Understanding Assignment Questions:
Propositions and Assumptions

This workshop will:

− Provide information on key words in set questions
− Define propositions and assumptions and show how to identify them
− Explain how to answer questions containing propositions and assumptions

Teaching points:

1. What markers want
2. What is an assumption?
3. What is a proposition?
1. What markers want

Your tutor or marker spends time formulating questions or tasks, and writing marking criteria. That is part of their job. Your job is to answer the question/s they set. Your tutors award marks for the right answer/s, not how much you know about anything that’s vaguely to do with the subject. You may write well and argue a particular case in depth and accurately, but if it does not answer the question, your marks will be low.

A brief or question is like a code that you have to decipher. To do this, you need to unpick the question by working out the type of question/task you’ve been set and finding the key words to help you to work out what to include in your assignment. If you can define them, you can address them.

Key words are usually the ones that ask you to do something (command words), raise the main issues, or are the main subject of the sentence. It is likely you will have to define or address them demonstrating your understanding of them and the issues they raise.

“AND” is an important word:
you must write about **both** of any linked items

Key command words relating to questions and tasks that may have propositions or assumptions include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Command Word</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account for</td>
<td>You would clarify why something is as it is, or what happened in any given situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>If you see any of these command terms you are expected to identify and explain the main features of the subject under discussion, including the main theories, ideas, models, or practices underpinning the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>If applicable, you would be expected to know of and weigh up any counter-arguments and to make connections between different ideas, models, or practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>This involves a detailed scrutiny of the topic in question. This could include explaining the origins, structure, organisation, or development of the topic in question, the positive and negative features of it, and the connections between theories, ideas, models, and practices. You would also demonstrate your awareness of any flaws in particular points of view, and your knowledge of alternative viewpoints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>This involves making out a case and giving reasons to support a particular viewpoint, position, judgement, or decision against other possibilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Compare and contrast
- Distinguish between

This involves a close study of the differences between one idea, phenomena, or situation, and another. You would need to identify the structure or features of one and make comparisons with another. You may be required to make a judgement on which is more applicable or relevant for the situation in question.

Whilst not all questions will have propositions or assumption, you should look for them, identify them and deal with them.

2. What is an assumption?

A point of view that is taken for granted without the need for evidence or discussion of the issue. Your task is to doubt what the question assumes, and again ask questions to see if it is if it is true or not.

There is an assumption in the following:

‘What is the difference between a conductor and an insulator? Give experimental evidence for the descriptions that you give, and account for these descriptions using a microscopic model of the material’

Assumption: that there is a difference between a ‘conductor’ and an ‘insulator’.

What’s expected of you? To distinguish between conductors and insulators by identifying and explaining the distinguishing characteristics of each and by using research evidence to support your explanation; and reach a conclusion using a microscope model of the material.

So, you:

List and describe the different features and/or uses of conductors and insulators. Proffer explanations using the model as requested.

If we re-write the question to....

‘Are there any differences between a conductor and an insulator? If appropriate, provide comparisons and contrasts with experimental evidence for each, and account for these descriptions using a microscopic model for the material.’

...the assumption disappears.

What’s expected of you? You decide if there are any differences between a ‘conductor’ and an ‘insulator’. If yes, provide comparisons and contrasts as requested. If not, list the same features, uses and provide the evidence as requested.
Again, we will see if there are any assumptions in the following, and if so, what it is, and what is expected of you.

‘The economic prosperity of any nation is dependent on the quality of its human resources: discuss.’

Assumptions:

What’s expected of you?

Activity 1: Assumption-spotting

In pairs or groups, identify the assumptions. Discuss what would be expected of you by a marker or tutor and jot down your ideas below the questions.

Evaluate the concerns that for all the talk of a new flexible workforce the reality is somewhat more contradictory and problematic.

Assumptions:

What’s expected of you?

2. What is a proposition?

A definite point of view or statement that is presented for discussion which could be in the form of a direct statement, or it may indirectly underpin the statement in question. Your task is to interrogate the proposition by asking questions to see if it could hold true entirely, in part (under certain circumstances) or not at all.
There is a proposition in the following:

'Evaluate the impact of the internet on practices for recruitment and selection employed by firms.'

Proposition: that the internet has had an ‘impact’ on recruitment and selection.

What’s expected of you? You decide the importance of the impact of the internet, and weigh up the value (if any) of the internet against non-electronic ways of engaging with the recruitment and selection processes. Make sure you look at a number of different-sized organisations because the question includes plural ‘firms’.

The two main positions you could take are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree generally</th>
<th>Disagree generally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreeing with the proposition and presenting evidence and summarising why you agree</td>
<td>Disagreeing that there has been an ‘impact’ or that it has been very limited, and presenting evidence and discussing why you disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we re-write the question to...

'Evaluate whether the internet has had an impact or not on recruitment and selection practices employed by firms.'

...the proposition disappears.

What’s expected of you? You decide if the internet has had an impact and to what extent, again comparing and contrasting it to non-electronic ways of engaging with the recruitment and selection processes. Don’t forget to look at a number of different-sized organisations because the question includes plural ‘firms’.

