

MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester

The University of Manchester Library

# My Learning Essentials



# Understanding your task



@mlemanchester

[www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/understanding-task](http://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/understanding-task)

# Blackboard®

CATALYST AWARD



# Introduction: understanding your task

---

Whether you're writing an essay, answering an exam question or preparing an assessed presentation, the first thing you'll need to do is to understand what you're being asked to do.

Your work will be marked on how well you've **answered the question**, not simply on how much information you provide about the topic. This means it's vital that you ensure you've fully understood what you're required to do.

This resource outlines a **three-step technique** that you can use to **break down** your task. It'll help you to map out all the elements of the task, creating a matrix that you can use to structure your answer.

# Introduction: understanding your task

---

The three things you need to establish about your task are:

1. What are you  
being asked  
**ABOUT**



2. What are you  
being asked to  
**USE**



3. What are you  
being asked to  
**DO**



# Introduction: example

---

Throughout this resource, we'll be using this exam question as our example:

*“Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest.”*

However, the same technique can apply to any assignment task, regardless of the topic.

# Step one: what are you being asked ABOUT?

---

The first step is to establish **what the question is about**.

This may sound obvious, but it can be easy to miss elements of the task, especially in longer questions.

You will **lose marks** if you don't refer to everything that you're being asked about, so this is an important step.

# Step one: example

First, draw a table like the one on the right.

Then read through your prompt and identify all of the topics you need to include.

Finally, write each of your topics across the top of your table.

PROMPT:

*Contrast the impact of **social media** versus **newspaper reporting** on at least two recent outbreaks of **civil unrest**.*

	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>

# Step two: what are you being asked to USE?

---

The next step is to establish **what you need to use**.

Here you should identify all of the sources, theories, materials and examples that you are being asked to refer to.

Sometimes the materials you need to use will be explicitly stated in the question; other times you'll be able to choose your own sources.

# Step two: example

Returning to our example question, we need to identify the sources or examples you need to refer to.

In this case, you'd need to choose two (or more) examples of recent outbreaks of civil unrest.

Write your examples down the left side of your table.

PROMPT:

*Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on **at least two recent outbreaks** of civil unrest.*

	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>
<i>ARAB SPRING</i>			
<i>2011 UK RIOTS</i>			

# Step three: what are you being asked to DO?

---

Now you need to establish what you need to actually **do** to answer the question.

It's not enough to simply write down everything you know about the topics and sources you've identified. Remember that you're being assessed on how well you answer the question, **not** how much you know about the topic.

Your task will include an **instruction word** which tells you what to do with the information. The instruction word is the verb in your question or task; make sure you follow this instruction throughout your essay.

# Step 3: instruction words

---

Below are some examples of instruction words that are commonly used in assignment titles.

- ANALYSE** - separate and examine the parts
- COMPARE** - illustrate the similarities
- CONTRAST** - illustrate the differences
- DESCRIBE** - outline the major elements
- DISCUSS** - explore a number of points of view

- EVALUATE** - assess the merits
- EXAMINE** - outline in detail
- EXPLAIN** - outline the causes or reasons
- SUMMARISE** - provide a short account

# Step three: example

*Contrast the impact of social media versus newspaper reporting on at least two recent outbreaks of civil unrest.*

PROMPT:

Returning again to our example question...

Read it through once more and identify the instruction.

Write the instruction at the top of the table. Make sure you know what the instruction means, and keep it in mind throughout as you write your assignment.

<i>CONTRAST</i>	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>
<i>ARAB SPRING</i>			
<i>2011 UK RIOTS</i>			

# Next steps: fill in the blanks!

Once you have your question matrix, you can use it to plan what you're going to include in your answer. For each space in your matrix, make a note of what information you will include.

<i>CONTRAST</i>	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>
<i>ARAB SPRING</i>	Communication, way around censorship, planning for events, real time, Twitter and YouTube	Able to report both sides of the story, access to more information, much slower	Democratic demonstrations against current leaders, problematic, sometimes violent
<i>2011 UK RIOTS</i>	Aid in avoiding police and planning, used to prosecute after the fact, BBM, YouTube, authorities also tweeting	Analysis after the fact. Able to report on both sides of story. Continued coverage after event (after had disappeared from social media).	Triggered by police shooting of a young man who possibly had a weapon. Focused on property damage and looting. Roving groups went into city centres to protest and loot

# References

You may also want to include a section to help you keep track of your references.

<i>CONTRAST</i>	<i>SOCIAL MEDIA</i>	<i>NEWSPAPER REPORTING</i>	<i>CIVIL UNREST</i>
<i>ARAB SPRING</i>	Communication, way around censorship, planning for events, real time, Twitter and YouTube	Able to report both sides of the story, access to more information, much slower	Democratic demonstrations against current leaders, problematic, sometimes violent
<i>2011 UK RIOTS</i>	Aid in avoiding police and planning, used to prosecute after the fact, BBM, YouTube, authorities also tweeting	Analysis after the fact. Able to report on both sides of story. Continued coverage after event (after had disappeared from social media).	Triggered by police shooting of a young man who possibly had a weapon. Focused on property damage and looting. Roving groups went into city centres to protest and loot
<i>REFERENCES:</i>			

# Summary: understanding your task

---

We've now looked at the three key things you need to identify in order to fully understand your assignment task:

1. What are you being asked **ABOUT** 
2. What are you being asked to **USE** 
3. What are you being asked to **DO** 

The best way to get quicker at the process is to **practise, practise, practise!**

Look through past exam paper for examples questions to practise on, and it will soon become **second nature.**

