

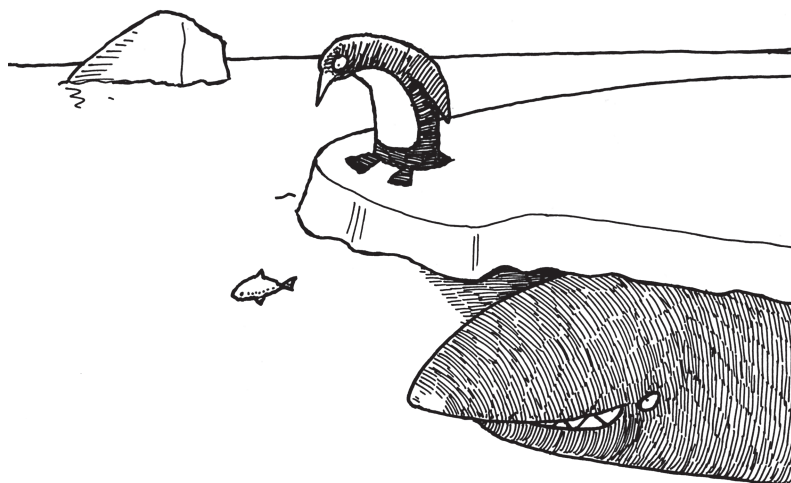
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# Examining Assumptions in Questions



All advice about how to write essays urges you to read the question, but what does *read the question* really mean? Skimming isn't enough. You need to take your time. Define the key concepts, think about how they relate to one another and root out any assumptions the question is making. 'Read the question' means read the question *critically* – that is, actively evaluate the question and come to an informed judgement about it.

Reading the question involves spending enough time working out what the question is really asking you to do, instead of leaping in with a response prematurely. I expect you know this already. I am sure you also know that you must define the main terms of the question. In my experience, university students – including very clever ones – already know what they need to do in general but don't always apply what they know to their own work. It is one thing to know these things in the

abstract but quite another to put them into practice. This chapter provides some techniques to help you to read the question critically.

## Finding an assumption lurking beneath the surface

One way to read the question critically is to consider whether the question contains any underlying assumptions: propositions that are accepted without proof, hidden in the background, and that may not be immediately obvious to the casual reader. Exposing those assumptions and examining them explicitly can help turn a so-so essay into a brilliant one. It can be an exciting intellectual exercise and an excellent way to read a question critically.

Rooting out these underlying statements starts with something called *implicature*. Implicature is a proposition that is *implied* by a question or statement but not stated explicitly. Don't be disturbed by the fancy word; implicature is all around us in everyday speech. For instance, if I were to ask you:

*Does Emma still work as reptile keeper at the zoo?*

The word *still* indicates an underlying implication. In other words, this question is based on an assumption.

**Assumption:** *Emma used to work as reptile keeper at the zoo.*

When we use the word 'still' in English, we imply that *at some point in the past* Emma did indeed work as reptile keeper at the zoo and perhaps that her service in that role has been continuous. The question at hand is whether or not she does so *now*. The answer to the question will be either 'yes' or 'no' but – additionally and entirely separately – that underlying assumption may or may not be true. Since I am using the word 'still', the chances are that we both know that assumption is correct. But if I am wrong, then it might be a good idea to correct that assumption.

**Correcting the assumption:** *You are confusing Emma with Anna. Emma is a primatologist. She has never worked with reptiles. In fact, she hates them.*

**Another way to correct the assumption:** *Emma is trainee reptile keeper, but she got the job yesterday so she hasn't been doing it long. She's only just started.*

The assumption arises as a result of a single word. If I had simply asked you (note the missing word):

*Does Emma work as reptile keeper at the zoo?*

Without the word ‘still’ in the question, there is no assumption about whether or not Emma has ever been a reptile keeper before. The focus is solely on the present.

Similarly, implicature can arise if I use the word ‘too’ or ‘also’. I could ask you:

*Is Ben also a vegetarian?*

There is a surface question here – I am asking if Ben is a vegetarian or not – but there is also an assumption (or several) underlying the question.

**Assumption:** *Somebody else (probably someone we both know) is a vegetarian.*

**Or:** *There is at least one other vegetarian.*

**Or:** *You are a vegetarian.*

These assumptions may or may not be true, and the precise nature of the assumption is usually clear from the context of utterance. If I come up to you while you’re loading your plate with tofu and ask:

*Is your brother a vegetarian too?*

Then, in addition to asking you a question about your brother, I have probably also implied that *you* are a vegetarian. Perhaps you’re not. Perhaps you are a carnivore who happens to enjoy coagulated soy milk.

Although we don’t often think about it explicitly, everyday speech is riddled with implicature. For instance, if I say ‘the problem with the cat is that it doesn’t know how to use the cat flap’, then my use of the definite article (‘the’) implies that there is *just one* problem and *one* cat and *one* cat flap. If we had several cats, I would most likely have identified it by name (*Felix*) or description (*our fattest cat*).

