

ENGLE205F

Module 5

**Preparing for the IELTS
Academic Writing test**

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Introduction

In *Module 1*, you reviewed the nature of academic English and revised some of the important skills involved in producing accurate, coherent and effective academic writing. Your knowledge of academic English is put into practice in this module in a wide variety of activities closely related to the questions you are likely to face in the Academic Writing part of the IELTS test.

The IELTS Academic Writing test comprises two tasks. You are given one hour to complete both tasks, and are advised to spend 20 minutes on Task 1 and 40 minutes on Task 2.

In Task 1, you have to identify the main features of data presented in graphs, charts and tables and transfer the information into well-structured paragraphs. In Task 2, you need to use formal academic English to respond to a question which asks you to present an argument and express an opinion on a topic.

The first section of the module deals with Task 1 and covers in detail the specialized skills involved in turning information presented in graphical form into words. We discuss the importance of careful and accurate interpretation of data presented graphically; and we emphasize the skills of identifying trends and exceptions, and presenting them in a neutral tone which avoids commentary. Throughout, we provide many opportunities for you to apply your knowledge and skill to test tasks.

In the second section of the module, we move on to tasks which are typical of Task 2 where you have to produce a piece of argumentative prose. Here we discuss the importance of analysing questions carefully. We look in depth at the planning process. We discuss the format and organization of answers, and present examples of outline essay plans which could serve as templates. Drawing on the content of *Module 1*, we review the appropriate style for academic writing and look at cohesion at the paragraph level. Integrated throughout are ample opportunities for you to try out your knowledge and skill in essay tasks similar to those that are likely to arise in the test itself.

Task 1: Describing graphical information

In this section, we focus on writing about information contained in a wide range of graphs, charts and tables. In Task 1, the instruction will ask you to look at a graph, chart or table and summarize the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and making comparisons where relevant. You are allocated *20 minutes* for this task and told to write at least *150 words*.

Analysing information presented graphically

The first thing you need to know about a graph, chart or table is what sort of information it contains. What is its *purpose*? When we describe the information, we need to talk about *overall trends* and *illustrate these trends by giving some specific data*. Just mechanically going through the years (or whatever units are used) one by one and describing what is shown (in other words merely repeating the information) is *not* a good technique.

Some key points to note first

In interpreting graphical information, we should start by:

- reading any headings;
- checking what the vertical and horizontal axes, columns or rows represent;
- looking at the key; and
- noting the units or time periods.

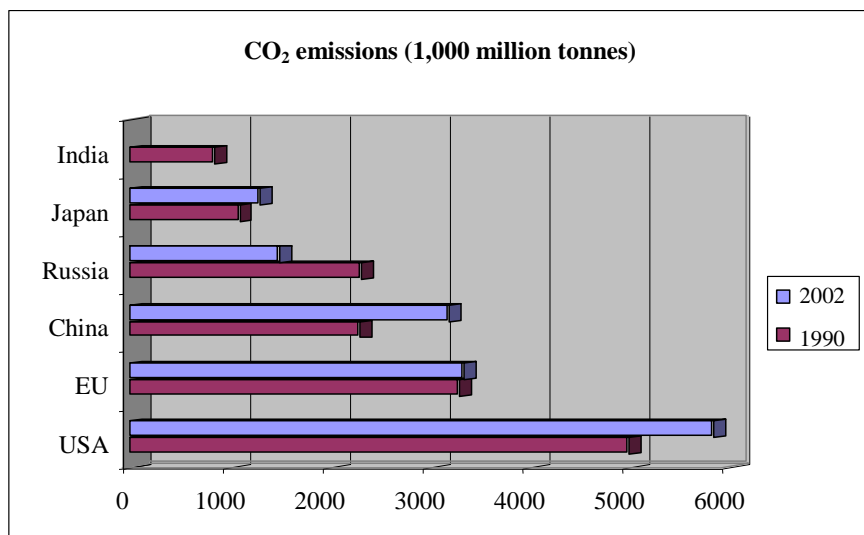
Then we move on by considering questions such as the following:

- 1 What is it about, *in general*? (That is, try to complete the sentence ‘This graph/table/chart represents/shows/illustrates ...’.)
- 2 What main *trend(s)* does it show?
- 3 Are there any *exceptions* to this trend (these trends)?
- 4 Are any comparisons made?
- 5 What time period(s) does it cover?

Let’s look at an example.

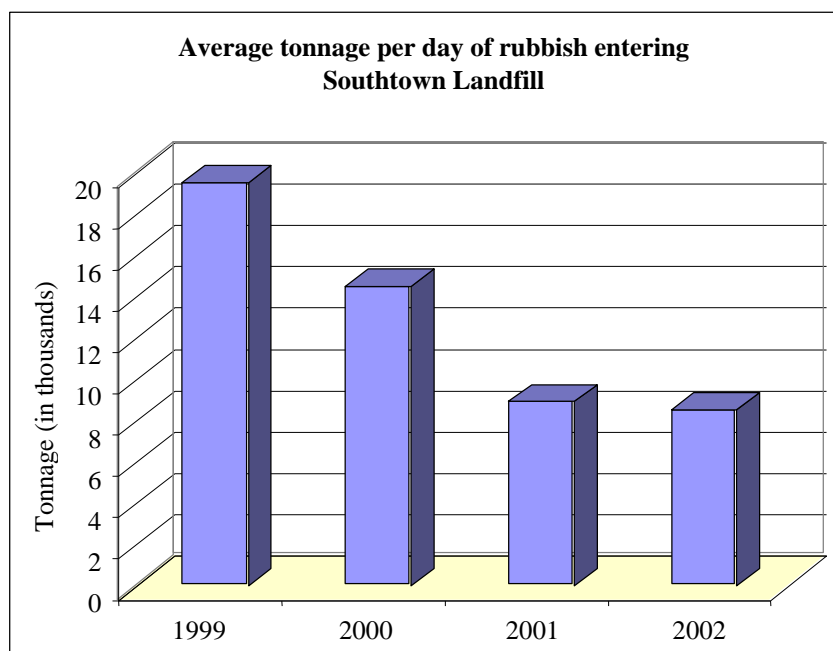
Activity 5.1

Think about how to interpret the bar chart below by answering the five questions above in writing. Write in complete formal sentences. Use the present tense in an introductory overview when describing the graph itself, then revert to the past or present perfect when discussing past events and trends.



When interpreting graphical information, it is important to spend time on such simple questions as those above, as it is very easy to misinterpret information if you are not used to working with graphs or charts.

Let's look at another example. The graph is not complex, but one can imagine careless readers misinterpreting it.



A casual glance might suggest that, since each column is above a year, the columns represent the amount of landfill in that year – but, of course, the caption tells us that the columns represent *daily tonnage*. This, then, is presumably an average figure. The vertical axis represents weight and the actual numbers represent thousands. The graph shows that between 1999 and 2000 there was a drop in the daily tonnage of approximately 5,000 tonnes or around 25%, which is obviously a very significant drop. One can imagine careless people talking of a 5% drop, thinking the figures are percentages, or saying there was a drop of 5 tonnes, forgetting the thousands.

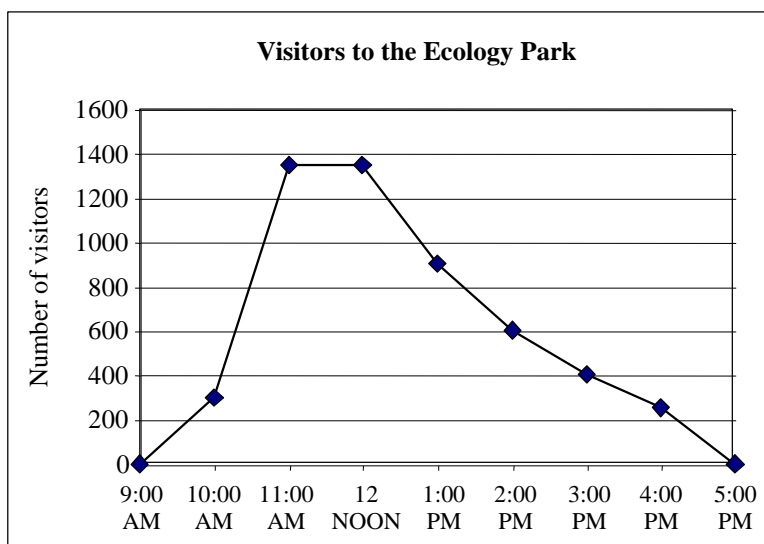
In 2001, there was a further reduction of about the same size, and the situation then stabilized and there was no appreciable difference between 2001 and 2002.

Language hint

In the discussion and examples in this module, we introduce a lot of useful vocabulary which you can use in this part of the Writing test. Above we have already used the following: ‘represent’, ‘drop’, ‘approximately’, ‘significant’, ‘further reduction’, ‘situation stabilized’, ‘appreciable’. In the test, you are less likely to use words such as ‘column’ and ‘vertical axis’ as they describe the graph rather than the information contained in it. Note down the new words you meet in the module in a vocabulary notebook and use it for revision before taking the test.

Establishing the topic and giving a clear overview

Your piece of writing about the graph or diagram you are given to discuss should include *a statement summarising the main trends shown in the figure*. This is called an ‘overview’. It’s a good idea to make the overview a separate paragraph (as in the example below). It should give the reader information about the graph’s main topic, and refer to key places, dates or quantities. It should *not* include specific details, and you should *not* copy long phrases or sentences from the question. When you write your overview, try to tell the reader what the graph shows, using your own words to do so.



