

1. About assignment topics:

Assignment topics come in many different forms, and also vary a lot in the amount of information they provide. When you sit down to commence work on an assignment, you need to take time to carefully read the topic and to properly understand it. This is because the first criterion your lecturers will consider in the marking of your work is whether you have in fact done what you were asked to do - that is, have you followed the instructions of the assignment, and answered the basic question (or questions) it is asking.

ACTIVITY 1: Interpreting an essay topic.

Here's a test of how well you can interpret an assignment topic. Look at the topic below (from a sociology subject) and then answer the following questions:

1. What is the required length of this assignment?
2. What type of assignment is it? An essay? A report? A literature review?
3. How many references (texts) do students need to consult for this assignment?
4. The topic is concerned with the impact of different 'forces of change' - tourism, consumerism, and labour market deregulation - on communities in the Third World. Do you need to cover all three of these forces in the assignment?
5. The topic is concerned with the impact of these forces on local communities. Is that all you need to consider in the essay?
6. Are you required just to provide information about this topic - or do you need to do more than this?

See page 5 for answers

Write an essay of 2,000 words on the following topic

Topic : Modernity and the Third World

Question: What do you think has been the main impact of tourism, consumerism or labour market deregulation on local communities in the so-called Third World? How have these communities responded to these forces of social change?

Instructions:

- You should choose to focus on tourism, consumerism or labour market deregulation
- You will need to focus on a specific locality and community
- You should consult at least eight references in preparing this assignment
- You need to present an argument; don't just give us information

2. Understanding key words and concepts in assignment topics

All assignment topics are fundamentally about a particular SUBJECT, one that will be central somehow to the unit you are studying. Thus in the following topic (seen in the previous section), this SUBJECT is forces of social change, which refers here to the forces of tourism, consumerism, and labour market deregulation.

Question: What do you think has been the main impact of tourism, consumerism or labour market deregulation on local communities in the so-called Third World? How have these communities responded to these forces of social change?

In coming to grips with the topic overall, you need to think about this SUBJECT, and to think about why it is something your lecturer has wanted you to focus on. What is its significance? Why, in the context of this unit of study, is it something you are being asked to write about?

Along with identifying and thinking about the SUBJECT of the topic, you also need to work out which aspect or THEME of this SUBJECT you need to investigate. In the case of the topic above, it is to investigate the impacts of these changes, and also the responses of local communities to these changes.

In the essay topics you are given, you will find there is a range of different THEMES that you can be asked to consider. The following are the more common analytical THEMES in university study:

Main analytical themes in university study	Related question
Definition	What is X?
Importance/significance	How important is X?
Comparison/Contrast	How is X similar to/different from Y?
Causes/Reasons	What is the cause of X? Why does X happen?
Effects/ Impacts/Consequences	What are the effects of X?
Reactions/Responses	What have been the reactions to X
Benefits/Strengths/Advantages	What is good about X?
Problems/Weaknesses/Disadvantages	What are the problems with X?
Solutions/Recommendations	What can be done to improve X?

ACTIVITY 2: An additional essay topic

Here is another essay topic – one from a media and communications subject. Read the topic carefully. Can you identify the main SUBJECT of this topic? And what are the main analytical THEMES you need to consider?

