

Understanding Your Assignment

It's a good use of your time to perform a close analysis of the wording of your assignment. Try some or all of these steps to clarify your understanding of the assignment. If you are still confused, seek help from your instructor.

1. **Start by reading your assignment instructions.** When you are finished, go back and **highlight** the
 - a) **Topic** words – those words which tell you what the assignment is about.
 - b) **Instruction** words and phrases – verbs and phrases which tell you how to go about answering the question. Double-check the meaning of the Instruction words and ensure you know how many parts the question has. Refer to the **Assignment Instruction Words and Definitions** list on pages 4-5 for frequently used Instruction words and their definitions.
 - c) **Restrictions**– those words or phrases which tell you what to include and what is outside the scope of the assignment. Ask yourself “what are the restrictions or limits on what I am supposed to do?” Ignoring restrictions will waste your time and lose marks.

Example Assignment:

It has been suggested that Canada and the United States should adopt a common currency. What are the arguments for and against this proposal? Refer to specific sectors of Canadian business and/or society which might benefit or suffer from such a development and express an overall opinion on this proposal. 2000 words plus or minus 5%.

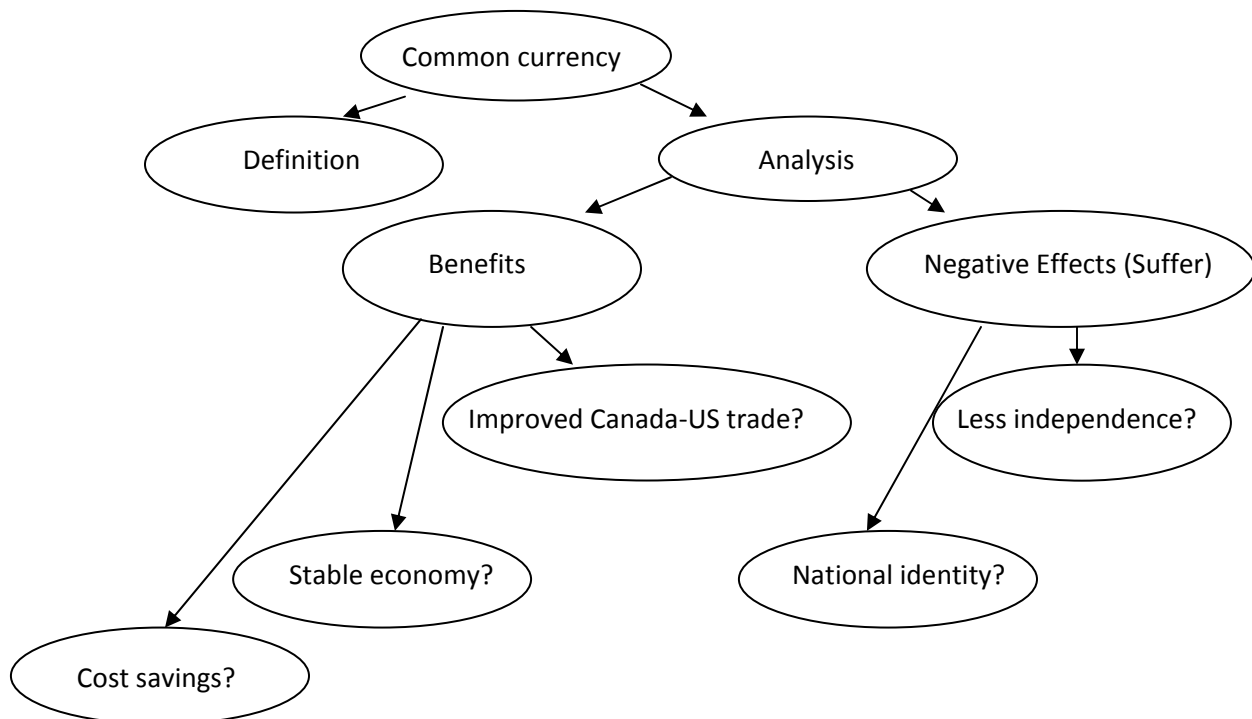
Topic words: common currency

Instruction words/phrases : What are the arguments for and against [and] express an overall opinion

Restrictions: specific sectors of Canadian business and/or society [and] benefit [and] suffer

2. **Draw a concept map based on topic words.**

This will help you come up with ideas for the assignment, and make connections between different concepts.



3. **Identify the different parts of the question**

It has been suggested that Canada and the United States should adopt a **common currency [Part 1]**. What are the arguments for [Part 2] and against [Part 3] this proposal? Refer to specific sectors of Canadian business and/or society which might benefit or suffer from such a development and express an **overall opinion on this proposal [Part 4]**.