Let’s decide whether there are any propositions here, and if so, what it is and what is expected of you.

'It can be said that the long-standing nature-nurture argument about the development of human behaviour still rages today. Some theorists take the position that behaviour is attributable to generic factors, while others argue that environmental factors are responsible. Explore this issue, with reference to relevant theorists and commentators.'

Proposition:
Activity 2: Proposition DIY

In pairs, choose a subject from the list below and create a question containing a proposition.

- Legal ramifications of recent ‘lethal injection’ lengthy executions
- The current conflict in Syria
- Physiotherapy treatment for lower limb amputees
- Cleaning techniques for medieval pottery
- Emerging laboratory techniques
- Dietary requirements in first-trimester pregnant women
- CRM applications of Linux
- Third sector funding generation
- Degenerative eye conditions in the over-60’s
- Support networks for those with mental health issues living in the community
- Virtual reality communication systems
- Combining real life and animation production techniques
- Models of cost analysis in the top five percent global companies
** Please note that the ‘what’s expected of you?’ sections are not intended to act as guidelines for the structure of an assignment. All the elements suggested, along with any others, would need to be integrated within a structure chosen by yourself.

**Answers**

**Assumptions**

‘The economic prosperity of any nation is dependent on the quality of its human resources: discuss.’

Assumptions: It is possible to measure the quality of human resources of a nation, AND achieving economic prosperity is a cherished goal of every nation.

What’s expected of you? Define ‘economic prosperity’, what indicators are there of it and the different ways it can be measured. Formulate an idea of the ‘quality of human resources’ and how it can be judged. Consider if and when quality of HR is the most appropriate method of measuring economic prosperity. Compare and contrast each other marker of economic prosperity to the quality of human resources.

**Activity 1:** Assumption spotting

*Evaluate the concerns that for all the talk of a new flexible workforce the reality is somewhat more contradictory and problematic.*

Assumption: That ‘reality’ is more ‘contradictory and problematic’. So your essay will need to reach some judgement or conclusion on this.

What’s expected of you? You need to define what is meant by flexible work practices; set geographical parameters for your discussion (will there be global, national, regional discussion of issues?); discuss evolution, scale, and current extent of flexible working practices today within geographical parameters selected; and discuss the perceptions and expectations of employers/employees in relation to flexible working, e.g. similarities, tensions, contradictions.

**Propositions**

‘It can be said that the long-standing nature-nurture argument about the development of human behaviour still rages today. Some theorists take the position that behaviour is attributable to generic factors, while others argue that environmental factors are responsible. Explore this issue, with reference to relevant theorists and commentators.’
Proposition: ‘It can be said’, but is it true? You would need to discuss this proposition, and in particular examine to what extent these views are over-simplified polarities, shaped by external political or other social factors, and if there has been a convergence of views on both sides.

What’s expected of you: Define terms; introduce arguments on both sides; look at the influence of other disciplines, e.g. philosophy, politics, cultural studies, on the ‘debate’, and to what extent, and in which areas, there has been a convergence of views. You would need to look, for example, at the relationship and dynamics between nature and nurture and how one can affect another.

Activity 2: Proposition DIY: there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers regarding question setting. The comments below are the concepts, ideas or theories tutors and markers would expect you to discuss.

- Legal ramifications of recent ‘lethal injection’ lengthy executions

The current issues relating to the administering of lethal injections as a method of execution constituting a potential breach of human rights.

- The current conflict in Syria

The conflict in Syria represents a failure of international peace-keeping and conflict resolution.

- Physiotherapy treatment for lower limb amputees

Physiotherapy is less effective when compared with occupational therapy when supporting the rehabilitation of lower-limb amputees.

- Cleaning techniques for medieval pottery

Pottery finds should not be subjected to thorough cleaning until analysis has been completed due to the potential for damage.

- Emerging laboratory techniques

Simulated laboratory environments offer a safe and viable alternative to traditional lab work in forensic microbiology.

- Dietary requirements in first-trimester pregnant women

The specific dietary requirements for first-trimester pregnant women and why they are required.

- Flexibility of Linux platforms regarding CRM applications for large-to-medium sized businesses.

CRM applications on a Linux platform offer greater flexibility to large-to-medium sized businesses than other platforms.

- Third sector funding generation
As more charities are providing front-line services there should be approved continuous government funding for their provision.

- Degenerative eye conditions in the over-60’s

Macular degeneration is the predominant vision problem in the over-60s, and what other problems or conditions are there and approaches to improving eyesight.

- Support networks for those with mental health issues living in the community

People with diagnosed mental health conditions need services not peer-support to live functionally as part of our communities.

- Virtual reality communication systems

Virtual reality as the future of communications technology is now largely defunct – why and what has replaced it.

- Combining real life and animation production techniques

The melding of CGI and live action footage is the future of cinematic special effects.

- Models of cost-benefit analysis in the top five percent of global companies by profit generated.

The most effective cost-benefit analysis models are found in the top five percent of global businesses, by most profit generated.

References