Sample response

The graph provides information on the times of arrival of visitors to the Ecology Park.

The number of visitors fluctuates throughout the day. It first increases, reaching a peak in the late morning, then gradually declines to the end of the day. From 9:00 a.m. people start entering the park. The numbers arriving rise very steeply between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. From about 300 people at 10:00 a.m., they reach a peak at 11.00 a.m. with almost 1,400 people an hour entering the park. This peak number of visitors continues until around noon when it starts dropping fairly steadily. At about 1:30 p.m., it is only half of what it was at its peak. After 2:00 p.m., the decline continues, though at a slightly gentler pace. So, for example, at just before 4:00 p.m. there are about 300 visitors an hour arriving. The decline continues until 5:00 p.m. when there are no further arrivals in the park.

In conclusion, the graph tells us that the number of visitors to the park peaks between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon and drops off steadily in the afternoon until 5:00 p.m.

Language hints

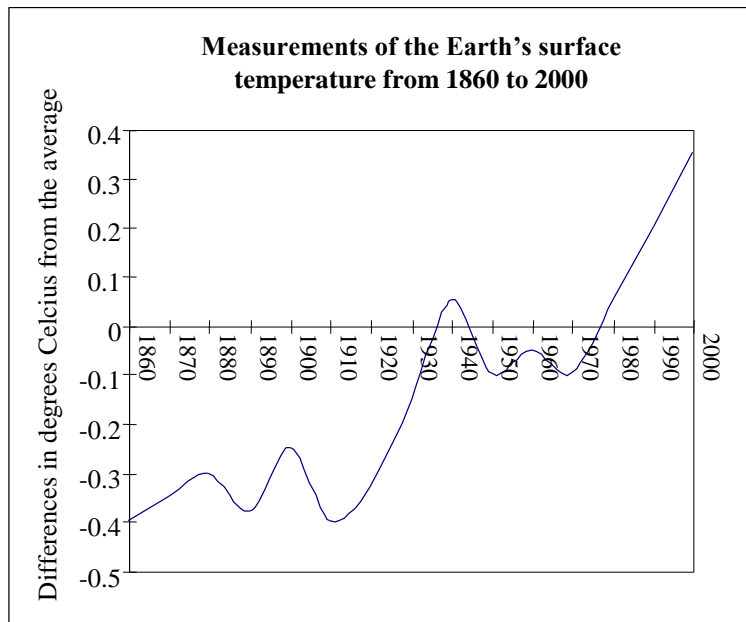
You will note that from the example above, and from the feedback to Activity 5.1, that the overview is in the present tense.

Some helpful words and expressions for writing overviews: 'The graph/chart/table contains/provides information about / shows / illustrates / concerns / deals with ...'

Items of vocabulary worth noting: 'rise very steeply', 'reach a peak', 'continues', 'starts dropping fairly steadily', 'decline', 'slightly gentler pace'.

Activity 5.2

Write a short piece on this graph, and don't forget to include an overview that tells the reader what it is about. Be careful to interpret the data correctly, stating clearly what the graph shows, using an impersonal style with appropriate vocabulary, and noting the general trend and then supplying some data.



Useful words relating to graphs

It will be useful here to take a break from actually describing graphs, to reflect on the language items you need in order to do this effectively. In this section, we have listed nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs you will find helpful in describing graphical information for this first part of the Writing test. The tables below include new words, and words we have already used in discussing the examples above and in the feedback on the activities. The new words are illustrated with examples. Words we have used already are marked with an asterisk (*). Look back and find these words to see how they were used in context and write down your own examples in the spaces provided.

Nouns	Examples
boom	There was a sudden boom in sales the following year.
*data	
*decade	
*decline	
decrease	A sharp decrease in the numbers of applicants can be observed in the mid-1990s.
*drop	
fall	The fall has been slow but steady and shows no sign of reversing itself.
fluctuation	Despite small fluctuations, the overall trend has been one of increasing interest in this topic.
growth	There was a dramatic growth in the numbers of arrests in the late 1980s.
*increase	
level	Numbers did not reach that level again until two decades later.
*pace	
pattern	A similar pattern was seen for the United States.
*peak	
*reduction	
*rise	
*situation	
slope	After that, the predicted slope upwards continues.
stability	The overall picture is one of considerable stability.
surge	A sudden surge in the numbers of tourists follows the introduction of cheaper fares.
*trend	
variation	The situation has remained much the same recently with only minor variation.

Adjectives	Examples
apparent	This was most apparent in the case of Far Eastern tourists.
*appreciable	
*approximate	
*average	
considerable	The changes recorded over the years have been considerable.
consistent	The decline is consistent with patterns seen in a recession.
constant	Since then, the levels of gas have been constant.
continuous	The continuous increase indicates a sales boom.
*dramatic	
gradual	At first the rise was a gradual one, but recently the pace of change has increased rapidly.
marked	There has been a marked increase in the popularity of language courses recently.
moderate	A moderate annual increase in numbers has been taking place for the last 20 years.
*overall	
rapid	Thereafter, there was a rapid collapse until extinction took place.
serious	A serious decline in numbers has been recorded over the last five years.
*sharp	
short-term	This appears to be a short-term phenomenon.
*significant	
slight	Slight fluctuations do not obscure a gradual movement towards new energy sources.
slow	Change has been a slow long-term process.
stable	Sales figures have remained remarkably stable despite the competition.
steady	There has been a steady increase in the temperature of the Earth.
steep	There was a steep increase in public utility charges over the same period.

substantial	The following year there was a substantial changeover from electricity to gas.
sudden	There was a remarkable degree of stability until 1985 when there was a sudden dramatic change in tastes.
temporary	Temporary fluctuations are seen in the figures for the last decade.
trivial	Apart from some trivial variation, the trend has been for increasing longevity throughout the region.

(Most of the adjectives above can be transformed into adverbs by adding -ly. But be careful, as there are exceptions, e.g. 'average', 'long-term', 'overall', 'short-term', 'stable'.)

Adverbs	Examples
*approximately	
dramatically	The rate of growth has fallen dramatically.
modestly	Tiger numbers increased modestly over the next decade.
rapidly	The figures for China are increasing rapidly.
robustly	Consumption doubled from 1978 to 1988 and continued to grow robustly during the 1990s.
*sharply	
*slightly	
*steadily	
*steeply	

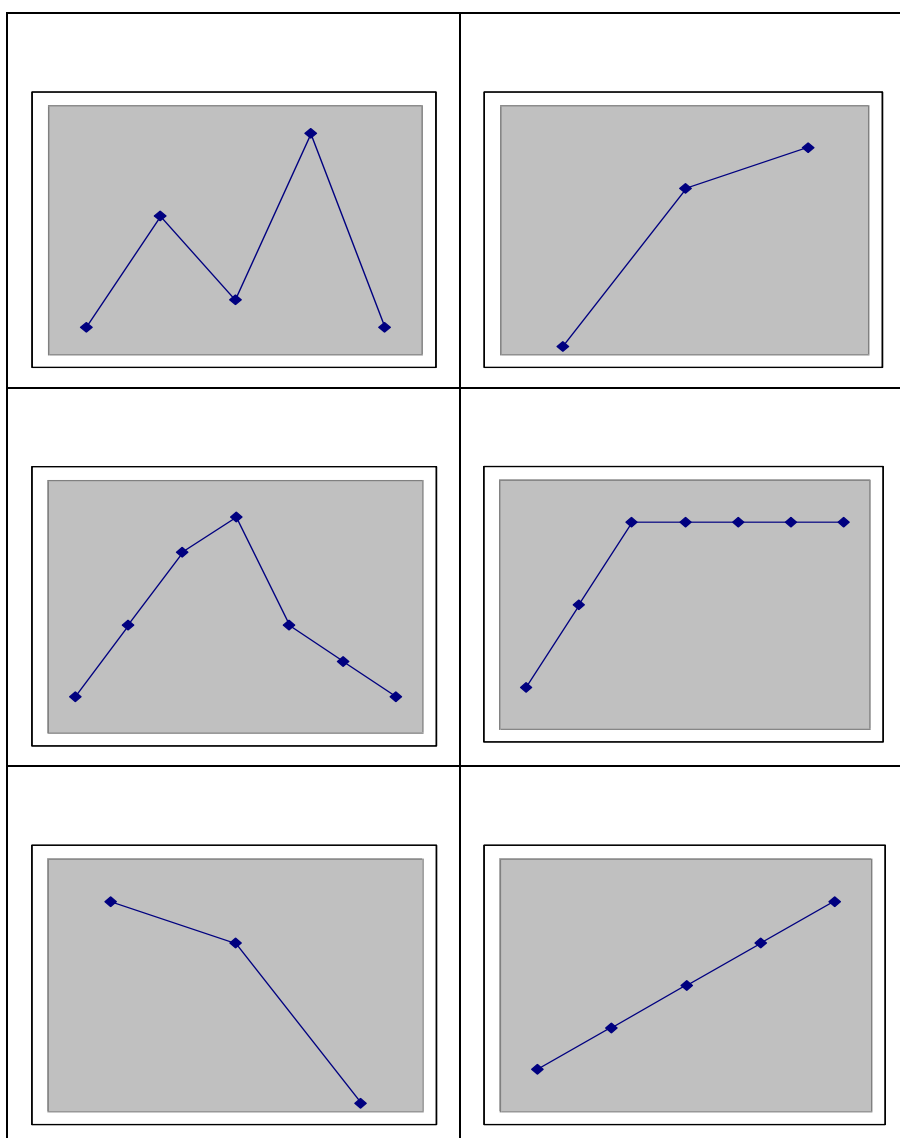
Verbs	Examples
*contain	
*continue	
decline	People's interest continued to decline as computer sales rose.
depict	The diagram depicts the process of turning waste paper into animal feed.
decrease	Numbers continued to decrease throughout the century.
dip	Sales dipped for the next two years before recovering strongly in 1998.

drop	The numbers of premature deaths from smoking dropped for the first time in 2005.
fall	Prices fell for the first time in 2004.
*illustrate	
*increase	
level out	Production figures levelled out over the next decade.
maintain	Growth was maintained for the next five years.
project	It is projected that by 2050 there will be only half the number of species of mammal alive that there are now.
*reach	
remain	The situation remained the same for a few years before a gradual decline set in.
*refer	
*rise	
*show	
*stabilize	
stay	The situation has remained much the same over the last three years, but is projected to change in the coming decade.
surge	Property values surged in the following year.

