

4.1

Identifying Content and Process Words

This is about interpreting assignment questions. The fundamental issue is being able to identify and properly interpret both process and content words. The examples below give you an opportunity to try this out and see that you are getting it right.

Identify the content and process words in each of the essay questions below. In some cases you will find, as in the examples in Chapter 4, that the process words as such are implicit in the wording of the question rather than actually stated.

You can print this out to work on. People often circle content words and underline process words.

The author's interpretations are given in a separate list below the questions.

1	Does capitalism require class inequality?
2	To what extent does capitalism require class inequality?
3	Put forward the main arguments for not raising the minimum wage.
4	What arguments are put for and against alcoholism being seen as a disease?
5	Describe three theories that account for juvenile delinquency and say which you think is the most powerful.
6	In what ways do people define what 'an American' is?

7	In what ways do 'race' and 'ethnicity' relate to 'culture'?
8	How different is rural life from urban life in the UK today?
9	Why did the Soviet Union collapse?
10	Are we living in a postmodern society? Give reasons why or why not.
11	'In the UK today people pierce their bodies because they don't feel good about themselves.' Compare two theories that seek to explain body modification.

The author's opinions are below.*

1	<p>Does capitalism require class inequality? <i>Generally speaking the content words are easy. In this case they are 'capitalism' and 'class inequality'. Note that there are three concepts which will all need to be defined – 'capitalism', 'class' and 'inequality'.</i></p> <p><i>There is no actual process word – the process you have to undertake is implicit in the fact that this is a question. It's a 'discuss' kind of essay in which you have to put arguments for and against, and refer to the main theories of capitalism and class inequality.</i></p>
2	<p>To what extent does capitalism require class inequality? <i>This question contains the same content words as question 1. Again there is no explicit process word, but the question is differently phrased. 'To what extent' makes a difference to what you are supposed to do. That suggests that this is an issue for discussion, but also an issue for judgement and evaluation.</i></p>
3	<p>Put forward the main arguments for not raising the minimum wage. <i>The content words are 'argument', 'raising' and 'minimum wage'. The 'minimum wage' is clearly the central concern, but the idea of 'raising' is significant, as it will alter the impact of the wage. The process phrase is 'put forward'. That means that you have to state the arguments, and make the case. It is, however, not a discuss or evaluate question. Note also that this is a one-sided question – in other words an advocacy question.</i></p>
4	<p>What arguments are put for and against alcoholism being seen as a disease? <i>The content words are 'alcoholism', 'seen as' and 'disease'. We look at the ideas of alcoholism and disease, and we have to write about ways in which alcoholism is perceived. Again there isn't a process word from which you can instantly recognize what you need to do, but the clue is in the word 'what'. That tells us the answer is to be a description of the arguments that are put forward. There is also an element of contrast here, as you need to indicate arguments for and against.</i></p>
5	<p>Describe three theories that account for juvenile delinquency and say which you think is the most powerful. <i>The content words are 'juvenile delinquency'. The process words are 'describe' and 'think'. 'Describe' is straightforward. The 'think' bit means that you have to evaluate the arguments in terms of their explanatory strength, and arrive at a conclusion about which is most powerful or convincing.</i></p>
6	<p>In what ways do people define what 'an American' is? <i>The content phrase is 'an American'. So far so good. The process words are 'In what ways', together with 'define'. 'In what ways' is at base a descriptive question, so it is asking you to describe the different ways in which people define what 'an American' is. Thus it is implicit that you would then be expected to provide some explanation of why there are varied constructions, representations, and so on, referring to the various theories that you will have encountered in your examination of national identity.</i></p>

7	<p>In what ways do 'race' and 'ethnicity' relate to 'culture'?</p> <p><i>The content words are 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'culture'. The process phrase is 'in what ways'. As in Question 6 this is looking for an explanation. Note however that in this case you have three highly complex concepts to relate to each other. You will put a lot of effort into defining them, and you may well find that your explanatory work is at least half done when you have arrived at satisfactory definitions.</i></p>
8	<p>How different is rural life from urban life in the UK today?</p> <p><i>The content words are 'rural life' and 'urban life'. The process phrase is 'how different is'. This is asking for definitions and descriptions of the two concepts and then an account of where they are different. You may well find yourself giving an account of where they are the same in order to arrive at a better definition of where they are different.</i></p>
9	<p>Why did the Soviet Union collapse?</p> <p><i>The content words are 'Soviet Union' and 'collapse'. The process word is 'why'. This asks for explanation. You will have to look at the various explanations offered for why the Soviet Union collapsed, and give your opinion as to which is the strongest explanation. Simple.</i></p>
10	<p>Are we living in a postmodern society? Give reasons why or why not.</p> <p><i>The content words are 'postmodern society'. The process words are 'give reasons why/why not'. So you have to define what postmodern society means, compare how we live with what that means, and show how we are or are not living in one. It's explanatory.</i></p>
11	<p>'In the UK today people pierce their bodies because they don't feel good about themselves.' Compare two theories that seek to explain body modification.</p> <p><i>The content words are 'pierce their bodies', 'feel good' and 'UK today'. 'UK today' limits the scope of what you need to cover. The central content is 'pierce their bodies', for which 'feel good' is one of many possible explanations. 'How valid' is looking not just for explanation, in other words examining the various theories offered for why body piercing takes place, but also for evaluation of those various explanations.</i></p>

*What many questions mean is open to interpretation. The discussions here offer one interpretation of these questions. However, the discipline you are studying and the particular content of your course or module will impact significantly on your interpretation. Question 11 is a prime example of this. Imagine the different ways you might unpack this question, depending on whether you are studying nursing, anthropology or critical theory.