

# Dissecting a question

## What is the question actually asking?

- If the question is multipartite, number the various parts to make sure you do not leave anything out.
- If not in parts, list as many aspects as you can by thinking around the subject, but make sure that each aspect is related to the topic. This will prevent your answer being too narrow.
- What is the keyword in the question- because that will be the focus of your argument.
- Analyse the terms of the question.

## Do not be seduced by the feature name!

If the question features a composer's name, be careful – it will not be asking about general biography, so do not write a potted history of the composer's life, however engaging that might be.

Look at the question carefully and see what aspect of the composer's work/s you are being asked to interrogate.

If the question contains the name of an opera do not rush in and write everything you know about the opera, focus on the aspect that you have been asked to investigate.

Do not write out synopses of operas – you can assume that the readers will know the story. If you are writing about an obscure opera then you could add a brief synopsis in an Appendix if necessary.

## Always write the question in full before you begin

This will help you slow down and really read the question – very often by writing it out you might suddenly see a side of the question that you hadn't seen before.

## Sketch out your preliminary ideas

These will be modified as you continue working

## Assemble your evidence

Primary and secondary sources

- Re-read these with the question in mind
- Take points which dispute your argument as well as those which affirm it.
- Make sure your notes reflect your own critical judgement-your voice needs to be heard.

## Review what you have done so far:

- Do you need to re-assess your initial position?
- Do you need to modify earlier statements?
- Are all your points directly related to the question?

Plan your argument so you present an organised piece of work with a structured flow of ideas with supporting evidence leading to a conclusion.

Remember each paragraph deals with one unit of thought.

## Example

“Does Macbeth lack the nobility of a true tragic hero?”

Do NOT launch in proving yes or no from your own initial thoughts – that is only part of the question!

First of all interrogate the terms of the question: ‘nobility’ and ‘tragic hero’ – both singly and together. Without assessing and defining these terms and their relationship your answer is built on sand.

Now go back and re-read the question again as there are still two further points to be considered before we start planning the essay:

‘True’ – this qualifies ‘tragic hero’ – it questions whether he is a true/genuine tragic hero. This requires you to explore his nature and the influence he experienced. Does he measure up to your definition?

‘Lack’ – again inviting you to explore Macbeth’s psychological make-up. Is there something inherently lacking in his personality which prevents him from behaving in a noble manner? Does he measure up to your definition?