

54. using the word "I" (Wednesday, January 04, 2012)

As an ex-examiner, my advice is that you **should** use phrases like "I believe" or "in my opinion" when the question asks for **your opinion** e.g To what extent do **you** agree or disagree?

55. 'nuclear power' topic (Wednesday, December 28, 2011)

There are several benefits to building more nuclear power stations. Firstly, nuclear power is a relatively sustainable energy source, meaning that it can be used to produce electricity without wasting limited natural resources like coal, oil or gas. Secondly, nuclear power stations are cleaner than fossil fuel power stations, and could help to reduce carbon emissions that cause global warming. With improvements in nuclear technology, the risks of accidents are being reduced. As a result, many countries are now considering nuclear power as a solution to high oil and gas prices, increasing demand for electricity, and worries about pollution and climate change.

56. 'a satisfying working life' essay

Many people decide on a career path early in their lives and keep to it. This, they argue, leads to a more satisfying working life. To what extent do you agree with this view? What other things can people do in order to have a satisfying working life?

Here's an example introduction:

It is true that some people know from an early age what career they want to pursue, and they are happy to spend the rest of their lives in the same profession. While I accept that this may suit many people, I believe that others enjoy changing careers or seeking job satisfaction in different ways.

On the one hand, having a defined career path can certainly lead to a satisfying working life. Many people decide as young children what they want to do as adults, and it gives them a great sense of satisfaction to work towards their goals and gradually achieve them. For example, many children dream of becoming doctors, but to realise this ambition they need to gain the relevant qualifications and undertake years of training. In my experience, very few people who have qualified as doctors choose to change career because they find their work so rewarding, and because they have invested so much time and effort to reach their goal.

On the other hand, people find happiness in their working lives in different ways. Firstly, not everyone dreams of doing a particular job, and it can be equally rewarding to try a variety of professions; starting out on a completely new career path can be a reinvigorating experience. Secondly, some people see their jobs as simply a means of earning money, and they are happy if their salary is high enough to allow them to enjoy life outside work. Finally, job satisfaction is often the result of working conditions, rather than the career itself. For example, a positive working atmosphere, enthusiastic colleagues, and an inspirational boss can make working life much more satisfying, regardless of the profession.

In conclusion, it can certainly be satisfying to pursue a particular career for the whole of one's life, but this is by no means the only route to fulfilment.

Here are some points to notice:

1. There is a clear 4-paragraph structure, and the essay is easy to read because the ideas are developed in a logical way.
2. The introduction is short, but it covers everything that the question asks you about.
3. The main paragraphs make up around 70% of the essay. These paragraphs are the key to a high score.
4. The conclusion is very short, and simply summarises what I had already written. Never put any new ideas in the conclusion.
5. I focus on expressing my ideas well, using a range of relevant words and phrases. I'm not thinking about 'complex grammar' or linking phrases.

Here is a question that a lot of students ask: **Is it acceptable to use "I" or "my" in IELTS writing?**

Some teachers tell students not to use "I" in academic essays, but this advice is really for university academic writing, not IELTS.

Read, analyse and use the paragraph:

1. How many sentences are there, and what does each sentence do?
2. Note the main ideas and collocations (e.g. sustainable energy source).

3. Try to rewrite the paragraph using only your notes.

PS. If you have my [ebook](#), you will find some ideas for the 'negatives of nuclear power' in the environment chapter on page 19.

how to write an introduction for this type of question. My simple rules for task 2 introductions are:

1. Write 2 sentences: introduce the topic, then give a general answer.
2. Mention everything that the question mentions.
3. Don't save any surprises for the conclusion; give your opinion in the introduction if the question asks for it.

Main body paragraphs:

I tried to use an "Idea, Explain, Example" structure for the first paragraph, and a "Firstly, Secondly, Finally" structure for the second.

Note:

I went a bit "over the top" with this essay. It's 310 words long, and more than good enough for band 9. You might not be able to write like this, but hopefully you can learn something from it.