Activity 5.3

Match the terms below with the graphs which follow by writing the correct letter above each graph:

- A sharp fall
- B reached a peak
- C sudden rise
- D considerable fluctuation
- E levelled off
- F steady increase



Activity 5.4

Fill in the blanks:

- 1 There was a gradual increase until numbers reached a p_____ in 1967.
 - 2 The number of applicants continued to c_____ throughout the 1980s.
 - 3 After years of stability, there was suddenly a period of f_____ and uncertainty.
 - 4 In recent years, there has been a d_____ rise in the number of females entering the profession.
 - 5 As we can o_____ from the figures, there are now more tourists coming from South East Asia than from any other region.
 - 6 Levels of activity remained s_____ throughout 1998 and 1999.
 - 7 The p_____ of development accelerated in the mid-20th century.
 - 8 Apart from some t_____ fluctuations, there have been no real changes in the situation over the last decade.
 - 9 The data r_____ to the world's oil reserves.
 - 10 There was a sudden s_____ in inflation in the late 1970s.
-

Tenses

We have mentioned tenses in discussing the examples and the overview. It is important to get the tenses right, so we reinforce the main points here.

The simple present tense is used in the sentences of the overview that introduce the graph and the main trend(s). The graph exists in the present and *shows* something:

The diagram illustrates a method for recycling glass.

The graph provides information on the times of arrival of visitors to the Ecology Park.

Data that change over time involve the *past*:

The temperature rose in the 1970s.

Data that run from the past into the present entail the *present perfect*:

This trend has continued until now.

Information that is projected into the *future* needs a suitable tense:

It is projected that by 2050 there will be only half the number of species of mammal alive that there are now.

Future projections are, of course, not sure, so hedging and modal verbs will often be appropriate:

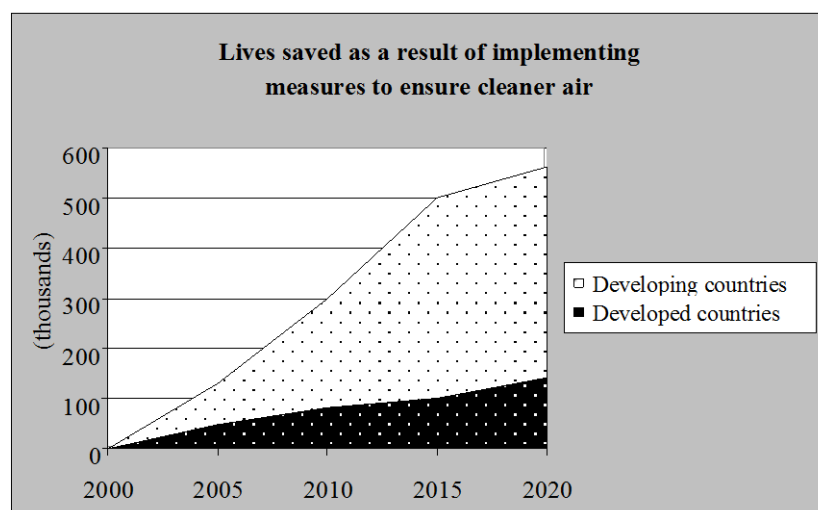
Possibly there will be no oil left.

The ozone layer could have disappeared.

There might be a huge increase in the size of deserts.

On the other hand, your task is to describe in words the data provided in graphical form. You are not expected to speculate on what *might* or *could* be. Look at the later section on 'Avoiding explanation'.

Now look at the graph below. In the description which follows, you'll see an example of the use of tenses. Before you look at the description, it is worth noting that the graph shows two separate sets of data, one for developing countries and one for developed countries. To discuss total figures for both types of countries, you need to add up the figures. For example, by 2020, the number of lives saved will be 550,000 + around 140,000 = approximately 700,000.



Sample response

The chart tries to predict the number of lives that could be saved by the adoption of policies against air pollution.

It can be observed that the graph suggests that the cost in human lives of not implementing such policies will be heavy. The model predicts that by 2010 nearly 400,000 lives a year will be lost if air pollution policies are not implemented. The numbers increase sharply every

year in the period up to 2015. To look at it in another way, by 2015 approximately 600,000 lives a year would be saved by the adoption of clean air measures now. After that, the predicted slope upwards continues, though not quite so sharply, to give a figure of around 700,000 lives saved in 2020, with well over 100,000 coming from developed countries and about 550,000 from the developing world.

Some language points

- ‘tries to predict’, ‘suggests that’ – academic uncertainty
- ‘could be saved’ – modality
- ‘by the adoption’ – abstract noun, avoiding repetition of ‘implement’ or ‘implementation’ in the title of the graph. Although you need to use the information in the caption, markers will not reward you for copying, so attempts to reword, at least the first time round, will be worthwhile.
- ‘policies against air pollution’ – same point as above
- ‘heavy cost’ – look out for nouns and adjectives that commonly appear together. Other common examples are ‘sharp decline’ and ‘sudden drop’.
- ‘the numbers increase’ – return to the present tense because we are now talking about the graph and its projections
- ‘approximately’ – the graph is not offering exact figures. Note also ‘nearly’, ‘around’ and ‘about’.
- ‘would be saved’ – passive

In general, notice the use of the techniques of cohesion covered in *Module 1*, in particular the use of pronouns, synonyms and other referencing devices to avoid repetition:

‘policies against air pollution’ = ‘such policies’ = ‘clean air measures’

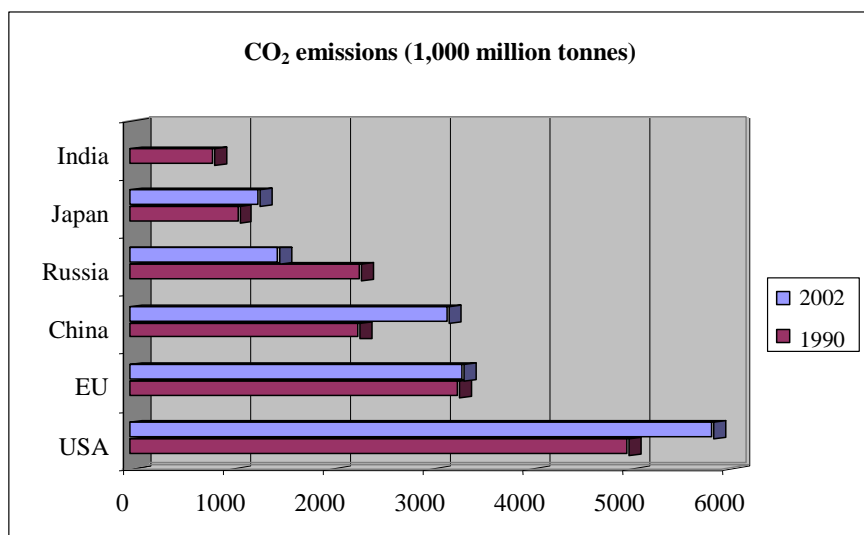
‘adoption of policies’ = ‘implementing’/‘implemented’

‘the number of lives that could be saved’ = ‘the model’ = ‘the predicted slope’

‘the number of lives’ = ‘the cost in human lives’ = ‘the numbers’ = ‘lives a year’ = ‘a figure’

Activity 5.5

Look again at the bar chart we discussed at the beginning of this module.



Complete the description of the chart, using the words in the box.

declined	figures	increased	rate	significant
development	growing	rapidly	shows	stable

The chart (1) _____ carbon dioxide emissions of five major countries and the European Union, and their (2) _____ over a recent 12-year period.

A number of (3) _____ points can be made about the (4) _____. Firstly, the United States was the largest emitter of carbon dioxide. It emitted more or less double the amount produced by the European Union (EU). Furthermore, the United States' (5) _____ of emission was (6) _____ fast. In the 12-year period covered by the graph, it (7) _____ its emissions by nearly 20%.

During this same period, the Europeans managed to hold their emissions more or less steady. The figures for China were increasing (8) _____ and China was fast drawing equal to the EU. Japan was producing about a fifth as much CO₂ as the USA and was keeping the figure fairly (9) _____. Russia's emissions actually (10) _____ sharply. The information about India is limited and we cannot really draw any conclusions from it except that the country was another potential source of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Organization

When you are writing about graphs or charts, remember the following general points:

- Begin with an overview.
- Write in coherent paragraphs (do not use bullet points).
- Do not use an inappropriate form of text such as a letter or a speech.
- Give paragraphs clear topic sentences.
- Organize your paragraphs according to what is significant in the data (do not just recount the figures; look for interesting points).
- Support your general points with information or data from the graph.

