

Analysing Essay Questions

Essay questions are typically set to encourage you to form views about a chosen topic and convey these views to the reader (usually your teacher). You are not expected to know the answer to the essay question, although you may have some possibly strong views on the topic. Your task is to investigate what is known on the topic and develop a logical argument that presents a reasonable and plausible response to the question. To do this, you will need to break down what the question means.

To complete such a task, you should keep an open mind in assessing evidence from your research. The question is set with the assumption that you do not know the answer, but that you will find out an answer through reading appropriate literature. Your aim is then to show what you have read, that you understand the literature, and that you can use it to strengthen your answer. An answer to this set topic requires a discussion of views that is supported with evidence from the available literature. Remember that there is not one 'correct' answer.



Consider the essay question below.

‘Class difference is the most significant barrier to social equality in Australia’. Critically discuss.

It is not possible to simply have a pre-prepared answer in your head. Most essay questions are not set on topics we readily know anything about.

To answer this question you need to demonstrate that you can:

1. Define ‘class’
2. Identify how we measure social equality
3. Show how class impacts on social equality
4. Demonstrate your ability to critically discuss and understand the complexities of the question
5. Provide a logically structured answer that includes the following components:
 - an introduction
 - a background to the topic in general
 - an indication (signposting) of how you plan to answer the question
 - a developed and logical answer in the body of the essay
 - a conclusion that gives the best explanation of the issue and final reflections