Typically, people converse politely and reasonably, so it is rare to spot an incorrect assumption. It might seem rude to interrupt the flow of the conversation to inform someone they have a faulty assumption; anyway, we can usually be confident that they are correct. In academic essays, however, the best stance is friendly but informed scepticism: start with an open mind and a willingness to question what you are being told, both explicitly and implicitly.

Implicatures such as the ones above often come up in essay questions too, so paying close attention to the wording of the question can help you to assess the question critically. For instance, you might be asked:

*Do presidential election debates still matter?*

Recall the implicature ‘still’ in the question: Does Emma still work as reptile keeper at the zoo? This question implies that presidential election debates *used to matter*, and it is asking you whether or not they matter *now*.

**Assumption:** *Presidential election debates used to matter.*

**In other words, the question is:** *Do presidential election debates matter now?*

Weaker answers to this question would ignore the assumption and simply list the ways in which presidential election debates do or do not ‘matter’. But the assumption underlying the question may be true or false, depending upon what is meant by ‘matter’ (Matter to whom? Matter in what way?) and the scope conditions of the argument (that is, its empirical boundaries). In this case, the conditions are temporal parameters (What period of time are we talking about? Televised presidential election debates started in 1960: how and when did they change? How far back in time does ‘now’ stretch?)

A cleverer approach would be to consider whether the assumption is true or not when responding to the question at hand. If the assumption is false, you should correct it.

**One way to correct the assumption and answer the question:**

*Presidential election debates have never mattered.*

**Another way to correct the assumption and answer the question:**

*Presidential election debates did not matter in the past, but they do matter now.*

Alternatively, it might be that the assumption is indeed true: such debates *did* used to matter.

**Affirming the assumption and answering the question in the negative:**

*Presidential election debates used to matter, but they do not matter now.*

**Affirming the assumption and answering the question in the affirmative:**

*Presidential election debates have always mattered.*

Even if you ultimately affirm the assumption underlying a question, it is still important that you seriously consider whether or not it is indeed true.

Why is it so vital to drag these assumptions out of their hiding places and address them, even if they turn out to be true? Because it forces you to slow down and really think about what the question is asking. It also allows you to practise your critical thinking skills – the essence of a brilliant essay – because you are not simply taking that assumption as given but actively evaluating it: is it true or false?



## EXERCISE 1.1

## Have a go at finding hidden assumptions

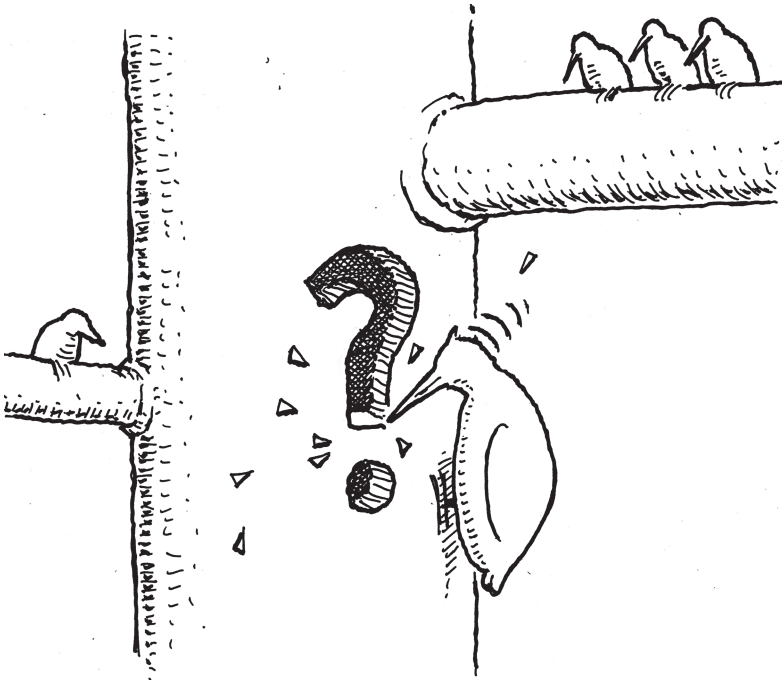
Find the assumptions underlying the following questions and write them out as full sentences. It doesn't matter if you don't understand the question! The answers are on p. 144.

- 1 Is catastrophism still a useful theory of geological change?
- 2 In his theory of *simulacra*, does Lucretius address non-visual senses too?
- 3 Do modern Chinese people continue to wear white for mourning?
- 4 'The problem with moral relativism is that it denies societal change.' Discuss.
- 5 'T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* poem can also be seen as a criticism of classicizing conventions.' Discuss.
- 6 Is the ideal of a democratic transnational public sphere realistic nowadays?
- 7 From a firm's perspective, what is the advantage of giving workers a fixed annual pay increase instead of paying them based on measures of performance?
- 8 Few philosophers today are substance dualists. Why?
- 9 What is the obstacle to adolescent girls' participating in sporting activities?
- 10 How has increased computational power revolutionized contemporary ecology?