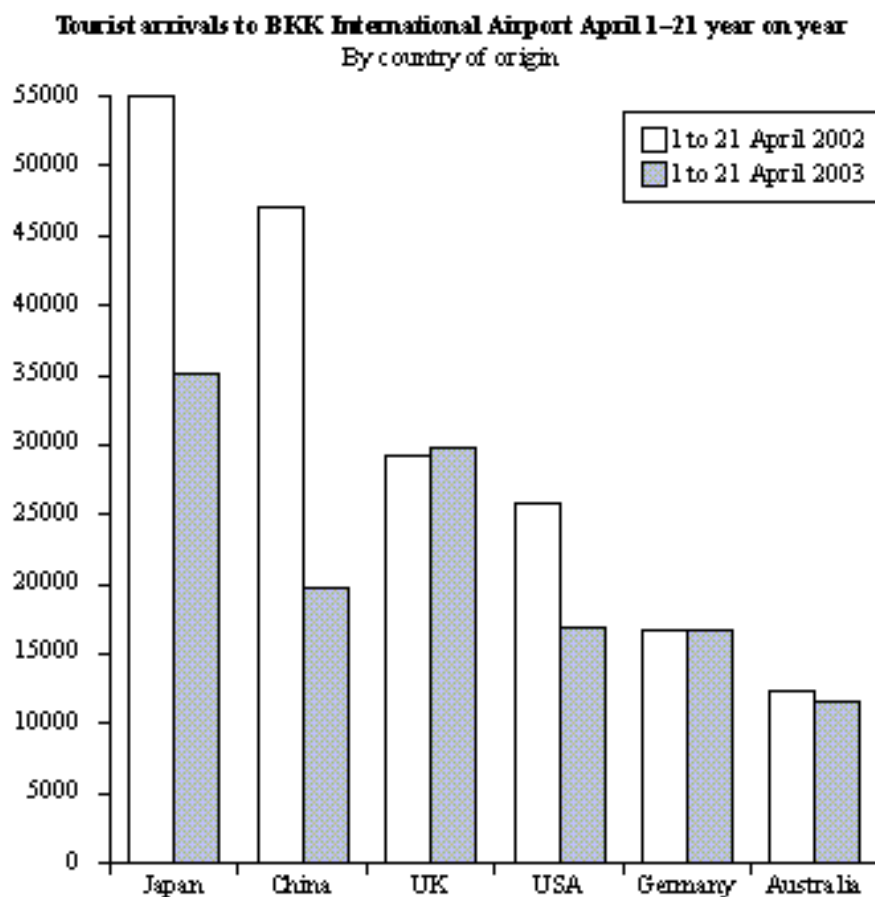
Note how in describing the graph above, the order of the countries was shifted to highlight important points and organize the material in a way that assists the reader to understand the main point, not just the details. The graph orders the countries according to the size of their emissions. We started with the largest emitter. We did not follow the order in the case of Russia, as this was unusual in showing a reduction. While Japan seemed close to the other examples in showing an increase, we shifted Russia's position and put it with India, which also seemed to be unusual in a different sense – the lack of comparative data.

Avoiding explanation

Your role in Task 1 is to give a neutral interpretation of the data and avoid commenting on it. Adverbials such as *sadly*, *luckily* or *disgracefully* have no place here. Nor do we need to explain the data. In the earlier example of the Ecology Park, it is fairly obvious that it opens at 9:00 a.m. and ceases to admit people at 5:00 p.m., and that the chart suggests that, if you want to visit the park, you should either arrive just after 9:00 a.m. or wait till lunch if you want to avoid queues. But it is not your task to do this sort of analysis. In a real study situation, after the data had been presented, a discussion on their implications would follow, but this piece of writing represents only the first stage. World knowledge also tells us that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dislocation that followed it explains the fall in CO₂ emissions rather than any strong ecological effort, but it is not necessary to mention this in describing the graph in Activity 5.5. Present the data in clear, accurate academic English for success on this task.

Activity 5.6

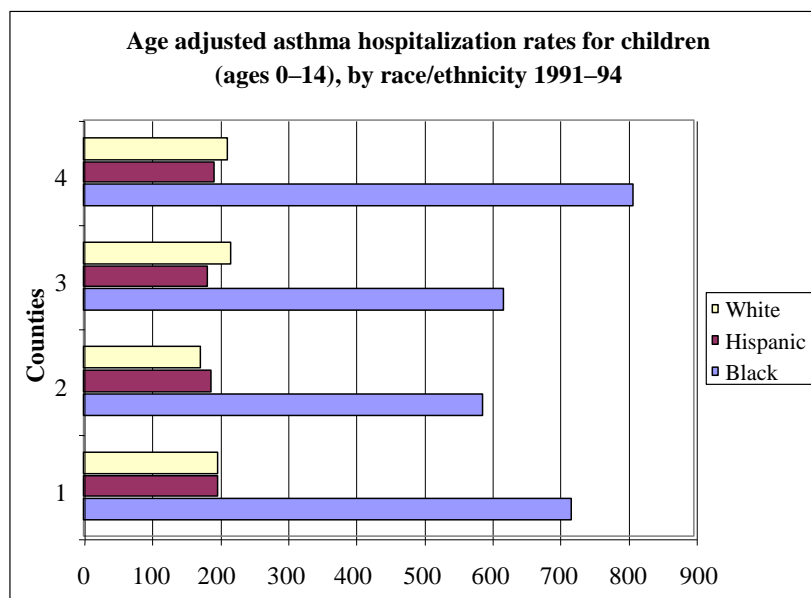
Look at the chart below. Summarize the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant. Use at least 150 words. Try to note places where different trends emerge and contrasts exist.



Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

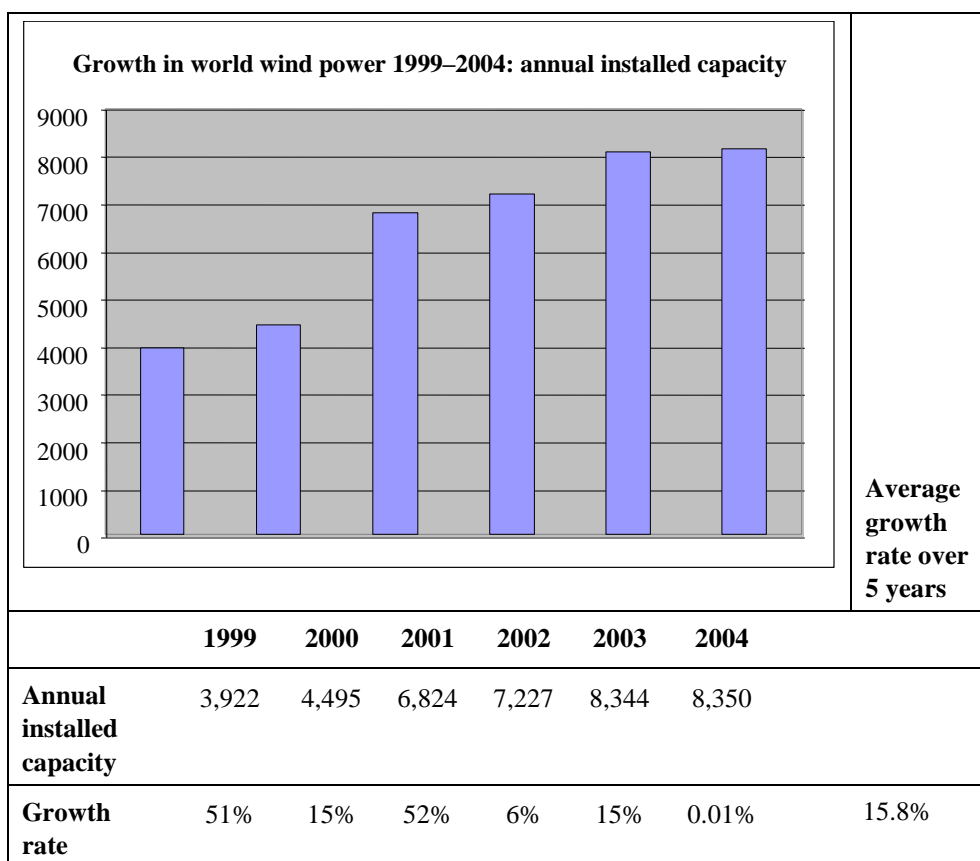
Comparisons

The tourist arrival numbers bar chart above involves comparison. Look at the next chart and think about what to compare. Note that the chart relates to ‘counties’, that is administrative districts of a state, and not ‘countries’.



We can see that black Americans have, in all the cases represented on the chart, the highest hospitalization rates. This is quite dramatically so. We can also see that County 2 has the lowest rate for two out of the three groups. County 4 has a tendency to have the highest rates.

Also, some graphical figures contain more than one set of information, as seen in the following case.

