Learning Development

University of Northampton

How to understand your essay titles

When lecturers write essay titles, they usually have a very clear idea of what they want to read as a result. Essay titles follow conventional patterns which you can learn to read and understand to make sure that your essays match your lecturer's expectations.

When you see an essay title for the first time, it's a good idea to read it several times and highlight the key words and phrases.

Identify the main elements of the title:

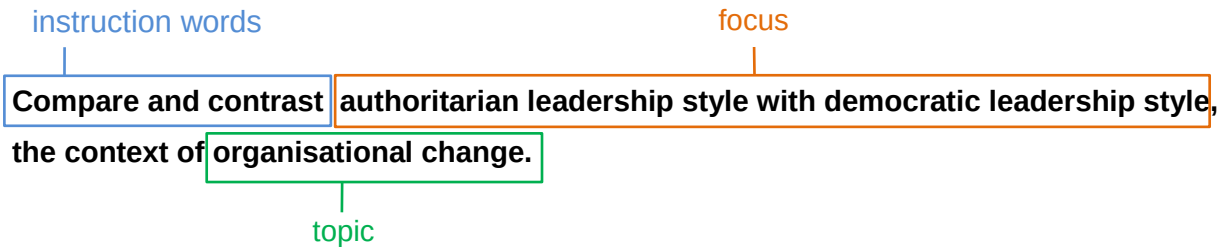
1. What is the **topic** of the essay? This is the main area that the essay is about.
2. What is the **focus** of the essay? This is the aspect of the topic that you need to write about.
3. What are the instruction words? Do you need to discuss? … analyse? … compare? …

Let's look at two examples:

- Topic: obesity
- Focus: individual responsibility
- Instruction: critically discuss

Re-phrase the title as a direct question.

- Are individuals responsible for their obesity? To what extent?



- Topic: organisational change
- Focus: authoritarian and democratic leadership styles
- Instruction: compare and contrast

Re-phrase the title as a direct question.

- When there are changes in organisations, how are the effects of authoritarian and democratic leadership styles the same? How are they different?