

## Focus on Writing – unpacking an essay topic

STEP 0: Write down your title or question:

STEP 1: Make your question into a statement (this can be a claim, a position, an assertion):

STEP 2: Reverse or negate the statement:

STEP 3: Explore variations on the statement by making it stronger or weaker, more or less certain, more or less specific. Write at least two variations of your statement here:

**STOP AND THINK: What do you believe? Which claim do you want to make?**

STEP 4: In order to make this claim, what other points or claims do you need to make?

- Make a list of these.
- Now order them as you might order paragraphs in a piece of writing.
- Does this make an essay plan? If not, what do you need to add?

### **Guidelines for use and adaptation - unpacking an essay topic**

*(Please contact Thinking Writing [thinkingwriting@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:thinkingwriting@qmul.ac.uk) with any feedback/comments if you do use or adapt these materials)*

#### **Outline and aims**

The aim of this activity is to introduce student to a way of thinking about what an assignment might be asking them to do; it aims to help them develop a sense of what possible evaluative statements or 'claims' they might make in a piece of writing.

#### **How to run this activity in class:**

To run this activity, the teacher can work through one of the examples provided with the students, discussing and explaining what the possible options are in each step, and/or can prepare and work through an example more appropriate to the subject in question (see below). In both cases, the goal is to model the critical thinking and questioning involved in developing a statement so that students can attempt it for themselves. In many ways, the start of this activity is very intense and needs and calls for intensive talk-through and discussion rather than giving out the examples; without this, it is difficult for the students to apply it to their own work.

#### **How to reproduce this activity in your subject:**

1. Choose a typical topic/question/title in your subject, ideally one that they are familiar with and one which requires them to discuss and evaluate the subject matter rather than just listing facts.
2. Using the worked model above together with the 4 steps, 'unpack' the question to reach at least two statements that students could legitimately make as a starting point for their answers.
3. Give students the edited text, ask for general impressions, and then use the questions in the original activity to guide the activity

Alternatively, choose an genuine example that is already vague, unclear, or repetitive in its use of connectors, and ask students to edit it for greater clarity; then compare and discuss resulting versions.

#### **Important to note**

We have found that the most difficult part of this activity is helping students to make interesting and relevant claims/statements that they feel they actually believe in; if students get stuck, asking them to make a firm statement about what they believe about the topic is a good starting point. It is also worth noting that this activity takes quite a bit of time and needs practice and plenty of discussion, but can be extremely effective in developing critical thinking. In step 4 there is mention of an essay plan – this is not an essay plan in the sense of 'introduction – 3-6 paragraphs – conclusion' but rather a series of points/arguments that make up a convincing case.

#### **Over to you activities**

Encourage students to work through the worksheet using a particular a topic/question/title that they are capable of writing on (i.e. something about which they have adequate knowledge) either individually or in pairs or groups, on individual or shared topics. Build in plenty of time to discuss their responses and to clarify any possible misunderstandings or mis-directions.

Example A

STEP ZERO: Write down your topic or question

**To what extent has feminism contributed to society?**

STEP ONE: Make your question into a statement/claim

**Feminism has contributed to society.**

STEP TWO: Reverse or negate the statement/claim:

**Feminism has not contributed to society.**

STEP THREE: Explore variations on the statement by making it stronger or weaker, more or less certain, more or less specific.

**Feminism has contributed to society to a great extent**

**Feminism has contributed to society only to a very small extent.**

**Feminism has contributed in some ways to some aspects of society but it has not contributed in other ways....**

Please adapt these materials to your own context

Example B

STEP ZERO: Write down your topic or question

**Describe and evaluate 1-2 theories of formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**

STEP ONE: Make your question into a statement/claim

Descriptive Claims:

- **Theory 1 describes the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**
- **Theory 2 describes the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**
- **There is a difference between the ways theory 1 and theory 2 describe the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**

Evaluative statements:

- **Theory 1 is good at describing the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**
- **Theory 2 is good at describing the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**

STEP TWO: Reverse or modify the statement/claim:

- **Theory 1 is not good at describing the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.**
- **Theory 2 is not good at describing the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships**

STEP THREE: Explore variations on the statement by making it stronger or weaker, more or less certain, more or less specific.

- **Theory 1 is good at describing *some aspects of* the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, but not good at describing others.**
- **Theory 1 is good at describing the formation of interpersonal relationships but not good at describing their maintenance.**
- **Theory 2 is better at describing some aspects of the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships than Theory 1....**

## Example C

STEP ZERO: Write down your topic or question

- **“Prisons are full of bad people” Discuss the link with prison violence.**

STEP ONE: Make your question into a statement/claim

- **Prisons are full of bad people** (first part of question)
- **Prisons (as defined above) are linked with prison violence.**
- **There is violence in prisons.**  
(second part of question)

STEP TWO (working on first part of question): Reverse:

- **Prisons are not full of bad people**

STEP THREE: Explore assumption:

- **It is possible to define ‘bad people’**

STEP THREE: Modify and question:

- **Not all people who go to prison are bad**
- **It depends what is meant by badness**
- **Prisons (as defined above) are linked with prison violence.**
- **There is violence in prisons.**

STEP ONE (Merge the two parts of the question into a single statement) Statement:

- **The reason there is violence in prisons is because there are bad people there.**

STEP TWO: Reverse

- **The reason there is violence in prisons is not because there are bad people there. There is some other reason....**

STEP THREE: Modify:

- **Part of the reason there is violence in prison is because there are ‘bad’ people there but there are other reasons as well....**