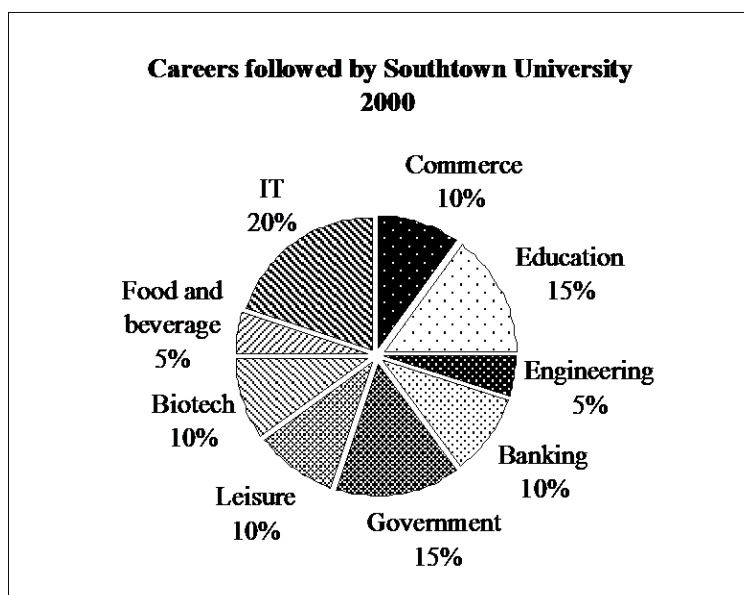
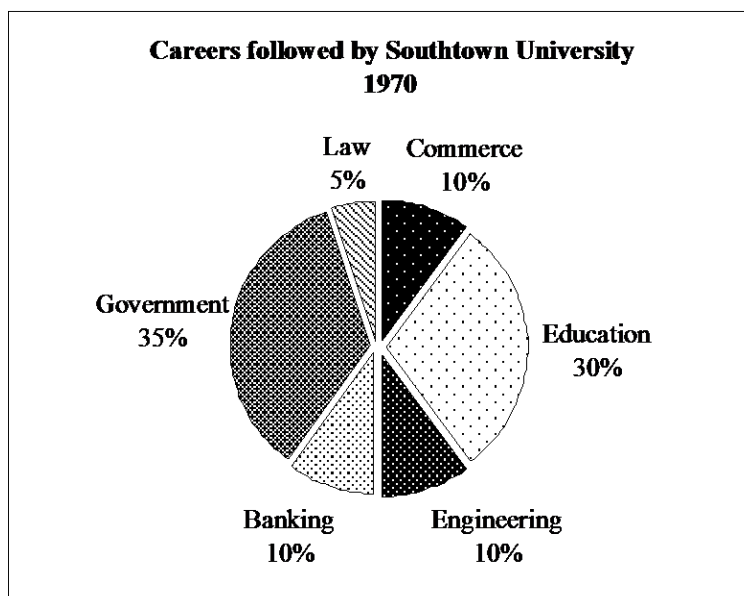


Here we see that, although the installation of capacity is increasing year by year, the rate of growth has fallen dramatically. In some ways, this

might be natural as it is easier to achieve high growth rates from a low base than a high one. You do not, however, need to seek the explanation. Perhaps you could describe the current and predicted growth first and then comment on the downward trend of the growth rate. You might also note in which year the actual biggest increase in the amount of installed capacity occurred.

Again, you would be using the language of comparison: 'higher', 'lower', 'faster', 'slower' and so on.

Note that you may be given two graphs or charts.

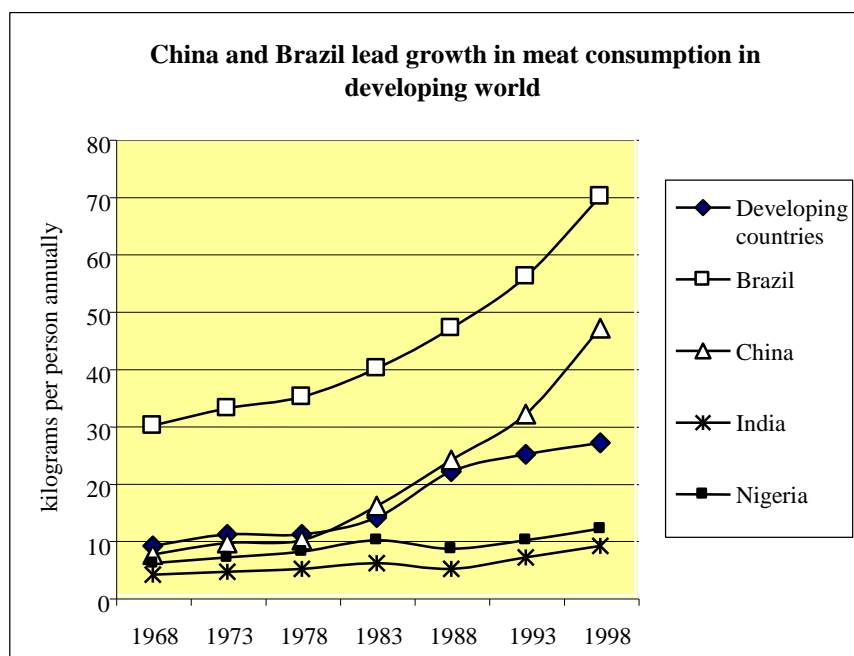


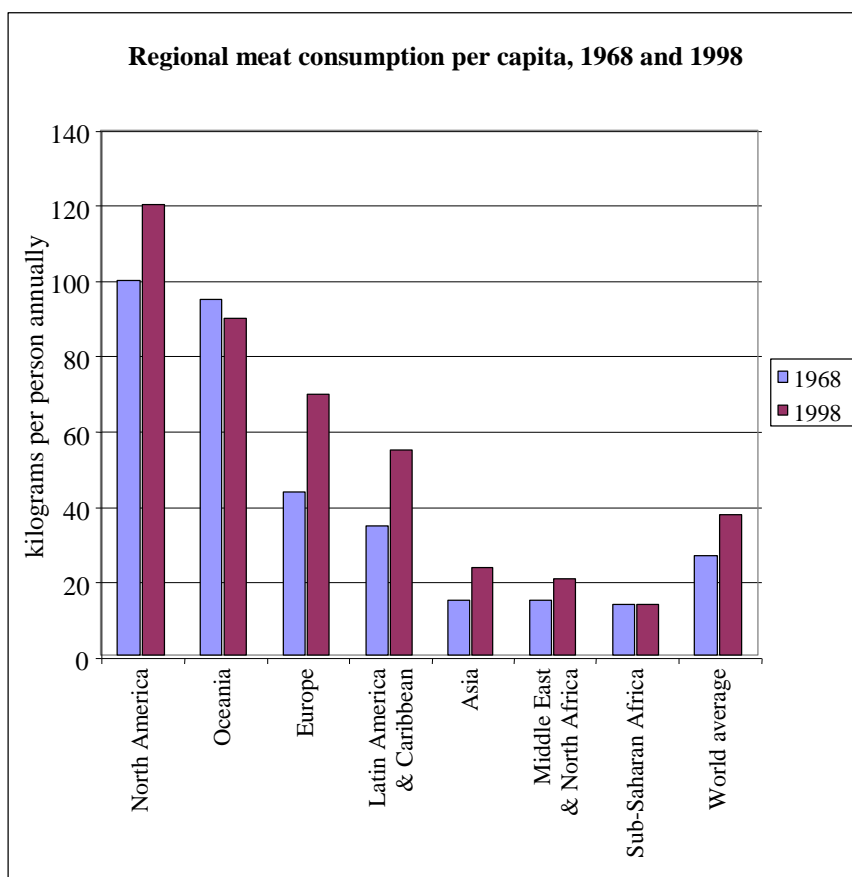
There are many things to talk about here: the increased range of careers, the decline in importance of some sectors (though remember these are percentages; just as many actual people may be working for government in 2000 as in 1970), and stability elsewhere.

Those diagrams invited direct comparison. However, in some cases the relationship may be more complex.

Activity 5.7

Look at the line graph and the bar chart below and think about the points you would make. Then treat this as a Task 1 practice: summarize the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.





Some other types of graphical information

Tables

Activity 5.8

Look through the table below and decide what aspects in general and more specifically you would choose to mention.

Cost of living comparisons in five major cities				
Categories	Munich	Chicago	London	Mumbai
Food	104	142	127	69
Home supplies	104	115	118	103
Personal care	93	113	126	84
Clothing	87	112	112	99
Home services	128	170	142	28
Utilities	107	174	136	138

Entertainment	101	127	136	95
Transportation	79	77	116	76
Sports and leisure	111	109	124	111
Total index	101	126	126	89

* based on an index in which 100 = the average cost of all categories in Manchester, in the UK

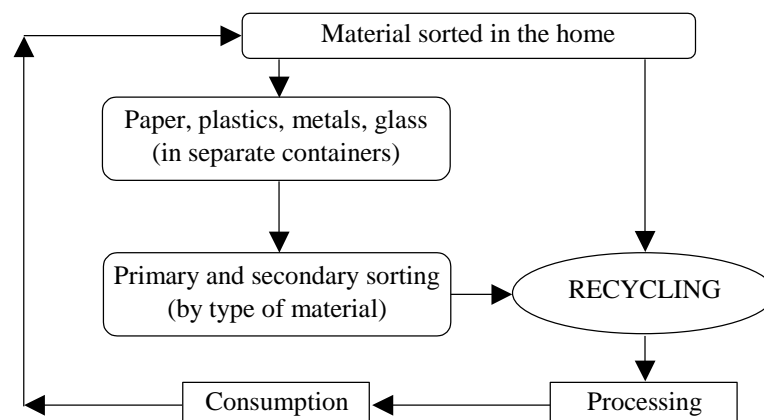
Flow charts

Flow charts might seem appealing because they contain words that you can make use of. This is, however, a mixed blessing. You cannot expect marks for taking the easy way and showing that you are only good at copying. Some rewording is essential.