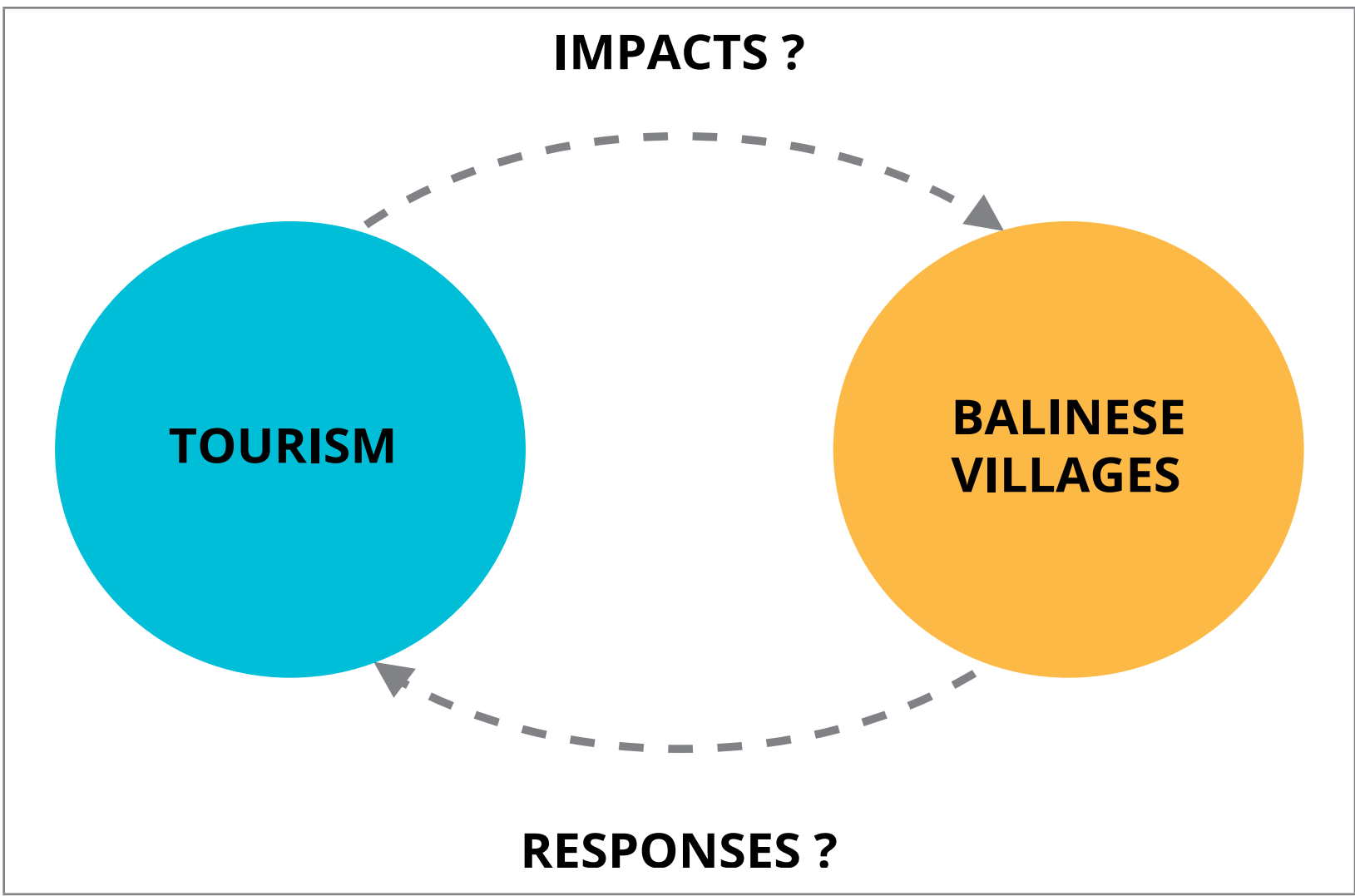
See page 5 for answers

Social media

Discuss the reasons why social media has become so attractive to young people? Has the use of this technology improved the quality of social relations, in your view?

3. Visualising the topic.

In any assignment topic, it is good to try to visualise in some way the aspect of reality that you are being asked to consider. Thus, for the Sociology *'Forces of change'* essay topic, you need to think about these different forces (ie . tourism, consumerism, and labour market deregulation) having certain impacts on local communities (what type of impact? Are they positive? Are they harmful?) And then you need to think about how these communities have responded to these forces. (What sort of response? Has it been one of trying to deal with problems that have been created? Has the community tried to resist these forces?) One student, in addressing this topic, decided they would focus on tourism as a social force, and that they would look at the impacts of tourism on the specific locality of rural Bali. Thus, in thinking about this topic, the student was able to visualise the requirements of the essay as follows:



