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Stage One

Interpretation of the Question

● Introduction

Often, and for the best of motives, our problems in essay writing begin the very moment we are given the question. Anxious to get on with the work and not fall behind, we skip the interpretation stage and launch straight into our research. As a result, we read sources and take notes without a clear idea of what's relevant, beyond some very general idea of the subject of the essay. Then finally, after hours of toil, tired and frustrated, and no clearer about what we're doing, we're left with a pile of irrelevant, unusable notes.

Yet, just an hour or two interpreting the question would not only have saved us this wasted time, but would have given us a clear idea of what the question is getting at and a better understanding of what the examiner is looking for in our work. And even more, it would have given us the opportunity to get our own ideas and insights involved at an early stage. Without this our work can seem routine and predictable: at best just the recycling of the ideas that dominate the subject.

So, what should you be looking for when you interpret a question? All essay questions tell you two things: the structure your essay should adopt for you to deal relevantly with all the issues it raises; and the range of abilities the examiner is expecting to see you use in answering the question.

• Interpreting the question

- 1 Saves us wasted time.
- 2 Gives us a clear idea of what the question is getting at;
- 3 and what the examiner is looking for.
- 4 Gets our own ideas involved so that our work is not so predictable and routine.

● Structure

Take the first of these: the structure. In the following chapters you will learn how to unwrap the meaning and implications of the question, so that, before you go off to do your research, you will have prepared for yourself a clear structure of the issues that the question raises, so you know what you're looking for. In many questions this will develop out of your analysis of the key concepts in the question. Most of us struggle to do this well, but the skills involved can be easily learnt. You will be shown a simple three-step technique for analysing the most difficult concepts.

Once this has been done you will be shown how to brainstorm the question. Again, this is not a time-consuming task, but it will help you to use more of your own ideas and avoid wasting time in your research. Once you've learnt to do this, you will be able to make two important things clear to yourself before you start your research: what *you* know about the issues the essay question raises, and the questions you want your sources to answer. Without this the authors of the texts you read are likely to dictate to you and you'll find it difficult to distinguish between what's relevant and what's not.

• Two things become clear:

- 1 What you know about the issues.
- 2 The questions you want your sources to answer.

● Range of abilities

Then, once you've brainstormed your ideas and know what questions you want your sources to answer, there's just one more thing you need to be sure about before you begin your research. You must be clear about the range of abilities the examiner wants to see you use. Otherwise you may find yourself tackling the essay in a way that doesn't answer the question, and noting information that is irrelevant.

1 Revealing the Structure

Obviously it's important to realise that you're not embarking on a piece of open-ended research. You're answering a particular question that raises particular sharply focused issues. You must, therefore, be rigorously selective in collecting your material in the research stage, and in planning and writing the essay. You should use only material that is relevant to answering *this* question.

There are times in the research of every essay when you find yourself collecting material that is interesting and so closely argued that you find it difficult not to take notes from all of it, particularly when it's relevant to the wider implications of the topic. But if it's not relevant to the problems raised in *this* essay, ditch it! File it away for other essays, by all means, but don't let it tempt you in this essay. Otherwise it will lose focus and the reader will fail to understand what you're doing and why.

- ▶ how to avoid irrelevance in your essay by carefully interpreting the meaning and implications of the question;
- ▶ how to reveal from the question the structure your essay should adopt;
- ▶ how to make sure your essay qualifies for the highest marks on offer.

● Analyse the key concepts

With these warnings in mind it's essential to pin down two things: how many parts there are to the question and what weight you will need to give to each part. With many questions these structural problems can be solved by analysing the key concepts used in the question. Indeed, in most, if you fail to do this, the examiners will deduct marks: they will expect to see you show that you can analyse difficult abstract concepts and allow this to influence, if not determine, the structure of the essay.

Concepts reveal:

- 1 How many parts there are to the question.
- 2 What weight you should give to each one.

For example, markers for the University of London are told to award the highest marks (70–100%) to those students who ‘note subtlety, complexity and possible disagreements, [which they] . . . will discuss’, while only average marks (40–60%) are to be awarded to the student who adopts a ‘More relaxed application’ of the question, and who ‘follows [an] obvious line . . . [and] uncritically accepts the terms of the question’.¹

Similarly, in the Department of Sociology at the University of Harvard students are told:

Papers will be graded on the basis of the completeness and clarity of your analysis and the persuasiveness of your recommendations. As always, we will be appreciative of well-organized and well-written papers.²

The same emphasis can be found at the University of Oxford, where examiners look for a good analytical ability to distinguish first class and upper second class scripts from the rest. In the marking criteria it’s only in these two grades that any mention is made of analytical ability, with those failing to display it more likely to end up with lower seconds and below. A first class script should show:

analytical and argumentative power, a good command of facts, evidence or arguments relevant to the questions, and an ability to organise the answer with clarity, insight and sensitivity.³

An upper second class script also displays these qualities, but ‘less consistently’ or ‘to a lesser degree’ than a first class script.