(go over the top: to do something that is more than what is considered normal or suitable)

57.1 'media' topic (Wednesday, February 01, 2012)

Compare the advantages and disadvantages of three of the following as media for communicating information. State which you consider to be the most effective. Comics books radio television film theatre

Usually I recommend writing 4 paragraphs, but for this question I think I would write 5 paragraphs: (from Cambridge IELTS book 4)

1. Introduction: state which 3 media you are going to write about (e.g. books, radio, TV), and say which you think is most effective (e.g. television).
2. Advantages and disadvantages of books.
3. Advantages and disadvantages of radio.
4. Advantages and disadvantages of TV (mention again that you consider this the most effective).
5. Conclusion: summarise and repeat your opinion.

57.2 books, radio, TV (Wednesday, February 08, 2012)

Advantages / disadvantages of books:

The main advantage of books is that they are usually considered to be reliable sources of information. People tend to refer to books when they want to research a subject in depth, and for this reason they continue to play an important role in education. On the other hand, books quickly go out of date, and therefore they are not the best medium for communicating news stories.

Advantages / disadvantages of radio:

Radio is a much more effective medium than books for the communication of up-to-date information. We can listen to news broadcasts about events as they happen, and a key benefit of radio is that we can listen to it while doing other activities, such as driving or working. The main drawback of radio, when compared to books or television, is that there is no visual element; we cannot see what the broadcaster is describing.

Advantages / disadvantages of TV, and my opinion:

In my opinion, television is the most effective of these three media because it brings us closer to reality than a book or radio programme ever can. For example, we can watch events as they take place on the other side of the world, or we can see the body language of a politician who is being interviewed. The disadvantages of television are that programmes tend to be short and interrupted by advertisements, meaning that information is presented in limited depth.

Here are my 'main body' paragraphs for last week's question. **Notice that it's possible to put advantages and disadvantages together in the same paragraph.** Also, you need to be careful not to write too much!

57.3 introductions and conclusions (Wednesday, February 15, 2012)

Many students waste time writing long introductions and conclusions. **These two paragraphs should be short and simple; a long, complex introduction or conclusion will not give you a high score.**

Just make your introductions and conclusions quick and concise, and spend your time writing really good main body paragraphs.

Here's my introduction and conclusion for the topic of my last two writing lessons:

Introduction

There are various benefits and drawbacks of books, radio and television as ways to convey information. In my view, television is definitely the most effective of these three media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although books, radio and television each have their advantages and disadvantages, it seems to me that the impact of television is greater.

58. 'art and science' topic (Wednesday, February 22, 2012)

Here's my recommended 4-paragraph essay plan:

1. Introduction: we could accept that artists are popular nowadays, but disagree that science and technology are treated as less important.
2. Main paragraph about the popularity of artists. I'd use examples as the basis for this paragraph. If you don't know any writers or painters, you can talk about actors and musicians.
3. Main paragraph about the importance of science and technology. I'd write about the popularity of mobile phones, computers and tablets. Maybe I'd use Steve Jobs or Bill Gates as examples of people who are famous for the technologies they created.
4. Conclusion: paraphrase the argument that you presented in the introduction.

59. agree, disagree, or both? (Wednesday, March 14, 2012)

A) Essay structure for one side of the argument:

1. Introduction: topic + your opinion (either agree or disagree)
2. First idea to support your opinion
3. Second idea to support your opinion
4. Conclusion: repeat your opinion

B) Essay structure for giving both sides:

1. Introduction: topic + say that you 'partly agree'
2. On the one hand,...
3. On the other hand,...
4. Conclusion: repeat that you accept elements of both arguments

60. topic sentences (Wednesday, March 21, 2012)

I normally write my topic sentences by thinking about how many points I want to mention in the paragraph:

1. If I only have one point or idea, I usually state it straight away:

In my opinion, junk food is the main cause of childhood obesity.

(then explain this opinion and give examples in the rest of the paragraph)

2. If I have two or three points or ideas, I don't usually mention them directly in the topic sentence:

There are two main causes (or 'several causes') of childhood obesity.

(then explain using "firstly, secondly..." or something similar)

Have a look through the essays that you've written in the past, and compare them with some of mine. Did you begin your main paragraphs with good topic sentences?