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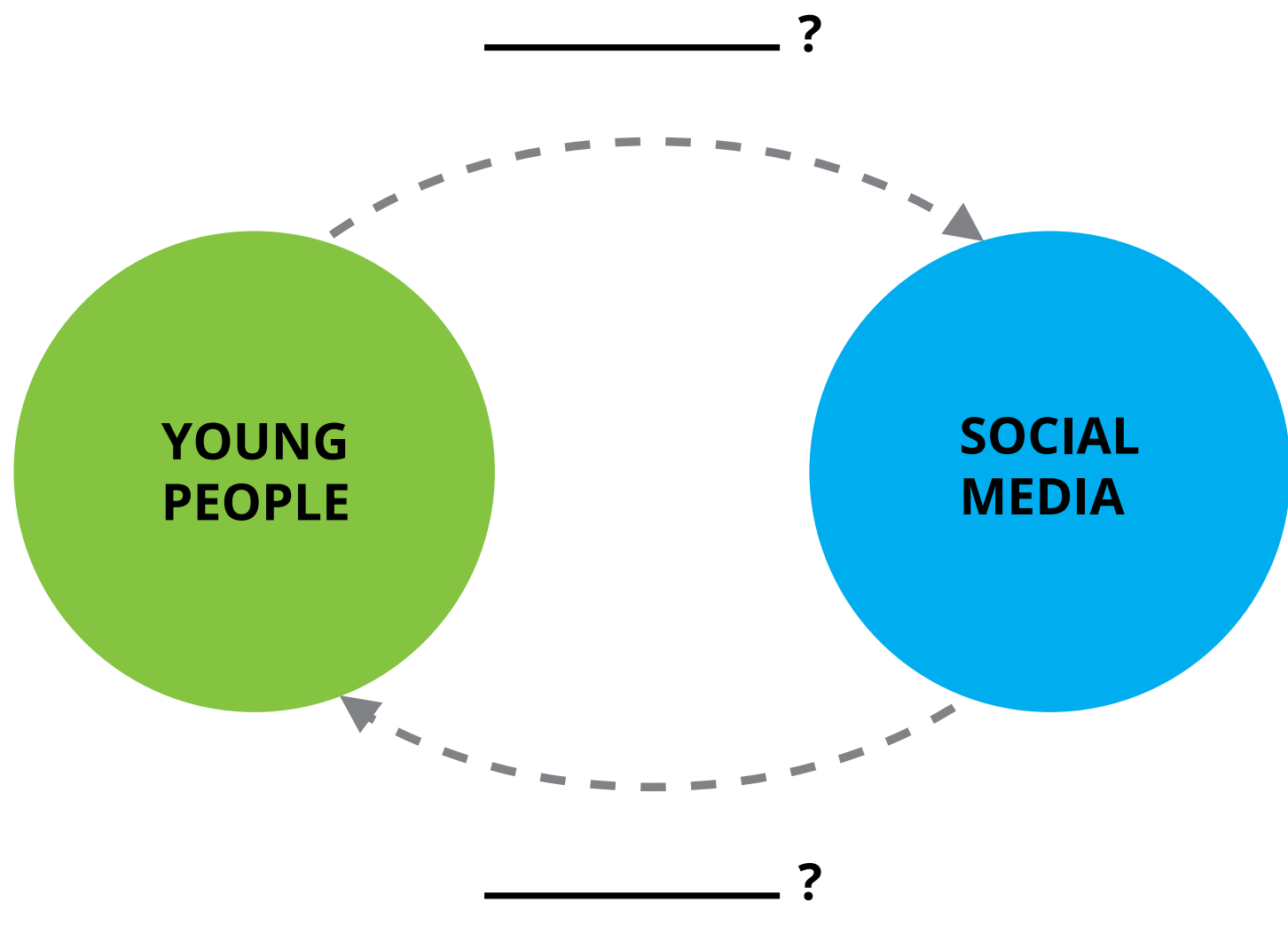
ACTIVITY 3: An additional essay topic

Have another look at the Media and Communications topic below. Read the topic carefully and see if you can fill in the content words for the arrows shown

See page 5 for answers

Social media

Discuss the reasons why social media has become so attractive to young people? Has the use of this technology improved the quality of social relations, in your view?



