At university you will never be asked to write down absolutely everything you know about this topic. Instead, you’re asked to interpret a question about one aspect of that topic. You must always answer the question as it’s been asked, so analysing the question is crucial to getting the essay right.

We can break the question down into several parts to help us understand what we’re being asked for.

To do this you need to know

- your subject,
- what instruction/direction you have been given,
- which aspect of the subject you’re being asked to write about, and
- the word limit, referencing style and format your lecturer wants

Let’s take a look at this using the following question. The question is: Discuss how media can influence children. Use specific examples to support your view.

**Subject:** What's the question’s topic – that is, who or what is the question about?

In this case, the subject is *the media*

**Instruction:** What does the essay want you to do? For example, does the question ask you to discuss, examine, analyse, outline, compare or anything else?

In this case, you’re asked to *discuss*

**Key concepts:** What are you being told to discuss, or examine, or analyse..?

In this case, you’re asked to discuss *how the media influences children*. You’re also asked for specific examples of how that happens.

**Additional Information:** In this box put in the word count, due date, referencing style, format instructions and whether it’s submitted through Turnitin. This becomes a helpful checklist.

The instruction word sets the direction your essay will take. This handout’s a useful reference, listing the most common instruction words used in academic essay questions and explaining what each one actually means.

For example, the instruction word ‘discuss’ has a completely different meaning to the instruction word ‘identify’. By understanding the instruction word, you get a clear idea of what your essay’s ultimately going to be.

In the case of our question on media, the instruction word is *discuss*. This means, roughly, *give all sides to an argument and then your own opinion arising from that*.

**Here’s the point**

Understanding the instruction word is crucial to understanding how to do your assignment. Everything else comes from this.