Activity 5.9

Look at the following chart.

The process of recycling domestic waste



Put the sentences below in the correct order to create a description of the flow chart. The first sentence has been numbered for you:

- ___ At this stage, the materials are sent for processing which transforms them into new consumable goods once again.

-
- ___ Recyclable materials such as paper, plastics, metals and glass are taken for further processing while the remainder of the waste is disposed of.
 - 1 This flow-chart describes the process of recycling domestic waste.
 - ___ The new goods are then purchased by consumers and the cycle starts again.
 - ___ The chart indicates that the process begins in the home with the production of waste and ends in the home with the consumption of goods made of recycled materials.
 - ___ After sorting and collection, the materials to be reused pass through two stages of sorting, primary and secondary, and are then ready for recycling.
 - ___ Once the goods producing the waste have been consumed in the home, the waste is sorted by the householders into categories and placed in different containers according to the type of material it is composed of.
-

To conclude the first part of the module and round up the practice of activities relating to graphs, charts and tables, we would like you to complete an activity under examination conditions. Give yourself no more than 20 minutes to work on the following activity.

Activity 5.10

Look back at the table comparing the cost of living in five cities in Activity 5.8. Using the suggestions we gave you in the feedback section, write a 150-word paragraph which summarizes the information in the table by selecting and reporting the main features, and making comparisons where relevant.

Task 2: Writing a piece of argumentative prose

The second task in the IELTS Writing test is to produce a short piece of *argumentative prose*. You may be required to offer a solution to a problem, give an opinion and justify it, present arguments on both sides of an issue, evaluate a point of view or speculate on an issue. In doing so, you are expected to:

- write in a style appropriate to an academic context;
- give reasons for your answers; and
- include relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Prior to January 2006, the Writing test instructions also asked you to:

- address an educated reader with no specialist knowledge of the topic in question; and
- support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.

While these instructions have been changed, it is probably true to say that they hold good advice for candidates and will continue to be rewarded.

Obviously, it is very important that you read the question very carefully and make sure you are very clear about the task and its precise requirements.

You will meet with instructions such as:

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

What are your opinions on this?

What do you think will happen?

Discuss the arguments for and against this position.

What would be the main effects of following this policy?

Analysing questions

Many questions are reasonably straightforward, e.g.

Learning a foreign language is a difficult process for most people.

What aspects do you consider to be the most difficult?

One might want to say a little about what ‘difficult’ means, but in general its use here is uncontroversial. In other questions, there may be words that are in clear need of definition, e.g.

It seems likely that the main threat to peace and security over the next century will be terrorism. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

The word ‘terrorism’ is a greatly contested one, and an answer to this question that did not attempt to clarify the term could not be considered a thoughtful one. Is terrorism an act of violence carried out for political purposes by a non-state agent? Or is it the use of violence against civilians when there is no declared war? What is its relation to self-defence or justified partisan action against a perceived oppressor? You not going to be able to solve the difficulties, but need to show an awareness of them and include the question of definition in the essay.

You also need to look out for implied positions and unstated assumptions that you might wish to question, e.g.

It seems that many people use drugs recreationally despite all the laws against them. In the light of this fact, the laws should be changed. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

The argument here depends on the view that laws which cannot be enforced strictly or which are broken by otherwise law-abiding people bring discredit on law as a whole and should be repealed. This is a view held by many, but it is still open to argument. Perhaps a law can express a social attitude, even if it is not practical to enforce it all the time; and society should show disapproval of drugs, even if in some places their use is fairly widespread among fairly respectable people. These are matters for debate and the better essays will raise such issues and not simply accept the statements in the question as given. Here is another example:

Smoking is harmful to health and should be made illegal.

One might not wish to dispute the harmfulness of smoking, but still not agree that it is the role of governments to try to force people to be healthy. There is an underlying issue that needs to be addressed as well as questions of fact, practicality, international repercussions, government finance and acceptability to the public. The better essays will raise as many issues as possible.

Responding to two sides of an issue

Sometimes a question presents both sides of an issue and asks you to discuss them. For example, the question on drugs could be reworded as follows:

Some people believe that drugs are a great social evil and the fight against their use a high priority. Others think that society should accept that outlawing them has failed and that some degree of tolerance should be introduced. Discuss both points of view and then provide your own opinion on the issue.

In this case, one must be sure to follow the instructions and organize one's essay accordingly. One might perhaps develop each point of view a little more fully, explaining the arguments its advocates would be likely to use, and then express one's own view, supporting it with relevant analogies or suggesting relevant research. Here's another example of this kind of question:

Some people believe that a doctor's main aim should be to prolong life, whereas others feel that when a patient's quality of life drops below a certain point the doctor should withhold treatment that can only increase the amount of suffering. Discuss both points of view and then state your own position on this question.

Activity 5.11

Read the following questions and decide which words need attention and what underlying issues and assumptions might merit discussion. Ask yourself whether two contrasting points of view need to be discussed. The feedback section provides ideas for the first four topics. Try to do your own breakdown for the last one:

- 1 Nationalism is an undesirable feeling that threatens world peace. Our aim should be to eradicate it. How far do you agree with this statement?
 - 2 Some people feel that 'punishment should fit the crime'. For example, people who commit violent crimes should suffer violence. What are your views on this topic?
 - 3 Envy is a key factor in success and advancement. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?
 - 4 Attitudes towards the sea must change dramatically over the next few decades or there will be a disaster. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?
 - 5 Some people believe that sports stars are grossly overpaid, while others argue that their talent and hard work deserves high financial reward. Discuss both points of view and then provide your own opinion on how well sports stars should be paid.
-

The planning process

Brainstorming

You have 40 minutes for Task 2 and you will wish to spend some time thinking and planning before writing. There are different ways of doing this. Some form of brainstorming helps many people. Just start writing down words, ideas and phrases that come to mind on a particular topic. When you have a reasonable number, try organizing them to create a rough mind-map to act as the basis for your essay plan. Some of the things you have written may provide ideas and others may include useful items of vocabulary.

For example, you may be faced with the following question:

It has been suggested that, as tobacco products cause so much ill-health, countries should make them illegal. Give your views on whether this is a sensible and practical suggestion.

You would have to identify the arguments against and for tobacco, and then from these generate a discussion and propose a solution.

Your brainstorming might produce the following.

Arguments against	Arguments for	Discussion	Solution
<i>Why tobacco is so bad and people might want to make it illegal:</i>	<i>Arguments that might be used on the other side:</i>	<i>General philosophical problem of role of government:</i>	<i>Policies that might achieve the same end without laws</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social/ medical costs; cancer/ carcinogenic • Hardening of the arteries • Lungs; coughs • Passive smoking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of the tobacco industry • Enforcement issues • World trade allowed? • Tourists • Would make tobacco very expensive • Government revenues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of government and legislation in society • Human rights • Smuggling 	

Step-by-step analysis

Brainstorming does not suit everyone. An alternative approach might be to move slowly and thoughtfully through the question. Let's take another possible question from Task 2:

Some people feel that 'punishment should fit the crime'. For example, people who commit violent crimes should suffer violence. What are your views on this?

Your analysis of the question might look something like this:

- Why do people feel this? Probably they feel anger and emotion at crime; they want revenge.
- What does violence for violence involve? Whipping for fighting; execution for murder – but beyond that?
- What does 'fit the crime' mean? Should a robber have to give money to the victim? But this only works if the robber has plenty of money.
- What crime would prison be for? Only for kidnappers? But prison keeps criminals out of circulation as well as punishing them.
- What is the role of punishment? Repaying, but also removal from society and re-education.

In this way one focuses on the key words and ideas and a structure begins to emerge:

- 1 Sympathy for the idea on an emotional level. It may work for some simple cases.
- 2 The idea soon breaks down because it is too narrow. Examples.
- 3 Need to consider the purpose of punishment. It is wider than repayment for wrong.
- 4 Conclusion – this is a slogan that may satisfy at some simple level but a proper penal system needs to be far more thoughtful and complex.

Range of ideas

In Task 2, you are instructed to write *at least 250 words*. You most certainly want to avoid repetition, so you should try to generate quite a few ideas. You will probably be writing four or five paragraphs with the main content in the middle paragraphs.

A good general knowledge and a close familiarity with the principal trends of the day gained from regular contact with the media (newspapers, non-fiction best-sellers, magazines, websites and television documentaries) will be of great assistance. Even current films can tell you a lot about the issues people are thinking about: pollution, climate change, cloning, organ transplants, nuclear hazards, longevity, unsustainable development, corruption, terrorism and so on.

Even if you do not like the brainstorming approach introduced earlier, it's a good idea to make a list of words connected with the topic as a way of ensuring you cover the correct ground and include the expected ideas.

Activity 5.12

Consider for a couple of minutes words you think should appear in the following essay:

Copyright laws are tools which help multinational corporations maintain monopolies over their products. What are your views on this statement?

Some ideas for planning

Outline essay plans

The organization of your answer will depend on the question, but you should be familiar with some common essay plans so that you can organize your thoughts quickly and effectively. In this section we provide some sample outline essay plans which are intended to be useful, but do not claim to be exhaustive.

You will notice that we have selected essay topics which give you the opportunity to express an opinion. This is because in Part 2 of the IELTS Writing test, you are specifically rewarded for expressing an opinion clearly and convincingly. Here are three sample outline plans.

