Understanding the question

Whether it's answering a question in a written exam or for a piece of coursework, how you interpret the question is the most critical factor if you want to gain maximum marks.

Analysing the question
The following three steps will help you to interpret what the question is asking you to do:

Identify the subject
What is the question about?
What is the topic you are being asked to write about?
What is the principal issue or concept?

Identify the instruction
What are the key words that indicate the approach your answer should take?
What are the key verbs? Identify other significant words

Identify other significant words
What aspect is being asked about?
What other words alter the meaning?
What is the scope of the question? Wide-ranging or restricted in a specific way?

What am I being asked to do?
In most questions there will be a key word which guides you towards the required approach. In order to successfully answer the question you will need to highlight and interpret these key words, targeting your writing accordingly.

Common key words and their meaning:

- **Analyse**: Separate down into its component parts and show how they interrelate with each other
- **Assess**: Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes
- **Comment**: To make critical or explanatory notes/observations
- **Compare**: Point out the differences and the similarities. This question needs to be carefully organised to produce a logical answer
- **Contrast**: Point out the differences only and present the results in an orderly fashion
- **Describe**: Write down the information in the right order
- **Discuss**: Present arguments for and against the topic in question. In discussion questions you may also give your opinion
- **Evaluate**: Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes
- **Explain**: The word 'explain' means that you have to give reasons. You have to explain why rather than just define
- **Justify**: Here you will need to present a valid argument about why a specific theory or conclusion should be accepted
- **Outline**: Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and stressing structure
- **Summarise**: State the main features of an argument, omitting all that is only partially relevant
- **To what extent**: Asks you to justify the acceptance or validity of an argument stressing the need to avoid complete acceptance

Source: ‘What does the question mean’ advice sheet: download from www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills