Step 1

Understand your assignment

Well, it may sound obvious but it's worth repeating. **Read** your assignment instructions carefully. Misinterpreting the assignment question is one of the most common ways to lose marks and it can easily be avoided.

So:

- Read your assignment as soon as you receive it.
- Don’t put this off. The sooner you start thinking about what you need the better. It might look straightforward at first, but once you get started it may involve more work than you first thought. You may even need to learn new skills.
- Read any assessment criteria your tutor may have given you.
- Once you have your own understanding of the assignment it’s always sensible to run it past your tutor. At the very least ask about anything you don’t understand.
- Check practical issues like
  - How many words are required?
  - Does your finished assignment need to have double spacing?
  - How many sources are you required to cite?
  - What formats e.g. books, journals, websites etc. are you required to cite?

All this will be clearly explained in your module handbook. If it isn't **ASK**.

Have you been given a research question to answer?

If you have a particular question to answer, read it carefully.

Look for

- Instruction words
- Topic words
- Any other words that might restrict the topic in some way

"Discuss the attraction of TV comedy programmes and analyse the ways in which the genre is communicated through the medium"
"Analyse" is an instruction word. It is asking you to focus on the "how" and "why" of an issue or topic - in this case how television comedy programmes are communicated.

"Discuss" is another instruction. It is asking you to present a point of view and argue both sides of an issue with supporting evidence. In this case the attraction of TV comedy programmes.

**Topic words** are the words that tell you "what" you have to write about. In this case Comedy programmes, Television.

There are also obvious restrictive words - you are to concentrate on TV not radio, comedy programmes not thrillers etc.

Follow this link for more instruction words that you might find in your essay question.

**Download:** [Guide to instruction words](#)

**Taken from:**


By now you should have a clearer idea of what you have to do.

**Have you got to think up your own research question?**

Sometimes your tutor wants you to research a topic of your own choosing. This may seem quite daunting to begin with but it doesn't have to be.

Think about a topic that you have been covering in class

- Are there any particular issues that have sparked your imagination?
- Is there anything that you would like to investigate further? Remind yourself of the issues by re-reading notes. If necessary do a little preliminary research. Find an encyclopaedia or 'Companion to...' newspapers or similar publication that will provide you with a brief overview of the subject. This may raise some issues. Questions don't just come from out of the ether, but from reading around the topic.
Now turn your topic into a question.

Once you have done a bit of research you will be able to form some opinions. For instance you are studying issues in Higher Education in class and you have just finished reading the latest government report on Higher Education. You have been interested in the issues around student debt and student loans and indeed it is a theme that has cropped up before in your lectures. You consider that far from widening participation, government policy is creating distinctions between who can benefit from Higher Education and those who are barred from it. So a question might be formulating that would look at the social and economic issues around higher education. This is very broad so you might narrow it down to the following question

"What impact has the introduction of student fees had on the Government's policy to widen participation?"

As you do more reading the question may well change slightly. This is all part of the research process as you learn more your opinions and arguments may well change in the face of the evidence or you may find the topic too broad and you may have to narrow it down.

The main thing to remember is that the best research questions require thorough investigation and do not have simple answers; it should interest you and enable you to expand your knowledge.