine	Look at a theory, model, concept, or practice in detail. You may be expected to ‘critically evaluate’ it too!
Explain	Make it clear why or how something happens.
Identify	Name and briefly describe something.
Illustrate	Use examples to explain or justify your argument.
Interpret	Explain the meaning or significance of information you are presenting.
Justify	Provide evidence in support of your argument.
Outline	Give the most significant points, showing only the main structure.
Review	Examine the subject carefully – using evidence to explore relevant strengths and limitations.
State	Present the main features clearly and succinctly.
Summarise	Draw out the most significant points, omitting unnecessary detail and examples.
To what extent	Consider the degree to which something is true or contributes to an outcome.

(Adapted from Cottrell, 2003)

2. Examine the Brief Further

Next, examine the **additional information** included in your assignment brief, such as the marking criteria, word count, and deadline.

As you read, you may find it helpful to answer the following questions:

- What is the **genre** of your assignment? Is it a report, for example?
- What is the **word limit**?
- How will your work be assessed? What are the **marking criteria**?
- Are you expected to include specific **theories, frameworks, or models**?
- What is the **deadline**?

(De Montfort University, 2010)

3. Summarise the Task

Next, summarise the task in your own words – incorporating the additional information located in the assignment brief. This will help you to understand the task and generate initial ideas for your response. You can use **bullet points, concise sentences, or a mind map** to complete this step.

For support, you can also book an [ACE One-to-one Tutorial](#) for understanding an assignment brief.

Top Tips



As you read, **annotate the assignment brief** with relevant definitions and questions for further research.



Use a thesaurus to **generate synonyms for the subject matter and limiting words**. These, alongside your annotations, can be employed to search for resources in scholarly databases such as Google Scholar.



For additional guidance, **attend assessment support workshops** and / or your tutor's **office hours**.



If an **exemplar assignment** has been provided, evaluate the strengths and limitations of its approach – considering where and how the assessment criteria have been met.

Reference List

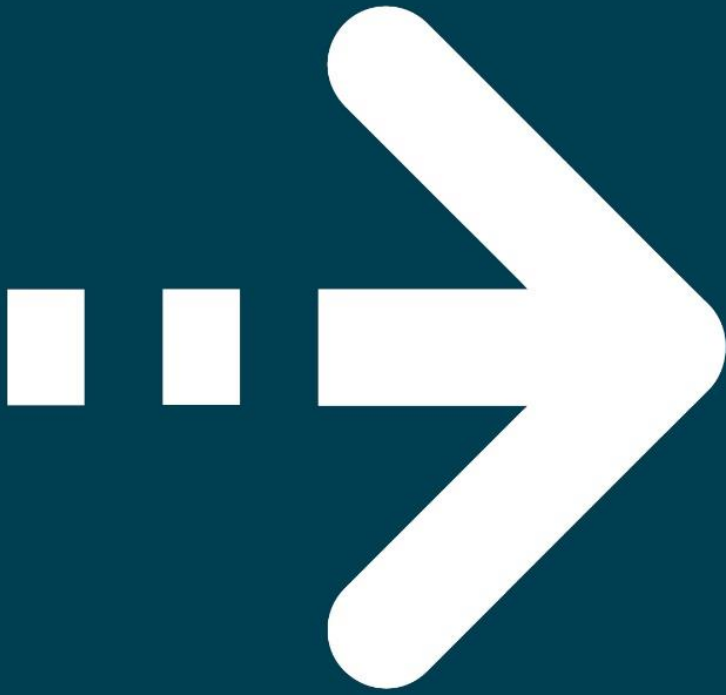
Cottrell, S. (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

De Montfort University (2010) *Understanding the Assignment Title and Getting Started*. Available at: https://library.dmu.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=32458716 (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

University of Birmingham (2023) *Understanding Your Assignment Questions*. Available at: <https://libguides.bham.ac.uk/c.php?g=679100&p=4839566> (Accessed: 9 February 2024).

Additional Resources

The University of Derby (2020) provides further guidance on understanding the question in their [Assignment Journey Podcast](#).



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