61. four question types (Wednesday, March 28, 2012)

1. **Opinion** Some people think that the only purpose of working hard is to earn money. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?
2. **Discussion + opinion** Some people believe that punishment is the only purpose of prisons, while others believe that prisons exist for various reasons. Discuss both views and give your opinion.
3. **Problem + solution** The number of plants and animals is declining. Explain this problem and suggest some solutions.
4. **2-part question** Many people around the world are choosing to move to live in cities. What problems do people experience in big cities? Should governments encourage people to move to smaller towns?

Important points to remember:

- An 'opinion' question asks for your view, not the views of other people, and you don't have to give both sides of the argument. Just make your opinion clear in the introduction, then explain it in the rest of the essay.
- A 'discussion' question requires you to write about both sides of the argument, and you should write a similar amount for each view. If the question also asks for your opinion, you don't need an extra paragraph. Just make it clear in the introduction and conclusion which of the two views you agree with.
- Type 3 is easy. Simply write a paragraph explaining the problem(s) and a paragraph explaining the solution(s). Some questions ask about 'causes' or 'effects': these would be part of the 'problem' paragraph.
- For type 4, just answer the two questions. Write one paragraph about each.

This seems to me to be a perfect question for a "balanced opinion" answer (i.e. both art and science are given equal importance). However, notice that you need to **disagree** with the question statement in order to give this balanced response.

These days people pay more attention to artists (writers, painters and so on) and give less importance to science and technology. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

For 'agree or disagree' essays, do you think you should give both sides of the argument or just one side? The answer is that you can do either.

Remember: it's very important to get the introduction right. This tells the examiner whether you are going to give one side of the argument or both sides.

A good way to start a paragraph is with a short, simple sentence that introduces the main idea of the paragraph. Teachers often call this a 'topic sentence'.

Here are 4 questions that illustrate the different types of task 2 question. Can you name each type? Can you explain the big difference between the first and the second type?

62. examples give you ideas (Wednesday, April 11, 2012)

Use examples to give you ideas:

- Make a list of some hobbies: either your own hobbies, or some typical hobbies that you can easily write about. Label each hobby 'easy' or 'difficult'.
- Look at your list. Is there a balance between easy and difficult hobbies, or is your list one-sided? The answer to this question will give you your overall opinion.
- Finally, write down a few reasons why each hobby is easy or difficult. Is there a connection between the difficulty of the hobby and the enjoyment you get from it?

Some hobbies are relatively easy, while others present more of a challenge. Personally, I believe that both types of hobby can be fun, and I therefore disagree with the statement that hobbies need to be difficult in order to be enjoyable.

On the one hand, many people enjoy easy hobbies. One example of an activity that is easy for most people is swimming. This hobby requires very little equipment, it is simple to learn, and it is inexpensive. I remember learning to swim at my local swimming pool when I was a child, and it never felt like a demanding or challenging experience. Another hobby that I find easy and fun is photography. In my opinion, anyone can take interesting pictures without knowing too much about the technicalities of operating a camera. Despite being straightforward, taking photos is a satisfying activity.

On the other hand, difficult hobbies can sometimes be more exciting. If an activity is more challenging, we might feel a greater sense of satisfaction when we manage to do it successfully. For example, film editing is a hobby that requires a high level of knowledge and expertise. In my case, it took me around two years before I became competent at this activity, but now I enjoy it much more than I did when I started. I believe that many hobbies give us more pleasure when we reach a higher level of performance because the results are better and the feeling of achievement is greater.

In conclusion, simple hobbies can be fun and relaxing, but difficult hobbies can be equally pleasurable for different reasons.

63. 'university' topic (Wednesday, May 02, 2012)

Here are some ideas:

- It would probably be easiest to argue that universities should fulfil both roles (providing vocational skills **and** knowledge for its own sake).
- We could use examples to help us generate ideas: try to make a list of some vocational degree courses (that provide training for a specific job), and a list of courses that do not lead to a particular job.
- Write one main paragraph explaining the benefits (to the student and to society in general) of the two types of course.

64. 'prisons' topic (Wednesday, May 09, 2012)

On the one hand, criminals do need to be punished in some way. A person who commits a crime must learn that unlawful actions have consequences. Prison sentences punish offenders because they lose their freedom, and are separated from family and friends. In this way, prison acts as a deterrent to make people think carefully before breaking the law. Last year in the UK, many people were given a prison sentence for rioting, and hopefully this punishment will deter them from similar behaviour in future.

Analysis:

1. The paragraph contains 5 sentences, with a total of 85 words. This is the kind of length I suggest aiming for.
2. The first sentence is short and simple. We often call this type of sentence a 'topic sentence' because it introduces the topic of the paragraph.
3. Sentences 2, 3 and 4 develop the main idea in a logical, step-by-step way: crime has consequences - loss of freedom is the punishment - this stops people from breaking the law.
4. Sentence 5 contains a real example.
5. Remember that good vocabulary is the key to a high score. I've underlined the best words and phrases in the paragraph.

If you can't think of any good ideas for an essay, try thinking about some examples first. Plan your essay around the examples. Take this question:

Some people believe that hobbies need to be difficult to be enjoyable. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

When I wrote my list of hobbies, I realised that some were easy and others were difficult. As a result, I'd say that "I partly agree" with the statement.

Here's my 4-paragraph essay plan:

1. Introduction- write 2 sentences: introduce the topic, and give an overall answer.
2. Main paragraph- about difficult hobbies. My examples: swimming, football, chess. Most sports and games are difficult, but the challenge makes them more enjoyable, especially when you can see that you are improving.
3. Main paragraph- about easy hobbies. My examples: photography, reading, cinema. In my opinion, you do not need to be an expert to enjoy taking photos, reading books, or watching films. I find these activities both easy and enjoyable.

4. Conclusion- repeat / summarise your answer in one sentence.

Note: Notice that we used examples as the basis of both main paragraphs.

*Some people think that **universities** should **provide graduates with the knowledge and skills needed in the workplace**. Others think that the true function of a university should be to **give access to knowledge for its own sake, regardless of whether the course is useful to an employer**. What, in your opinion, should be the function of a university?*
(from Cambridge IELTS 7)

65. both sides or one side? (Wednesday, May 16, 2012)

Can you see the difference between the two questions below?

- A) Explain the positives and negatives of this development.
- B) Is this a positive or negative development?

and these two questions:

- A) What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- B) Do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages?

and these two questions:

- A) Discuss both views and give your opinion.
- B) To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Answer: The difference is that for all of the (A) questions you must explain both sides of the argument, whereas the (B) questions can be answered by giving both sides or by supporting only one side, depending on the view that you express in your introduction.

This is still the most common confusion that students ask me about. Make sure you understand the difference between the questions above; if you're still unsure, look through all of my task 2 lessons to see further advice and examples.

66. the importance of planning (Wednesday, May 23, 2012)

The range and quality of food that we can buy has changed because of technological and scientific advances. Some people regard this change as an improvement, while others believe that it is harmful. Discuss both views and give your own opinion.

Follow these steps before you start writing:

1. Take a couple of minutes to read and understand the question.
2. Decide what each of your 4 paragraphs should contain.
3. Spend around 6 minutes noting down ideas for the two points of view.

67.1 fully respond to the question (Wednesday, June 13, 2012)

One of the things that the examiner will check carefully is whether or not you have fully responded to the question.

Some people think that all teenagers should be required to do unpaid work in their free time to help the local community. They believe this would benefit both the individual teenager and society as a whole. Do you agree or disagree?

67.2 completely disagree (Wednesday, June 20, 2012)

When you completely agree or completely disagree with the question statement, you don't need to write about the other side of the argument. Just state your opinion and give reasons. Today I'll show you how to write a 'disagree' essay.

Many young people work on a volunteer basis, and this can only be beneficial for both the individual and society as a whole. However, I do not agree that we should therefore force all teenagers to do unpaid work.

Most young people are already under enough pressure with their studies, without being given the added responsibility of working in their spare time. School is just as demanding as a full-time job, and teachers expect their students to do homework and exam revision on top of attending lessons every day. When young people do have some free time, we should encourage them to enjoy it with their friends or to spend it doing sports and other leisure activities. They have many years of work ahead of them when they finish their studies.

At the same time, I do not believe that society has anything to gain from obliging young people to do unpaid work. In fact, I would argue that it goes against the values of a free and fair society to force a group of people to do something against their will. Doing this can only lead to resentment amongst young people, who would feel that they were being used, and parents, who would not want to be told how to raise their children. Currently, nobody is forced to volunteer, and this is surely the best system.

In conclusion, teenagers may choose to work for free and help others, but in my opinion we should not make this compulsory. (250 words, band 9)

When the question topic is difficult, planning becomes even more important. If you start writing your essay straight away, without preparing some ideas first, you will probably get stuck and start to panic!

I think you'll agree that this is a tricky question. My advice would be to spend about 10 minutes planning.

The student wrote about the advantages and disadvantages of unpaid work for teenagers, but completely forgot to mention the benefits and/or drawbacks for society as a whole.

If you don't fully answer the question, it's extremely difficult to get a band 7.

Here's my 4-paragraph plan:

1. **Introduction:** introduce the topic of unpaid work for teenagers, and make it clear that you completely disagree with the idea of requiring (forcing) young people to do this.

2. **First reason:** explain why this idea would not benefit teenagers e.g. they are already busy with school work, they should be allowed to enjoy being young, they have many years of work ahead of them when they finish their studies.

3. **Second reason:** explain why this idea would not benefit society e.g. forcing young people to work goes against the values of a free society, the current system of volunteering is better, this idea would be impossible to enforce.

4. **Conclusion:** repeat your opinion that requiring teenagers to work benefits neither the teenagers nor society as a whole.

68.1 before you start writing (Wednesday, July 04, 2012)

Before you start writing your task 2 essay, you need to do two things:

1. Plan your overall essay structure (ideally 4 paragraphs)
2. Spend some time thinking of ideas for the main body paragraphs

68.2 from ideas to paragraph

I always tell my students to plan ideas for their main body paragraphs. Let's look at how to put some ideas together to make a paragraph. Here's the question:

Example 1: The main reason people go to work is to earn money.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Ideas for one main paragraph:

- agree that money is the main reason people work
- people look at salary first, they rarely take a salary cut
- need to live, pay bills, food etc.
- look after our families, save for the future
- otherwise, most people would probably choose not to work

Full paragraph using the ideas above:

I agree that the majority of people work in order to earn money. Before taking any other factors into account, it is normal to first consider the salary that a particular post offers, and it is rare to hear of a person who happily takes a cut in pay when beginning a new job. We all need money to pay for our basic necessities, such as accommodation, bills and food. Many adults also have families who depend on the wages they earn, and at the same time they are conscious of the need to save for the future. If we no longer needed money, I doubt most of us would choose to continue in our jobs. (116 words)

Example 2: The number of plants and animals is declining.

Describe the problem and suggest some solutions.

Ideas for describing the problem:

- over-farming, land needed for crops and animals
- cutting down trees destroys natural habitats, animals become extinct
- industrial waste in rivers, sea
- chemicals kill fish and plants, interrupt natural cycles / food chain

It seemed that we had 2 main ideas, so we wrote a 2-idea paragraph:

There are two main reasons why plants and animals are disappearing. Firstly, in many parts of the world trees are being cut down to make way for farmland on which to grow crops and keep animals. The result of this is that natural habitats are being destroyed, and in some cases whole species of animals are becoming extinct. Secondly, human activity is also responsible for the destruction of aquatic life as domestic and industrial waste is pumped into rivers and seas. This chemical waste kills plants and fish, interrupting natural cycles and having a devastating effect on food chains. (99 words)

68.3 problem & solution introduction (Wednesday, July 25, 2012)

My advice for task 2 introductions is to write them very quickly. Just write 2 sentences: one to introduce the topic, and one to give a basic answer. Let's look at how to do this for a "problem and solution" question:

The number of plants and animals is declining. Describe some reasons for this problem and suggest some solutions.

Here's my introduction:

It is undeniable that wildlife habitats are being destroyed and whole species of plants and animals are disappearing. There are several causes of this alarming trend, but measures could certainly be taken to tackle the problem.

Note: In the second sentence you don't need to give any causes or solutions; save your ideas for the main paragraphs.