The best place to consider the assumptions underlying an essay question is right at the start, as you unpack the terms of the question and set out the direction your essay will take. If the question does make an interesting or questionable assumption (there might not always be one, of course, and if there is, it might not be particularly interesting), then you can use it as a springboard into your argument.

A middling-grade essay might mention an underlying assumption briefly – for example, by introducing a historical quotation about the importance of presidential election debates, followed by the word 'however' and some points about the importance of such debates in the present day only. In this case, the assumption is merely mentioned in passing, relegated to the background, and dispatched without a second thought. When a question makes an interesting and questionable assumption, it is better to consider the assumption explicitly and integrate that discussion into the essay as a whole.





One note of warning: as you consider the assumptions underlying your essay questions, take care not to stray too far from the question you have been asked. Imagine that you were asked to write an essay on the following question:

*Is Malthusian theory still valid today?*

You might think the words 'still... today' indicate an assumption:

**Assumption:** *Malthusian theory was once valid (at some point in the past).*

This is a vulnerable assumption. Even in 1798, when he first laid out his ideas, Malthus's theories of population growth had detractors. It would be a good idea to evaluate this assumption explicitly. Decide before you put pen to paper whether you intend to affirm the assumption (Malthusian ideas did have merit at some point in the past) or reject it (Malthusian ideas were not valid in the past), but remember also to decide whether you will answer *the question* in the affirmative (Malthusian ideas are valid today) or negative (Malthusian ideas are invalid today).

You mustn't write your entire essay about whether Malthus's theories were valid in 1798 and neglect the question of whether they are valid in

the twenty-first century. The latter must be the crux of your argument or you won't have answered the question set. A brilliant essay tackles the assumption(s), if there are any, *and* the question. If an assumption is interesting and vulnerable, then examining it can help you answer the question too.

If Malthus's theories weren't valid in 1798, then we might think they wouldn't *ever* be valid. If we can identify time-invariant factors that lead us to reject the assumption, we might apply those same principles to help answer the question at hand: Malthusian theory cannot ever be valid. Similarly, if we affirm the assumption (Malthusian theories did once work), answering the question in the negative (Malthusian theories don't work today) becomes harder though by no means impossible. We would need to show what changed such that the theory is no longer true.

However you choose to answer the question, looking for assumptions is a great way to read a question carefully and approach it sceptically. We *Homo sapiens* are naturally good at communicating; if you are able to identify hidden assumptions in everyday speech, you are perfectly capable of doing exactly the same with an academic essay question. In the next chapter, we'll use the examining assumptions technique for an additional purpose: to highlight possible comparator classes, the set of things you are comparing in your essay. By the end of the next chapter, you'll be all set to ask the crucial questions: Of what is this a case? And compared with what?

## Chapter 1 Exercises

### Examining assumptions in questions

An implicature is a proposition that is *implied* by a question or statement but not stated explicitly. For example, 'Jane is sad too' implies 'There are at least two sad people' or 'Jane has several emotions'.

PART A: Find the implicatures in each of the following questions and statements. Underline the word or words that indicate implicature and write the implicatures as grammatical sentences.

- 1 Is John still studying geology?
- 2 Oh! Do you also like kickboxing?
- 3 Nowadays Sarah lives a quiet life.
- 4 Lin hasn't got a dance partner at the moment.
- 5 When you finally get your car going on a cold morning, the icy seats make your life miserable too.

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- 6 The problem with the youth of today is that they don't respect their elders.
- 7 I've packed the inflatable dinghy as well, just in case.
- 8 Charlotte ate the sandwich.

PART B: Find the implicatures in each of the following essay questions. Underline the word or words that indicate implicature and write the implicatures as grammatical sentences. Be careful to distinguish what is *asserted* (the surface statement, such as 'Jane is sad') from what is *assumed* (the statement that is implied but not stated directly, such as 'More than one person is sad').

- 9 Is 'the Third World' still a useful concept?
- 10 Are perceptual motor skills a type of intellectual learning as well?
- 11 In *The City of the Sun*, 'the walls are also the curtains of an extraordinary theatre and the pages of an illustrated encyclopaedia of knowledge'. Discuss.
- 12 Explain how science-fiction films came to prominence in 1950s Hollywood.
- 13 Does the Victorian aesthetic sensibility survive today?
- 14 What is the problem with Meinongianism?
- 15 Does John Locke also apply the concept of tacit consent to the ongoing evaluation of the performance of a political regime?
- 16 What explains the current bias towards states in international law?
- 17 Is it true that any standard of virtue will be contestable in a diverse modern society?
- 18 'Problem-solving policing doesn't just mean looking at incidents only.' Discuss.
- 19 'Nowadays, metals are infinitely recyclable.' Discuss.
- 20 'The problem with geothermal energy is its adverse effect upon land stability.' Discuss

PART C: For each of the implicatures you identified in Part B, say how likely these assumptions are to be true, to the best of your knowledge: Definitely true/Probably true/Probably false/Definitely false/I can't say\*.

\*If you can't say whether an assumption is true or not, try to explain why. Is it just because *you* don't know enough? Is the assumption true in some senses, false in others? Is it *impossible* to say?

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