When approaching any written assessment, it is important to be clear about the assessment task and the purpose of the writing. This article outlines a scheme for ensuring all relevant aspects of an assessment task are addressed. The scheme unpacks the question by identifying so-called actions, elements and operationalizations.

Written Assessments

Written assessments form part of the appraisal process of many vocational and non-vocational courses. In broad terms, most courses will aim to educate students to think clearly and to judge objectively. Written assessments enable the student and educators to evaluate how well course objectives are being achieved.

When approaching any written assessment, it is important to be clear about the assessment task and the purpose of the writing. All too often, students research, write up and submit a written report based on what they assume the task to be instead of addressing the actual assignment requirements.

One tactic that I employ to ensure that I highlight all relevant aspects of an assessment task is to **unpack the question**. To assist me, I use what I call the **A-E-O** scheme.

The Scheme

The **A-E-O** scheme refers to Actions – Elements – Operationalizations:

Actions - Elements - Operationalizatons (AEO)

I will use the following written assessment question (drawn from the Distance Education course in Speech and Language Difficulties at University of Birmingham, UK) as a model to illustrate how this scheme can be applied.

> "Traditionally, after a child has been identified as having a speech and language difficulty, they often received specialist support outside the classroom."
>
> Drawing on your own professional experience, discuss some of the reasons given by teachers and therapists for withdrawing a child from the classroom for assessment and therapy or special teaching as opposed to doing this in the classroom.
>
> Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of withdrawing a child in this way, and suggest alternative procedures.

ACTIONS

A useful starting point is to highlight all the **actions** (action words) that you, as the author, will have to carry out. I came up with the following.

> "Traditionally, after a child has been identified as having a speech and language difficulty, they often received specialist support outside the classroom."
>
> Drawing on your own professional experience, discuss some of the reasons given by teachers and therapists for withdrawing a child from the classroom for assessment and therapy or special teaching as opposed to doing this in the classroom.
>
> Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of withdrawing a child in this way, and suggest alternative procedures.

So, I now realize that I am required to <u>discuss</u> and <u>suggest</u>, and to set my discussions and suggestions within the context of my own <u>professional experience</u>. Your tutor will be looking to see that you have fulfilled these three requirements when marking this assessment.

ELEMENTS

Next, I highlight all the relevant **elements** of the assessment question, i.e. those parts that are minimally sufficient in order to demonstrate that one has fully addressed the question, e.g.

> "Traditionally, after a child has been identified as having a speech and language difficulty, they often received specialist support outside the classroom."
>
> Drawing on your own professional experience, discuss some of the reasons given by teachers and therapists for withdrawing a child from the classroom for assessment and therapy or special teaching as opposed to doing this in the classroom.
>
> Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of withdrawing a child in this way, and suggest alternative procedures.

So, there appears to be at least three parts to this assessment:

1. **reasons for withdrawal** – as reported by (1) teachers, and (2) therapists
2. the **advantages and disadvantages** of the reasons that teachers and therapists give for withdrawal
3. an indication of **alternative procedures**

Again, your tutor will be looking to see that, as a minimum, these three areas have been addressed. Note also that there are two parts to number (1) above, i.e. reasons provided by teachers, and reasons provided by therapists. Both parts must be addressed.

OPERATIONALISATIONS

[If you are uncertain what this subheading refers to see Operationalizing Variables.]

In brief, to operationalize a variable or a concept means to define a variable or concept so that it can be measured or expressed quantitatively or qualitatively. Choosing which variables/concepts to explicitly define in an assessment is always a judgment call. However, it is usually necessary to give the reader some idea of how you are choosing to define a concept/variable. Concepts/variables can, of course, be defined in many ways. For the assessment question we've been considering here, I highlighted the following concepts/variables that I thought would benefit from definition.

> "Traditionally, after a child has been identified as having a ==speech and language difficulty==, they often received ==specialist support== outside the classroom."
>
> Drawing on your own professional experience, discuss some of the reasons given by teachers and ==therapists== for withdrawing a child from the classroom for assessment and therapy or special teaching as opposed to doing this in the classroom.
>
> Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of withdrawing a child in this way, and suggest alternative procedures.

In sum, therefore, there appear to be possibly three concepts that would benefit from a brief definition:

1. speech and language difficulty
2. specialist support
3. therapists

You do not necessarily have to write at length when operationalizing concepts/variables. It may be possible to make your interpretation explicit simply by the way you structure your writing (e.g. use of headings and sub-headings). Often, however, a brief sentence or two can help. For example, in concept (1) above – *speech and language difficulty* – it is the word *difficulty* which I think causes the difficulty in interpretation. Is a difficulty the same as an impairment? Is a difficulty the same as a disorder? And so on. A sentence something like the following should help to minimize ambiguity and clarify your interpretation and how you intend to approach this:

> "For the purposes of this paper, I consider speech and language difficulty to include both development delays and patterns of disordered development which impair a child's ability to engage in conversation, irrespective of cause."

The important point, then, is to highlight the concepts/variables that need attention and not to assume that the reader will adopt the same definitions as you – so make these explicit. Of course, any reader may choose to disagree with the way in which you have operationalized your variables but he or she must judge your arguments and conclusions according to how you have defined your terms.

Now, in my experience, most students who attempted this assessment question made the assumption that 'therapists' referred to just speech and language therapists. Whilst I can accept that this is a reasonable assumption (given that the training course from which this example assessment question is taken focused a good deal on the working relationships between teachers and speech and language therapists), the question does not actually specify therapists as being only speech and language therapists. Would you wish to discuss withdrawal by other therapists, such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and so on? If not, then perhaps you should consider informing the reader that, for the purposes of this particular assessment, you are interpreting 'therapists' to mean just speech and language therapists. Again, it is all about being specific.

Unfortunately, there are no rigid rules about operationalizing your variables/concepts. I can only recommend that you always give this consideration when beginning a written assessment. With practice, and reading works by more experienced practitioners and researchers, it should become easier. **Remember…**

Actions - Elements - Operationalizatons (AEO)