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It might be that you already know something about the topic. (Often, there will already have been some coverage of the subject in lectures and in course readings). Wherever possible, you should draw on any of this prior knowledge to give your essay plan some additional shape. For the Bali topic, it might be that you know, for example, that one of the impacts of tourism on local villages has been an undermining of local culture; another might be the trend for young people to leave their villages in search of jobs in the main tourist centres. On the other hand, it may be that you don't know anything about the responses of the community to these changes, so this section would be left open. Any initial thoughts you have, can go into this evolving plan:

4. Using the topic to develop a provisional essay plan

Often when students feel they have a sufficient grasp of a topic, they think the next logical step is to consult the library catalogue and start collecting resources for their assignment. BUT there are some things you can usefully do before you launch into the major task of reading for an assignment. One of these is to try to use the topic to generate a rough and simple plan for your work.

In the Sociology 'Forces for Change' topic above, we saw that there were two main parts to the essay – discussing the impacts of a 'social force' (eg. tourism) on a local community (eg Bali); and then discussing how this community has responded to these impacts. This suggests that we can think of the essay being divided into two parts. From this, we can draw up a very simple plan as follows:

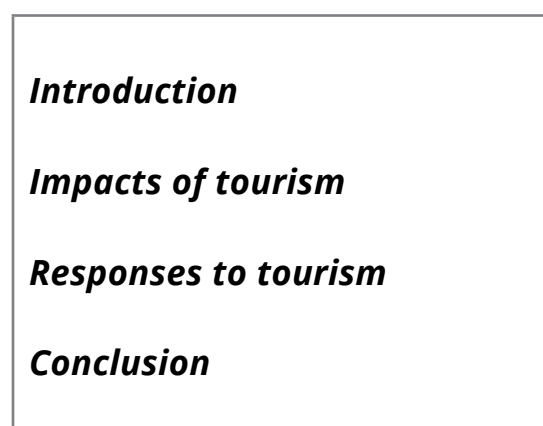


Fig. 1: A very simple essay plan

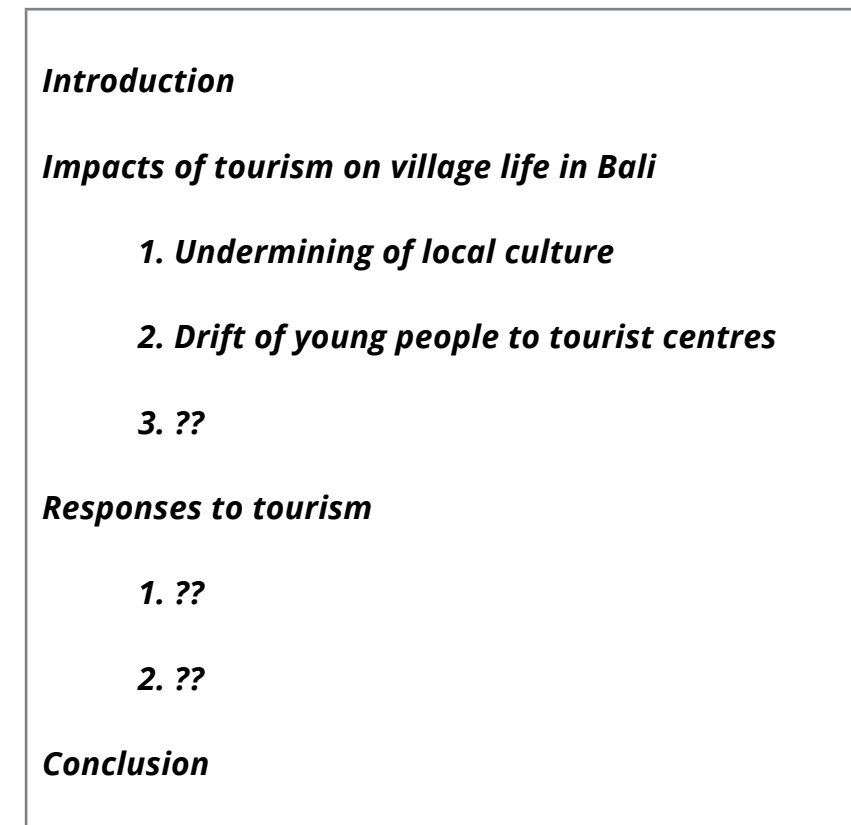


Fig. 2: An evolving essay plan

It is important to stress that this would be a "provisional" plan only ("Provisional" = temporary; for the time being; existing only until permanently replaced). As you do your reading for the assignment, you will be able to add to your plan, and in many cases modify what you initially sketched out. Gradually your plan will assume a more definite shape, and this will make it much easier to write the essay.