Questions

To give you an idea of what this means in terms of actual questions, listed below is a selection of essay questions from different departments at different universities around the world. You will see that the answer to each of them hinges upon the same ‘clarity, insight and sensitivity’ that we can bring to the analysis of the key concepts in the question.

Some of them, as you can see, incorporate the concept in an assertion or opinion, which is not always obvious. Others present it in a statement of incontrovertible fact, which you must analyse before you can evaluate it to see whether it is consistent with the facts or just a subjective opinion. Alternatively the concept could be presented in the form of a generalisation. Indeed, this is,

in fact, exactly what concepts are: they are universal classifications that we develop from our observation of individual instances of something. Concepts like 'love', 'honour' and 'beauty' are universal classifications of certain emotions, acts and desires that we experience or see others experience.

So it is important to identify the opinion, the statement or the generalization and let the examiners know that you have done so. The first thing they will look for is evidence that you have interpreted the question with 'clarity, insight and sensitivity'; that you have seen the point of it. In the following questions I have underlined the key concepts.

- Do the narrators of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* speak with the same kind of irony?
(The English Novel, University of Harvard)
- Discuss the management of health needs within a population group in the Primary Care setting.
(Nursing and Applied Clinical Studies, Canterbury Christ Church University)
- What is bribery and can it be justified as an acceptable business practice?
(Business and Administration, University of Newcastle, Australia)
- How do culture, race and ethnicity intersect in social work practice in a multicultural society?
(Social Work, University of British Columbia, Canada)
- 'Geomorphology is a branch of geology rather than of geography.' Discuss.
(Geography, University of Oxford)
- 'Mill has made as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire. "Good," he tells us, means "desirable," and you can only find out what is desirable by seeking to find out what is actually desired . . . The fact is that "desirable" does not mean "able to be desired" as "visible" means "able to be seen".' G. E. Moore. Discuss.
(Philosophy, University of Kent)
- 'Authority amounts to no more than the possession of power.' Discuss.
(Philosophy, University of Maryland)
- In the light of a number of recent high profile complaints about invasion of privacy, critically assess whether the press should continue to be self-regulating.
(Journalism, University of Newcastle, Australia)

- Is democracy always compatible with individual freedom?
(Politics, University of York)
- Are concepts of anomie and subculture still of value in the explanation of criminality?
(Sociology, University of Oxford)
- What are the assumptions of the revealed preference approach to life valuation?
(Biology, Stanford University)
- 'Free Trade leads to a Paretian Optimum.' 'Free Trade leads to unacceptable inequalities.' Discuss.
(Economics, University of Oxford)

● Key concepts

As you can see, no matter what the subject, the analysis of the important concepts is the main focus when we come to interpret questions like these. They may be couched subtly in everyday language, like 'unacceptable inequalities', 'needs', or 'bribery', or they may stand out like beacons warning us not to ignore them, like 'Paretian Optimum', and 'anomie and subculture'. So ask yourself as you read the question, 'Are there words or expressions here which different writers use in different ways?' If there are, the different ways need to be analysed. There is a concept here which is up for interpretation.

Many of them, as you can see, are non-specialist words and phrases, which we use every day without much deliberation. Historians, for example, are fond of using concepts like 'revolution' and 'crisis': seemingly inoffensive and untroubling words. But then, look at the British Industrial Revolution and you find yourself wondering, was this a revolution or just accelerated evolution? Indeed, what is a revolution and what's the difference between a revolt and a revolution? Does a revolution always involve violence? Is it all a question of the speed of change? If this is the case, the Industrial Revolution was more an evolution than a revolution, spread as it was over seventy to a hundred years. Or is it more to do with the scale of change? If this is true, then there's little doubt that it was a revolution, what with the mechanisation of labour, factory production, the growth of cities and the development of mechanised transport.

Much the same could be argued for a concept like 'bribe'. Again it appears to be inoffensive and untroubling; that is until you ask yourself, what do we really mean by the word? Whatever your answer, if you find you use the concept in more than one way, you have a structure emerging: each way in which you use it needs to be explored and its implications unwrapped.

What makes something a 'revolution'?

- 1 Is it the speed of change?
- 2 Or the scale of change?
- 3 Does it always involve violence?
- 4 What is the difference between a revolution and a revolt?

Alternatively you may be able to draw a key distinction between the concept and something very similar and this provides your structure. You may find that the way we use the word 'bribe' suggests that we draw a distinction between it and commissions, gifts, tips and incentive bonuses and that this distinction is based on our belief that one is private, the other public. It might show that we regard bribes as private and secretive: that they are used to sidestep the ethical norms of the market to gain an undeserved advantage over competitors. In contrast, commissions, gifts, tips and incentive bonuses are public: wherever we work we know about them and we all have an equal chance to benefit from them. They are incentives for working harder and more efficiently

Creating an essay structure by analysing a concept

- 1 Either from the different ways in which we use it.
- 2 Or by drawing a distinction between it and something similar.