4. **Estimate how many paragraphs you need for your assignment based on the word count instructions.** For example:

Introduction = 150 words (1 paragraph)

Body = 1700 words (12-15 paragraphs)

Conclusion = 150 words (1 paragraph)

5. **Make a grid matching paragraphs to parts of the assignment.** For example:

Paragraph 1	Introduction
Paragraph 2	Part 1: Define + analyse 'common currency'
Paragraphs 3 – 8	Part 2: Arguments against a common currency (3 arguments against supported by 3 examples of sectors / businesses that might suffer)
Paragraphs 9 – 14	Part 3: Arguments for a common currency (3 arguments for supported by 3 examples of sectors / businesses that might benefit)
Paragraphs 15 – 16	Part 4: Reasons for preferring a common currency and ways of minimizing negative effects
Paragraph 17	Conclusion

6. **Describe the purpose of the assignment in your own words.**

7. **Aside from your instructor, who is your audience? What are your readers' needs and expectations?**

Knowing your intended audience makes the process of writing easier because it simplifies the decisions you have to make. Since your intended audience will influence your choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, and even the kind of evidence you use to support your arguments, determining your readership is an important part of understanding your writing assignment.

8. **Working from your concept map, list the key course concepts you must know to complete this assignment.**

Organize your thoughts by brainstorming ideas, and grouping them. Which ideas are more relevant to the assignment topic and which can be cut out? What links are there between ideas?

9. **List the key resources and reading materials you need to complete this assignment.**

10. **Think about what counts for the instructor when s/he evaluates your assignment and consider what criteria you might use to evaluate your paper.**

Typically, when the instructor evaluates your assignment, s/he is going to be considering the knowledge you've gained and demonstrated in preparing the assignment and the way you've communicated your knowledge. If you look at the assessment criteria, knowledge may be assessed by the depth of your background research, the coverage of key issues, integration of theory, level of understanding, and originality. Your ability to communicate these ideas clearly may be assessed in terms of how well you have focused and structured your paper based on the instructions, and on conciseness, clarity and presentation.

Assignment Instruction Words and Definitions

Most assignments include instruction words in the description or question. Instruction words tell you what your assignment task is. It is important that you understand what these words mean so that you don't misinterpret a question. Here are some common task words and their definitions.

Instruction Words	Definition
Analyze / examine / explore	Break an argument, idea, subject down into parts and examine them, showing how they relate to each other
Argue	Provide reasons for and against something, using evidence to back up facts and opinions
Comment on	Identify the main issues or ideas, then express an opinion or viewpoint backed up by evidence from readings, lectures, seminars and tutorials
Compare	Demonstrate and explain how ideas, items, objects or theories, etc are similar. Explain why these similarities are important *
Contrast / differentiate / distinguish	Identify the main differences between/among two or more ideas, items, objects or theories, etc , and explain why their differences are significant*
Criticize/Critique	Discuss both the merits (positives) and faults (negatives) of a theory, statement, or article, based on academic reading and evidence, to reach a final judgment of its overall worth
Define	When you define something you show, describe or state clearly what it is and what it is like; you can also say what its limits are. Do not include details but do include what distinguishes it from other related things by giving examples, if appropriate.
Describe	Present a full and detailed account of something
Discuss	Consider all sides of an issue, providing arguments and evidence for and against, using evidence to support what you say
Evaluate / assess	Give your opinion about the importance or usefulness of something by considering its strengths and weaknesses. Use evidence to support what you say
Explain	Clearly show how and why something happens or is constructed in a particular way.
Illustrate	Make something clear and easily understood through the use of examples and evidence; the illustration may include diagrams and figures in addition to written explanations
Interpret	Show the meaning of something and explain its significance using evidence where possible.
Investigate	Research, inquire into and examine all aspects of the topic; may involve collecting your own original research data
Justify	Provide reasons why particular decisions should be made or certain conclusions drawn
Outline	Give only the main points of a theory, situation or topic in a logical order (e.g. time, importance, etc) being sure to explain the relationship between each point
Prove	Demonstrate that something is correct by providing accurate information and logical argument
Relate	Clearly show the relations or connections between theories, ideas, events, etc considering their similarities and differences, and their effect upon each other
Review	Examine something, reporting the key points and critically assessing these
State	Express fully or clearly
Summarize	Provide only the main points or information, without including examples or details
Trace	Identify and describe the stages, events or development of an idea, subject or process from the start