Analysing an essay question

The academic task in writing an essay is to create an argument that answers the question. Developing a line of reasoning - that is, an essay plan - will help in this process. As your research and writing continues, do not be afraid to alter your plan. Your essay plan should:

- coherently develop your argument
- be clearly identifiable by the marker, so s/he can see how it develops your argument.

1. Understanding your task - the discipline/field

The best place to start is the course outline, available on the web, which outlines the important elements, concepts and theories of your course. You will need to demonstrate an understanding of some or all of these in your essay, so it is worth reading very closely.

Now spend some time analysing the question and identifying the components of your task. Read the question several times, very carefully. What is the question asking you to do? How many questions or tasks are involved? What are the key ideas, themes and theories that this course is designed to cover?

Consider this question from a first year International Relations course:

*What is the "world food crisis"? What are the political causes of it and what might be the political responses to it? (2000 words)*

While you are reading the following section on subject, angle and process, think about how they apply to the question above.

2. Subject/angle/process

Analysing the question in terms of subject/angle/process helps you identify the task in preparation to developing a plan.

- The subject of your essay is the broad field or topic - it is the “what” your topic is about: ask yourself, “What do I have to demonstrate knowledge about?”
- The angle of your essay is the controversy or debate that is at the heart of the subject - “why” you should examine this topic: ask yourself, “What questions do I have to answer?”
- The process is the “how” your essay is going to proceed in answering the “what” and the “why”: ask yourself, “How should I answer?” The process is the way in which you demonstrate your academic point of view, using evidence to develop your answer to the question.

If you look at the handout “What do markers want in an essay?” you’ll notice that the “subject” above corresponds
to the “focus,” the "angle" corresponds to the "wide and critical reading," and the "process" corresponds to the "argument."

In the essay question above, the subject is the “world food crisis.” In this question, the angle for International Relations is to identify what the “world food crisis” is, the political causes of it and the possible political responses to it. The process involves explaining the politics of trade and the inequalities of wealth, and some suggestion of how these might be overcome. Now you are in a position (though this will adapt and evolve) to develop an argument: ask yourself: “What do I want to persuade (with evidence) the reader to think?”

3. Make a plan

Remember, this is not the answer to this essay question: this is an example of how an answer might develop. From the lectures, tutorials and reading in your course so far, think about the political causes of the “world food crisis”:

- trade, barriers and tariffs (power relations between countries)
- over-population (the politics of migration policies)
- environmental degradation
- purchasing powers of rich v poor countries
- food distribution and the price of transportation.

Now think about possible political responses:

- trade, barriers and tariffs - power relations in free trade agreements
- over-population - increasing standards of living, power relations of health technology
- bio-fuels, environmental degradation - Kyoto Protocol?
- purchasing powers of rich v poor countries - IMF, structural adjustment procedures
- food distribution and the price of transportation - greater commitment from food surplus countries.

You now have a better idea of what to look for in your research.

4. Refine your plan

After some preliminary research, you then decide that two of your causes - trade issues and relative purchasing powers - are really both problems to do with the inequities of power between countries, so these can be addressed together. You also decide, given the limited word length, to combine over-population and environmental degradation into a section on the politics of resources. Finally, your reading uncovers an issue you knew nothing about: the influence of food aid on domestic markets.

With these changes, you now have the core of your essay plan. It is a 2,000 word essay - this means about 10-15 paragraphs - so your plan might now look like this:

(200) introduction

(200) political cause 1: the power relations of trade, barriers and tariffs

(200) potential political response: free trade agreements, greater access of less-developed nations into "first world" markets

(200) political cause 2: limited resources for population

(200) potential political response: sustainable farming, increasing standards of living, decreasing child mortality

(200) political cause 3: food aid flooding domestic economy

(200) potential political response: food aid supplied via domestic market suppliers

(200) political cause 4: food distribution and the price of transportation

(200) potential political response: greater commitment from food surplus countries
(200) conclusion

Now, you have four clearly identified issues to research thoroughly. How you might go about this research is covered in the handout "Research skills: how to start researching your essay".

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