It may be that your initial planning ends up not being relevant at all. This is not a problem. The advantage of drawing up a provisional plan is that it provides you with a focus for your initial reading (and thinking) on the topic, and will keep you from straying into areas that may not be relevant to the overall assignment.

ACTIVITY 4: Sketching out a plan for your essay

Have a look at the second essay topic – on social media. Are you able to sketch out a provisional plan for this topic?

See page 6 for answers

5. Showing your understanding of a topic in an essay introduction

After you have done sufficient reading, and planning for the topic, you will be ready to launch into the writing of the essay.

A good way to anchor your essay to the topic is to have a go at drafting the introduction. (Note that some students find introductions difficult – and hold off writing them right until the end. That's OK, although in our experience it is a good idea to have a go early on, even if later you decide to change what you've written). One thing you should always do before attempting an introduction is to return to the topic, to be sure you are on track with the basic question(s) that has been posed.

Essay introductions typically include a number of elements: you should introduce the broad SUBJECT area, and also show the reader (the lecturer) what the basic question or THEME is you are addressing. Another important element is to introduce the ARGUMENT you wish to present (ie. what your view is on the topic).

Some students like to draw on the following sequence when composing an introduction:

1. Introduce the SUBJECT area
2. Introduce the question or THEME of the essay
3. Introduce the essay STRUCTURE
4. Introduce the essay's ARGUMENT

A well-constructed introduction – one that clearly demonstrates your understanding of the topic – will give your reader (usually the lecturer) a good first impression, and leave them confident that your essay is going to be relevant to the task that has been set.

ACTIVITY 5: A sample introduction

Look at the following sample introduction, written for the Bali essay. Can you recognise each of the four elements in the sequence above?

See page 6 for answers

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been a recent phenomenon in Bali. Wall (1998) notes that it was not until the 1980s that tourist numbers rose significantly to the point that tourism is now regarded as "the prime sector of the Balinese economy" (p. 128). The arrival of so many foreign visitors, numbering more than 1 million in 2006 (Statistics Indonesia, 2006), has had an undoubted impact on many aspects of village life on this small island. This essay will explore what some of these impacts have been, and also consider ways that communities have responded to these changes. It will be argued that whilst there have been a range of impacts, the most serious of these has been the drift of young people away from villages to the tourist centres in the south of the island. This has put severe strain on these villages to the point that some have become socially and culturally unviable.

6. A note on assignment wordings

In general, assignment topics (or parts of topics) are worded in one of two ways - as instructions or as questions, as in the following examples:

Discuss the reasons social media has become so attractive to young people
INSTRUCTION

Has the use of this technology improved the quality of social relations?
QUESTION

For topics that are worded as instructions, a range of instruction words (verbs) are typically used, such as DISCUSS above. Others are: ANALYSE, COMPARE (AND CONTRAST), EXPLAIN, OUTLINE, DEFINE, EVALUATE, ASSESS, DISTINGUISH, and so on. You will often find that some of these terms are accompanied by the term CRITICAL, as in CRITICALLY ANALYSE, CRITICALLY EVALUATE etc.

All these terms have different meanings, and it can be difficult sometimes to work out what exactly is required when the topic is constructed in this way. The following are more examples of instruction-based topics:

1. *OUTLINE the causes and consequences of inflation. CRITICALLY ANALYSE the possible policy solutions available to governments to fight inflation (Economics)*
2. *COMPARE and EVALUATE the policies of 'multiculturalism' in two countries (Sociology)*
3. *CRITICALLY ASSESS Maslov's 'needs hierarchy'*

When writing an essay, it is generally more straightforward to deal with a question than an instruction. This is because if you are working with a question, you know that you need to provide an answer to it – and it is your answer to this question (or questions) that will in effect be the ARGUMENT that you present.