Essay topic 1

Studying overseas has both its advantages and disadvantages. Discuss the arguments for and against overseas study, and then state which arguments you feel are stronger.

Paragraph structure	Details
1 Background to the topic / definitions and main opinion	Define the <i>topic</i> ; overseas study has advantages and disadvantages. <i>Main opinion</i> : I believe that the benefits of overseas study outweigh the costs.
2 One side of the issue / advantages	<i>Main idea</i> : Overseas study brings a range of educational, social and cultural benefits. <i>Supporting details</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience another education system and language first-hand • work and interact with students from other cultures • be exposed to different perspectives • become more independent.
3 Other side of the issue / disadvantages	<i>Main idea</i> : Overseas study is very costly. <i>Supporting details</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tuition fees • travel and accommodation fees • ‘emotional’ costs of homesickness and culture shock.
4 Conclusion	<i>Compromise / synthesis / my final opinion</i> : Despite a range of practical and emotional costs, overseas study brings a range of benefits.

This is a very good example, as it provides you with the opportunity to respond to both sides of the issue, something we discussed earlier. Don’t forget to address both sides clearly in a question like this, otherwise you may be penalized for only answering half the question. In other words, you must discuss both advantages and disadvantages. You will also be rewarded for expressing a clear point of view and giving supporting reasons.

Essay topic 2

At present, oil supplies a lot of the world's energy needs, but this dependence on oil may cause problems. Do you agree this is a problem and what solutions do you suggest?

Paragraph structure	Details
1 Background to the topic / definitions and main opinion	Growing demand for oil from developing economies; new oil finds becoming rarer; many oil fields in politically unstable parts of the world <i>Main opinion:</i> I believe that this is a problem.
2 Why a problem?	Because of rising prices; risk of competition for oil supplies leading to war; greenhouse effect and global warming.
3 Possible suggested solutions	Building more nuclear power stations
4 Conclusion	Risk of accidents and terrorism; nuclear weapons and a different type of severe pollution. A possible but desperate solution. More research needed very soon.

Essay topic 3

The family is the bedrock of society. What are your views on this statement?

Paragraph structure	Details
1 Background to the topic / definitions and main opinion	Define the <i>topic</i> : 'family' (extended/nuclear); 'society' (a community of people with similar traditions, institutions or nationality) <i>Main opinion:</i> I agree that the family is the bedrock of society.
2 Reason 1	It supplies us with a loving base and fulfils us emotionally. Examples ...
3 Reason 2	The family accords with nature and our greater concern for those closest to us genetically. Examples ...
4 Reason 3	It unites the generations and means the young are nurtured and the old cared for. Examples ...

5 Conclusion	Families are the base of society and everything possible should be done to strengthen and support them.
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Activity 5.13

Consider how you would plan answers on the following topics. There is no single correct answer, and in the feedback section we have provided some outline plans which adopt a range of approaches.

- 1 Some people strongly support capital punishment while others condemn it as barbaric. What are your views on this controversial matter?
- 2 All around the world people are giving up their traditional dress. This is a great shame and people should be encouraged to wear it more frequently. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?
- 3 A good academic education is necessary for a successful life. What are your views on this statement?
- 4 It seems to be agreed that fast food is not good for our health. Do you think then that the government should discourage its sale?
- 5 Some people think life will be far better in the future, while others see only disaster and doom ahead. Are you an optimist or a pessimist about the human future?

Organizing your answer

A checklist

When organizing your answer to any questions, it is always useful to bear in mind a checklist of key questions:

- How many points of view or issues do I need to consider in this essay? Have these been covered?
- How many paragraphs should there be in my essay? What will be the main idea in each paragraph?
- Does my first paragraph clearly state my own opinion?
- Is the main point of each paragraph clearly given in my topic sentence?
- Do other sentences in each paragraph support the idea in the topic sentence?

- Do the ideas flow smoothly between paragraphs? Have I used discourse markers ('firstly', 'secondly', 'in addition', 'in contrast', 'however', 'as a consequence') to show the relationships between ideas and paragraphs?
- Does my conclusion clearly re-state my main opinion?

Linking ideas cohesively

Cohesion – the linking of ideas together in a text – is closely related to organization and is another important aspect of successful writing for part two of the Writing test. In *Module 1*, we discussed cohesion at a *sentence* level. For example, we looked at logical sequencing, the use of verb tenses, pronouns, synonyms and metaphor. We also looked at the way discourse markers hold a text together at the sentence level. It is equally important to create links across sentences and between paragraphs to hold the argument together and create a logical progression of ideas. In this section, we provide two activities to raise your awareness of the importance of cohesion and give some ideas on how to enhance cohesion in your own essays.

Activity 5.14

The text below is a four-paragraph essay. However, the four paragraphs have been jumbled up and your task is to put them back in the correct order. Try to do this by identifying cues that indicate the logic of the argument in the essay. You then have to put the paragraphs in the correct order and state why you have chosen the order you have:

- A On the other hand, none of this comes cheaply. One must be prepared to meet transport costs, tuition fees (which are often very high), and living expenses including accommodation charges. There is also an emotional cost which can be high: culture shock, a feeling of isolation and alienation, and occasionally acute attacks of homesickness. Not every day of one's time away from home will be happy.
- B The idea of going to a foreign country to study fills some people with delight; they cannot imagine anything more exciting or beneficial. Other people react in precisely the opposite way and are filled with dread and doubt at the idea. While we can perhaps sympathize with the latter group, on the whole there is no doubt that overseas study is a good thing.
- C There is a lot of truth in the old adage 'No pain, no gain'. As I have explained, studying overseas can be a painful experience, but the normal resilient person can meet those challenges, and then gain in terms of being a more rounded and mature person with new linguistic skills and attitudes which make it all worthwhile.

- D Let me first explain the reasons why I think this to be true. Studying abroad offers a range of educational, social and cultural benefits. Apart from pursuing one's main subject one is, in most cases, immersed in another language and given an opportunity to develop fluency in it. One learns to see things from new perspectives. One has every opportunity to become more independent, and one interacts on a daily basis with people from a variety of cultures, so gaining new sensitivities. One returns home with new ideas, new friends and a greater internationalism.

Activity 5.15

The following text is a response to a possible essay question:

Where there's a will there's a way. Do you agree?

In this task, you have to complete the gaps in the text by providing cohesive devices that link ideas *within* and *between* paragraphs.

are they true?	defeated	perhaps	that	though
but	however	pieces of advice	the old proverb	

'Where there's a will there's a way.' This old proverb tells us that if we are determined enough about something, we can achieve whatever we set out to achieve. Saying something is impossible is merely an excuse to cover up a lack of will-power. We can do it if we really want to. These are fine words, but (1) _____

Perhaps that is an unfair question. (2) _____ proverbs are not meant to be true. In some cases there are two proverbs saying the opposite of one another (3) _____ we still use them. 'Strike while the iron is hot' tells us to act now, but 'Look before you leap' advises caution. The truth is that in different situations both (4) _____ are appropriate.

So let's return to (5) _____. For someone hesitating and lacking in self-confidence, 'Where there's a will there's a way' is just the right thing to say. It can inspire one to further efforts, and, truly, in many areas of life with a bit more effort we can achieve our goals. A few more doors knocked on, a few more hours spent studying, or an improved business strategy and we can succeed. Defeatism is not going to help in any case.

(6) _____ does not mean, (7) _____, that we are never going to be (8) _____. In some circumstances we have no hope. Will-power will not save us as our plane falls from the sky. The world is governed by luck and often we are forced to do things we hate. (9) _____ it is part of the glory of being human that we do not just accept our fate – we struggle against it – we try to find a way with our will.

Academic style

The essay in Task 2 of the IELTS Academic Writing test is included to see at what level you are able to write the sort of prose suitable for university studies. It is important that you follow the correct style. Newspapers and magazines may provide you with the right ideas, but are not good models for general academic style (apart from the more serious publications). Very scholarly books are also not suitable as models as they use the jargon of a particular subject. You need to use the sort of prose that you find in a serious biography or history book intended for a general audience.

In *Module 1*, we introduced you to the essential elements of academic style and discussed at length the topic of academic register, the use of appropriate tone, the role of hedging, formal vocabulary, nominalization and ellipsis.

Following the advice in that module, the piece of writing for Academic Writing Task 2 should be in a formal style with complex sentences and carefully selected vocabulary. Though you are rewarded for expressing an opinion, the tone of the essay should be largely impersonal. This may in part be achieved by the use of passive verbs and nominalization. Statements should not be more definite than is justified and *hedging* should be used, e.g. 'A preferable view seems to be that punishment has more than one purpose'.

Range of vocabulary

Academic tone

English is rich in synonyms, and this is an important feature in the creation of style.

Consider this sentence:

The public has failed to comprehend the magnitude of this problem.

This is very similar in meaning to:

People just don't seem to understand the size of the problem.

It's also similar to:

Ordinary guys just don't get it.

Their tone is, however, very different. For a high mark in writing, an approximation to the first, more academic, style is necessary. The second level is suitable for the speaking parts of the test, with perhaps a little of the third included to show that you do have the full range of formal–colloquial English.