The same analysis of concepts and arguments can be found in just about every subject. In politics there are concepts like freedom, ideology, equality, authority, power, political obligation, influence, legitimacy, democracy and many more. Do we really harbour not a single fear of ambiguity when we use such a large and important concept as freedom, or was Donovan Leitch right when he admitted in the sixties that, 'Freedom is a word I rarely use without thinking'? What do we mean by legitimacy and how does it differ from legality? And when we use the word 'democracy' do we mean direct or indirect democracy, representative or responsible, totalitarian or liberal, third world or communist?

In literature what do we mean by concepts like tragedy, comedy, irony, and satire? Indeed, it's not unusual to find universities devoting complete courses to unravelling the implications of these and others like them: concepts like class, political obligation, punishment, revolution, authority and

so on. In the following course outline the concepts of punishment and obligation, and the distinction between law and morality, are central concerns that run throughout the course. Entitled 'Moral Reasoning – Reasoning In and About the Law', it is part of the programme at the University of Harvard:

How is law related to morality? How is it distinct? Do we have an obligation to obey the law? What, if anything, justifies the imposition of legal punishment? These issues, and related issues dealing with the analysis and justification of legal practices, will be examined using the writings of philosophers, judges, and legal theorists.⁴

Take just about any course at any university and you will see the same: that many of the challenges we face are questions about concepts. For example, the Philosophy Department of the University of Southampton describes its Philosophy of Science course in the following terms:

This course examines concepts of evidence, justification, probability and truth, in relation to scientific explanation, causality, laws of nature, theory and fact; the distinctions between science and pseudo-science, as well as between science and metaphor, are among the topics explored. Examples illustrating the philosophical argument will be drawn from the histories of the physical, biological and social sciences.⁵

Most subjects have concepts like these about which we can ask, 'But what do we mean by X?' In nursing there are concepts, like 'abuse', 'care' and 'dignity', and in social work 'inequality', 'discrimination', 'race' and 'racism'. But then, in contrast, we also come across concepts about which there isn't this doubt about their core meaning, so it seems we can't question them in quite the same way: concepts like 'globalization' and 'diversification' in business; 'membranes', 'dimensions', 'strings', even 'dark matter', in physics; 'vectors' and 'chromosomes' in genetics; 'entropy' and 'negentropy' in engineering; and 'neurosis' and 'psychosis' in psychology. These have a definite core meaning about which there may be little dispute. But still, by analysing them in essay questions we reveal for ourselves not only the organisational structure for our essay, but their implications, which in many cases raise questions of emphasis and interpretation that will need to be discussed. We all know what is meant by 'globalisation', but there is considerable debate about its implications, the effects it's likely to have on us. There may be no doubt about what is meant by 'membrane theory' and 'multi-dimensional universes', but there are many questions we can ask about their implications for our understanding of the universe.

Practice exercise 1

Concepts

In your own subject list as many as you can of the key concepts which are important to your understanding of the topics you are studying and which need to be analysed carefully. It should be possible for you to list at least 10.

● Qualifying for the highest marks on offer

Syllabuses like these indicate the importance of key concepts both in the courses you're studying, and in the essays you're expected to write. By analysing them you not only give your essay a relevant structure, but, equally important, you qualify for the highest marks on offer.

If, at this stage, you don't acknowledge the significance of these concepts by analysing their implications, you will almost certainly fail to analyse them in your essay. This will indicate not only that you haven't seen the point of the question, but, more seriously, that you haven't yet developed that thoughtful, reflective ability to question some of the most important assumptions we make when we use language. It is as if you're saying to the examiner that you can see no reason why these concepts should raise any particular problem and, therefore, they deserve no special treatment.

Summary

- 1 Make sure you are rigorously selective in collecting material for your essay.
- 2 Analysing concepts is important to pin down how many parts there are to a question and what weight to give to each part.
- 3 Markers give most marks to those who demonstrate analytical ability.
- 4 Key concepts can be found in every subject.

● In the next chapter

In the next chapter we'll look at a particular concept and show how you can prise it open to reveal its implications. In so doing you'll see how you can capture more of your own ideas and insights.

● Notes

- 1 *General Marking Instructions* (London: University of London, 1987).
- 2 Peter V. Marsden, *Sociology, 25: Introduction to the Sociology of Organizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: University of Harvard, 2000).
- 3 *Greats Handbook* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2000), p. 46.
- 4 Michael Blake, *Moral Reasoning, 62: Reasoning in and about the Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: University of Harvard, 2000).
- 5 *What is Philosophy?* (Southampton: Department of Philosophy, University of Southampton, 1986), p. 16.

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