The good news is that instruction-based topics can often be converted into simpler question-based ones. This is demonstrated in the following, taken from the examples above:

Instruction-based topics	Possible rewording as questions
1. OUTLINE the causes and consequences of inflation. CRITICALLY ANALYSE the possible policy solutions available to governments to fight inflation (Economics)	What is inflation? Why does inflation occur? What are the effects of inflation? What can governments do to prevent inflation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different policies they can adopt?
2. COMPARE and EVALUATE the policies of 'multiculturalism' in two countries (Sociology)	Looking at the multicultural policies of two countries, what are these policies? In what ways are they similar? In what ways different? Which of these policies is the more effective and why?
3. CRITICALLY ASSESS Maslov's 'needs hierarchy' theory as a way in understanding motivation in modern organisations? (Management)	What is Maslov's 'needs hierarchy' theory? How does it help us to understand motivation in modern organisations? What are its limitations?

Instruction-based topics	Possible rewording as questions
1. DISCUSS some of the changes that have occurred in the modern family in the last 50 year and CONSIDER the main underlying reasons for these changes (Sociology)	
2. CRITICALLY EVALUATE Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis as a way of understanding contemporary global politics (International Studies)	

7. A final note on interpreting assignment topics

Sometimes you will find topics that are difficult to interpret – and where you are left wondering what it is exactly you need to do, or what the basic underlying question is.

In these situations, it is best not to take a punt, and hope you are heading in the right direction.

If you are in doubt, always consult your lecturer or tutor to get his/her advice, and to find out if you are on track. You can also consult the staff of the university's Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) centre, who can help you with a range of study and writing issues.

Follow this link swi.nu/assessment

ACTIVITY 6: Essay topics as questions

Have a look at the following additional instruction-based topics. See if you can reword them as a series of questions.

[See page 6 for answers](#)