Activity 5.16

Decide which level the following phrases belong to (of course, there may be some minor disagreement over this). They all refer to topics mentioned earlier:

1 = formal/academic

2 = middle range

3 = colloquial

Phrase	Level of formality
the acquisition of vocabulary	
determination to succeed in one's ventures	
kick the bucket at 70	
want to do well	
exploitation of nationalism for ulterior purposes	
smoke-filled air	
spend like there's no tomorrow	
highly competitive spirit	
reasonable to love your motherland	
I suppose the average bloke is better off.	
keeping up with the Jones's	
a gradual decline into senility	
a greater sensitivity to animal rights	
inhalation of noxious fumes	
depends on your health	
one of the foundations of our financial system	
Animals have their own lives.	
stick up for the home side	
considerable gains both quantitatively and qualitatively	
revolution in moral attitudes	
penal theory stipulates	
One must borrow wisely.	
stinking of cigarette smoke	
an eye for an eye	
It depends on which part of the world we look at.	

Elegant variation of vocabulary

We also mentioned in *Module 1* the need for *elegant variation*, the use of synonyms, paraphrases and pronouns to avoid the constant repetition of one key word, e.g.

smoking	tobacco-use	nicotine addiction	noxious habit
the habit	it	this	

Superordinate terms can also be used to avoid repetition of a noun, e.g. red is a colour, a potato is a vegetable, fish are marine life and so on.

Activity 5.17

Think of more formal variants of the following.

join together	
not liking each other	
getting worse	
executing people	
make stronger	
growing food	
ban	
use up	
help (noun)	
take part	

Activity 5.18

Arrange these words into ten sets of three synonyms:

additional	debate	partnership
alliance	disaster	pertinent
applicable	discussion	practical
calamity	divergent	preference
catastrophe	enormous	project
collaboration	extra	realistic
colossal	feasible	relevant
conflicting	immense	scheme
contrary	liking	supplementary
controversy	partiality	undertaking

1	additional		
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Activity 5.19

It is very natural to use contrast when writing; it is a good idea to make use of antonyms as well as synonyms.

Arrange these words into ten sets of two synonyms and one antonym:

authentic	former	predictable
barbaric	genuine	previous
counterfeit	humane	relieve
creative	inevitable	savage
critical	innovative	simplistic
decisive	insignificant	sophisticated
disallow	moderate	sterile
dispassionate	neutral	subsequent
exacerbate	partisan	superficial
forbid	permit	unforeseen

1	authentic		
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Knowing which words go together

Another aspect of vocabulary that deserves attention is *collocation*, knowing which words commonly go together. The principal ones are verb–noun collocations (‘make a bed’), adjective–noun ones (‘great disappointment’) and adverb–adjective ones (‘totally wrong’). They can mainly be acquired by plenty of reading. Their use makes a piece of writing seem not only correct but polished and natural.

Activity 5.20

Match the adjectives and nouns.

1

i	absolute	a	certainty
ii	enormous	b	challenge
iii	grand	c	claim
iv	painful	d	clarity
v	unsubstantiated	e	climax

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

2

i	acute	a	alternative
ii	great	b	anticipation
iii	unqualified	c	anxiety
iv	vast	d	approval
v	viable	e	array

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

3

i	decent	a	education
ii	firm	b	friend
iii	intense	c	guidance
iv	reliable	d	hatred
v	undeserved	e	reputation

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

4

i	inexhaustible	a	situation
ii	overall	b	strategy
iii	profound	c	supply
iv	severe	d	trauma
v	short-term	e	wisdom

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

5

i	balanced	a	debate
ii	core	b	deal
iii	fair	c	diet
iv	heated	d	discontent
v	widespread	e	values

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

6

i	complete	a	coalition
ii	full	b	compensation
iii	further	c	complication
iv	rainbow	d	compromise
v	sensible	e	conformity

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

7

i	constant	a	function
ii	effective	b	innovation
iii	primary	c	justice
iv	serious	d	leadership
v	social	e	misgivings

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

8

i	cautious	a	optimism
ii	deadly	b	peace
iii	fragile	c	peril
iv	fundamental	d	relevance
v	marginal	e	reappraisal

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

Activity 5.21

Match these verbs with the nouns.

1

i	accomplish	a	initiative
ii	formulate	b	a mission
iii	pose	c	an operation
iv	show	d	a plan
v	undergo	e	a risk

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

2

i	halt	a	the alarm
ii	make	b	attention
iii	pay	c	the decline
iv	raise	d	pains
v	take	e	a profit

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

3

i	act as	a	an agreement
ii	earn	b	a deterrent
iii	maintain	c	facilities
iv	reach	d	growth
v	upgrade	e	a living

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

4

i	gain	a	a campaign
ii	launch	b	discrimination
iii	provide	c	gratitude
iv	show	d	guidance
v	suffer	e	an impression

i _____ ii _____ iii _____ iv _____ v _____

Range of sentence structures

For the higher grades, a candidate must demonstrate command of complex sentences. We have discussed complex sentences in *Module 1*, and included material on building on basic sentence patterns. The more the resources of English are used, the more impressed the marker will be.

Let's take an example.

You are asked to write on whether you think disabled youngsters should attend ordinary local schools or go to special institutes catering for their specific disabilities. You decide to first describe the advantages of attempting integration. You argue that it is wrong to keep the disabled apart from the rest of the community. Having disabled classmates will be a valuable learning experience for teenagers, and leading an average life will be of benefit to the disabled. You sum up this part of your argument. As you do so, though, you bring in some doubts. In some cases, the more severely disabled may get more benefit from specialized facilities with trained instructors. It may also be extremely expensive to fit all schools with the necessary technology to make learning easy for disabled students.

Activity 5.22

Think carefully and then write this transition in the essay, summing up the first part and introducing the next topic. We suggest you draft it a few times and try to polish it a little with each draft, improving the vocabulary and experimenting with different ways of expressing your ideas in complex sentences.

Elegance and range of reference

There are aspects of writing that create a pleasing style. We have spoken of elegant variation of vocabulary, and the same point applies to other aspects of a piece of writing, e.g.

- Sentence lengths should not be too uniform. It can be very effective to follow some long complex sentences with a short one that almost dramatically makes an important point:

Universities have opened their doors to commercial investment and actively seek out business partnerships. Courses have become ever more practical and geared to the marketplace, luring students with the hope of lucrative careers and prestigious posts. This is all wrong.

- Creating some balance in one's phrases and clauses is also a part of good style. This often involves the use of doubling. In the above,

there are two similar sentences opening with a subject and present perfect tenses; two things are said of the courses, and there are two hopes mentioned.

- A phrase like ‘a scandal and a disgrace’ is forceful, especially because the two reinforcing nouns both have two syllables.
- While it must not be overused or allowed to become noticeable, the repetition of sounds adds a certain music. In the above, ‘luring’ and ‘lucrative’ fit together rather well, and so do the words ‘prestigious posts’.
- A rhetorical question can be effective, but one should perhaps limit oneself to one per essay (e.g. ‘Would we not need to rethink our attitudes towards other animals if we met a species far superior to ourselves?’).
- Metaphors and similes are also elegant if used in moderation. Care needs to be taken not to mix metaphors (e.g. ‘As we are all in the same boat when it comes to the environment, we need to forge closer ties’).
- Precision is highly desirable and examples and illustrations drawn from a wide range of sources are likely to impress. If one is talking about the topic *genocide*, one might wish to refer to the Holocaust, Pol Pot and Rwanda. References to literature, myth and history would be well received if appropriate and clearly and succinctly explained.
- An occasional quote or saying may also be useful:

The course of true love never did run smooth.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.

Strike while the iron is hot.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Great minds think alike.

- Sophisticated punctuation (the less-used colon and semi-colon) might be expected in writing worthy of the higher grades.
- Slightly unusual effects, if used unobtrusively and correctly, can add a little polish, e.g. inversion and double negatives:

Under no circumstances can we tolerate this.

Seldom has there been such unashamed plunder of the Earth’s resources.

Not for nothing did they die.

- Finally, we have already emphasized the importance of well-constructed paragraphs and of logical connectors or discourse markers to organize and make your writing cohesive. These also add to the elegance of your writing.

Try putting some of these ideas into practice in responding to the four topics in the activity which follows. For each one, we have brainstormed some ideas for content and organization in the feedback.

In order to gain maximum benefit from this activity, try to do it under examination conditions. In other words, give yourself only 40 minutes to complete the first draft of each essay, the same amount of time that you will have in the IELTS Academic Writing test.

Activity 5.23

Write an essay of *at least 250 words* on each of the following topics:

- 1 Different societies have had different attitudes towards the taking of one's own life.
What are your views on suicide? Is it ever justified?
 - 2 Some people think that the human race is doomed and will not last much longer.
Do you agree or disagree with this gloomy scenario?
 - 3 Some people fear that machines will become so intelligent that they will one day replace us. Do you think this is likely or not?
 - 4 Parents drive their children to achieve academic success. Is such achievement really necessary to success in life? Explain and justify your opinion on this question.
-

Conclusion

In this module, you have looked at the two tasks in the IELTS Academic Writing test.

For Task 1, in which graphical information has to be turned into words, you looked at a variety of graphs, charts and tables and questions involving one or a number of them. You did a variety of exercises to become familiar with the type of writing needed and then tried it yourself.

In this section, we highlighted the need to establish the topic before proceeding with the presentation of the data. We also considered style, content, organization and vocabulary, and stressed the importance of seeing trends, noting exceptions and making comparisons.

For Task 2, we attempted to raise your awareness of the features of academic/formal writing that examiners will be looking for and respond to. This section offered quite a few vocabulary exercises and many opportunities for writing practice. Selective reading and the production of a large number of practice essays are recommended as the keys to success.