

Writing effective exam/essay questions and titles

Damian Fitzpatrick

The Chinese University of Hong
Kong

Challenges

- Teachers
 - Time consuming 'searching for answers' (only using key word in answers)
 - Expected to know how to set questions
 - Working alone
 - What is an 'ideal' answer?
- Students
 - Unfamiliar with language of titles and questions
 - Different disciplines do things in different ways (Anokye, 2008).
 - Unable to do the things that are being asked (Lea and Street, 1998)
 - Are students doing anything with knowledge?
 - Does learning actually take place?
- Purpose
 - Unclear purpose and/or focus



Overview

- Challenges
- Purpose
- Structure
- Cue/Instruction Words
- Suggestions

Purpose

- Reflect course goals
- Evaluate student learning
 - Identify the task
 - Review cue words
 - Clarify the task
 - Concrete (and challenging)
 - Define the terms
 - Other special instructions
 - Combine these steps to form a clear, precise, concise statement of task (Anokye, 2008)



Example Title 1

Outline the Marxist model of class divisions. How does the growth of the middle class affect the model?

- What is the question asking the student to do?
- What challenges might the student have with this question?

(Source: [Open University.edu](https://openuniversity.edu))



Structure

- What is the main topic of the question? What do you want students to write about? (Topic)
- What specific areas of this topic do you want the students to focus on? (Aspect)
- How do you want students to answer the question? (Instruction)
- Do you want an opinion from the student? (Value)



Structure: Example Title 1

- Topic
 - Marxist model of class divisions
- Focus/Aspect
 - Middle class affect
- Instruction
 - Outline/Describe
- Viewpoint/Opinion
 - ‘Describe how far it is true to say that...’ (Opinion)

(Source: Open University.edu)



Example Title 2

Analyse the changes in US policy
towards China during the 1970s

- Topic?
- Restriction?
- Aspect?
- Instruction?

(Source: UEFAP.com)



Example Title 2

Analyse the changes in US policy
towards China during the 1970s

- Topic
 - US policy towards China
- Restriction
 - In the 1970s
- Aspect
 - The changes
- Instruction
 - Analyse

Cue Words/Instructions

- How do you want students to answer/address the question
 - Instruction words / 'Cue words'
 - Bloom's Taxonomy – 'elicit level of thinking' (Anokye, 2008)

Example: Define, Explain, Contrast, Evaluate, Discuss

<http://www.uefap.com/writing/question/question.htm>

Question: Evaluate vs critically evaluate?



Suggestions

- Raise awareness with students
 - Analyse previous essay questions and titles
 - ‘(This) helps them engage with the terms and get to grips with what is being asked’ (Lea, N.D)
 - Explain the language used in titles
 - Better understand what they are being asked to do
 - Better prepare their reading/research
 - Link to course aims and outcomes

Resources

Analysing the language of titles

- The University of Leicester
<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/analyse-essay-titles>
- The University of Reading
<http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Essays/sta-planningessay.aspx>
- The Open University
<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/essay-and-report-writing-skills/content-section-5.2.2>

Information on instruction words in essay and exam titles

- UEFAP.com
<http://www.uefap.com/writing/question/question.htm>
- The University of Exeter
http://education.exeter.ac.uk/dll/studyskills/answering_questions.htm

Checklist on Essay titles for teachers

- University of Southern California
<http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/title>



References

- Anokye, A. D. (2008) Teaching Writing Teachers to Teach Writing 59-72 In Teaching Academic Writing (Ed. P Friedrich) Continuum: New York
- Lea, M. (N.D.) Open University, UK The Open University's Institute of Educational Technology
- Lea, M. and Street, B. (1998) Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach *Studies in Higher Education* June 98, Vol 23 Issue 2, p157