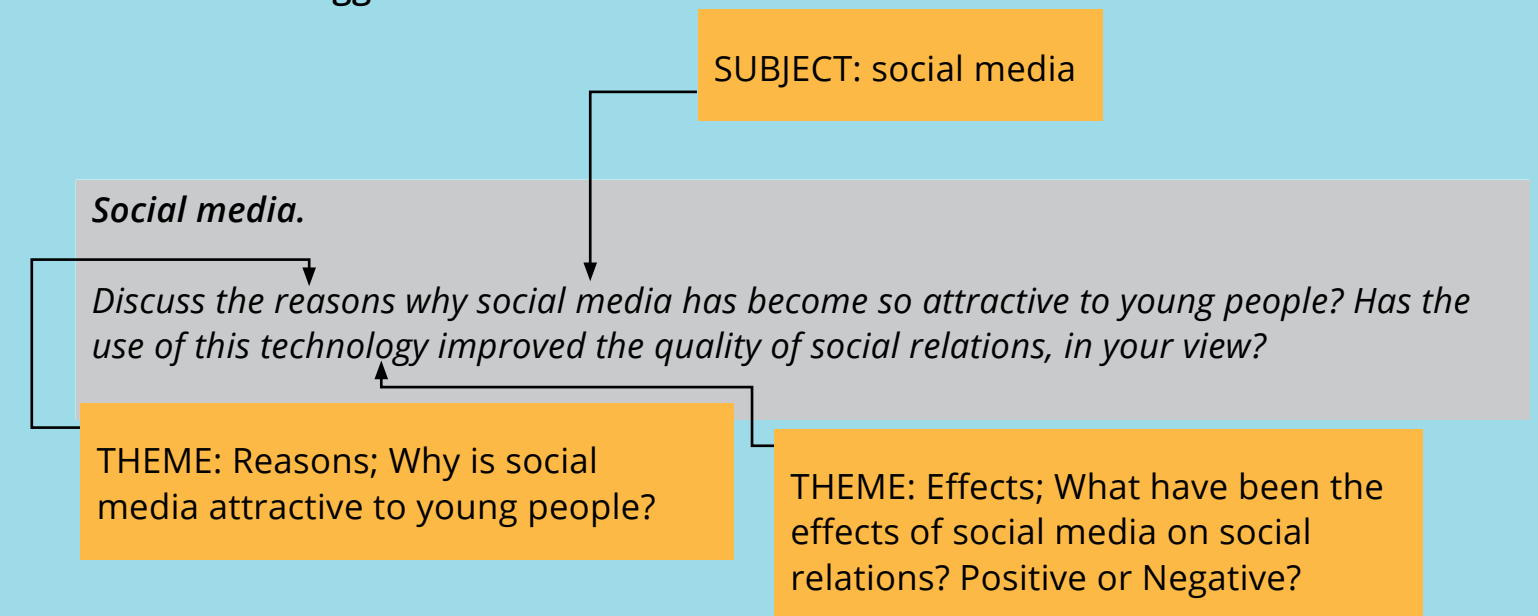
8. Activity answers

ACTIVITY 1: Suggested answers

1. 2,000 words. Bear in mind that you don't need to write exactly 2,000 words. The rule of thumb with assignments is that you can come in either side of the length by about 10%.
2. This is an essay. Usually assignments will stipulate what type of assignment (or genre) you need to produce. It's important to be aware of the different formats of these genres (Link: See writing at university).
3. At least 8. Often assignments will not state exactly the number of references you need to consult. Bear in mind that you will always be rewarded for the quantity (and also quality) of the reading you do for an assignment. An essay, for example, that was based on only one or two readings would not normally be acceptable.
4. NO, note that the assignment asks you to focus on just one of these forces ("You should choose to focus on tourism, consumerism OR labour market deregulation"). It would be a serious mistake to cover all three forces – and you would invariably be marked down if you did this.
5. NO, this is just one part of the topic. You also need to consider how these communities have responded to these forces.
6. You also need to provide an 'argument'. This means that you need to present your own point of view on the topic (Note that the topic begins: "What do YOU think ..."). In this case it will be deciding which of the impacts you discuss is the MAIN one. In most essays you do you will need to provide your own argument.

[Return to Activity 1.](#)

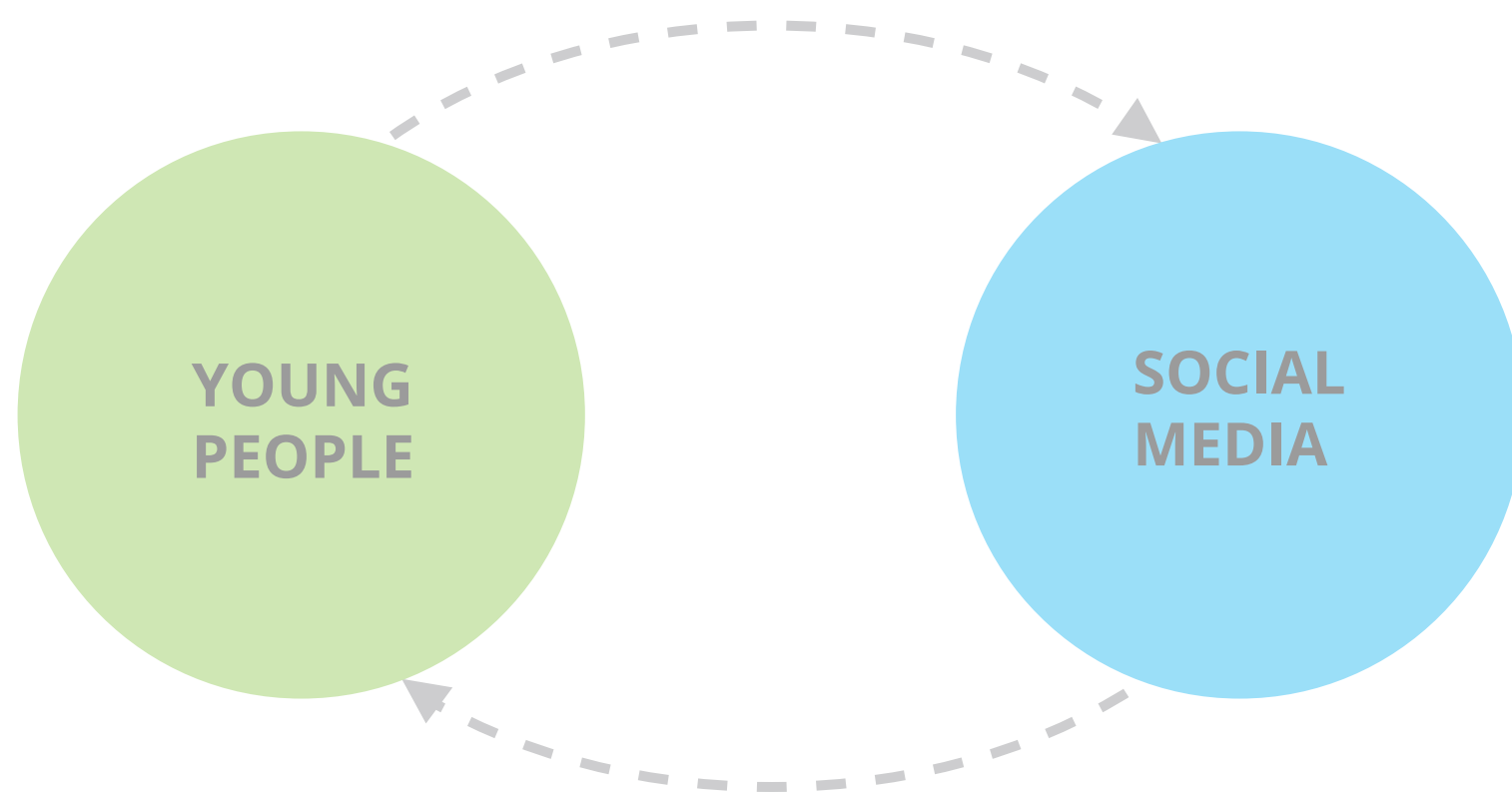
ACTIVITY 2: Suggested answers



[Return to Activity 2.](#)

ACTIVITY 3: Suggested answers

Reasons for attractiveness?



Effects on social relations?

[Return to Activity 3.](#)

ACTIVITY 4: Suggested answers

The following would be a possible provisional plan for the social media essay topic. Note that it might be a good move to divide the effects on social relations into positive and negative ones. This would give you a basis for answering the key question – whether you think overall, social media has led to an improvement in social relations.

Introduction

Reasons for social media's attractiveness

- 1. Ease of use*
- 2. The need for connection*
- 3. ??*

Effects on social relations

- 1. Positive effects*
- 2. Negative effects*

Conclusion

[Return to Activity 4.](#)

ACTIVITY 5: Suggested answers

1. These first two sentences introduce the topic area i.e. Tourism in Bali

2. This sentence introduces the main issue/ question i.e. The impact of tourism on village communities.

SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been a recent phenomenon in Bali. Wall (1998) notes that it was not until the 1980s that tourist numbers rose significantly to the point that tourism is now regarded as “the prime sector of the Balinese economy” (p. 128). The arrival of so many foreign visitors, numbering more than 1 million in 2006 (Statistics Indonesia, 2006), has had an undoubted impact on many aspects of village life on this small island. This essay will explore what some of these impacts have been, and also consider ways that communities have responded to these changes. It will be argued that whilst there have been a range of impacts, the most serious of these has been the drift of young people away from villages to the tourist centres in the south of the island. This has put severe strain on these villages to the point that some have become socially and culturally unviable.

4. The remaining sentences introduce the essay’s argument i.e. What the student thinks the main impact has been.

3. This sentence introduces the essay structure i.e. that the essay will cover the issue of these impacts and the responses to them.

[Return to Activity 5.](#)

ACTIVITY 6: Suggested answers

Instruction-based topics

1. DISCUSS some of the changes that have occurred in the modern family in the last 50 year and CONSIDER the main underlying reasons for these changes (Sociology)

2. CRITICALLY EVALUATE Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis as a way of understanding contemporary global politics (International Studies)

Possible rewording as questions

How has the modern family changed over the last 50 years? What have been the main underlying reasons for these changes?

What is Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis? How does it help us to understand contemporary global politics? What are its limitations?

[Return to Activity 6.](#)