

How to Hack Independent Speaking Questions

Independent questions in both the writing and speaking section of the test ask you to elaborate on your opinion to a question.

The question can be about any topic, so there is no point preparing a specific response.

Even though you can't predict the question, you can predict the structure of your response and, even, the theme of the question.

I will explain more as we go.

After the question is read, you have:

15 seconds - prepare a response

45 seconds - provide a spoken response.

Hack # 1 - The Introduction

Let's look at a question from the past.

The Question:

What do you consider to be the most important room in the house where you grew up? Why was this room more important than any other room? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

I chose this particular question on purpose because it's a little strange and requires thought.

For many students, the hardest part of the speaking is the first sentence, so let's find a word or phrase you can use every, single time you start. You only have 15 seconds to prepare, so you want to have certain parts of your response memorized so you don't have to think about them. The introduction and conclusion are the parts you should have memorized.

“To me...”

You can say other things like, **“In my opinion...”**, **“If I were asked...”**, **“I think...”** **“I believe...”** and so on. However, beginning with **“To me...”** or **“For me...”** sounds the most natural. If you begin your response with:

~~“In my opinion, the living room was the most important room in the house where I grew up for a couple of reasons.”~~

That sounds a lot like a script someone memorized and it doesn't sound very natural. You want to find a balance between natural and academic. You want to sound comfortable, clear, and professional. You want to sound like you're fluent in English! Here's my sentence:

“To me, my bedroom was the most important room in the house where I grew up because I had complete control over it.”

Doesn't that sound more natural?

Your first sentence is very important. We need to spend time thinking about it. If you noticed, I did three things in my first sentence:

1. I restated the question.
2. I gave my opinion.
3. I provided one reason for my opinion.

“To me, my bedroom was the most important room in the house where I grew up because I had complete control over it.”

In one little sentence I did three different things. I restated the question, gave my opinion and gave a specific reason. Also, you might have noticed that I didn't say “for a couple of reasons” and instead described one specific reason immediately.

Let's look at one more example:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Telephones and email have made communication between people less personal. Use specific examples to support your opinion.

“For me, I agree that telephones and email have made communication less personal because you no longer have to look someone in the eye when you talk with them.”

When you begin your speaking in this manner, you sound confident and concise. You shouldn't spend too long on your introduction. You only have 45 seconds to speak and in that time you have to explain your reasons and examples to help illustrate your opinion. The sooner you get into your reasons and examples, the more you'll be able to explain and the higher your score will be.

Hack # 2 - Your Personal Example

Speaking for 45 seconds about your opinion to a simple question is tough. The only way to fill that time is to provide a personal example.

However, it's hard to think of a personal example for every single question that may be asked. It's easy to think of a personal example of "the most important room in the house", but it's much more difficult to come up with a personal example to a question like:

Some people think governments should spend as much money as possible exploring space (for example, traveling to the moon and to other planets). Other people disagree and think governments should spend this money on our basic needs on Earth. Which of these two opinions do you agree with? Use specific reasons and details to support your answer.

How are you supposed to have a personal example about space travel?

Themes.

There are a few common themes that no matter what the content of the question asked, they are still asking the same question. Let me list out the themes first. After that I will provide an example of my own to each them and then apply it to some questions.

- 1. An example of when you were or weren't given the freedom to choose**
- 2. An example of an obstacle that either you or someone you know had to overcome through hard work**
- 3. An example of a personal risk that succeeded or failed**

4. An example of a time when you changed your mind; in particular, you felt one way before direct contact and a different way after, thusly emphasizing experience and trumping assumption

5. A piece of technology that has either improved your life or hurt it

6. Two characteristics of a decent person and an example

Let's take another look at the same question.

Some people think governments should spend as much money as possible exploring space (for example, traveling to the moon and to other planets). Other people disagree and think governments should spend this money on our basic needs on Earth. Which of these two opinions do you agree with? Use specific reasons and details to support your answer.

Instead of thinking about this in terms of space, let's try to think about it in terms of theme #3, risk.

Going into space is risky. You don't know what's going to happen. You could invest millions of dollars into a space project that yields no returns.

My Personal Example:

When I first started out as a teacher I had planned on staying in that one career for the rest of my life. I thought I would teach in the same school for decades before retirement. However, I thought I could do more. I wasn't happy with the way the education system treated the kids and wanted to make my own career as an independent educator, using the principles that I believed would be best for students. It was risky. I quit my job and became an independent teacher. While I still have trouble paying rent and finding students, I'll never regret my decision. If I hadn't taken the risk I would have stay at one job for the rest of my life, always wondering about the possibilities.

My Space Travel Response (with risk example)

To me, I think governments should invest money in to space travel because it could lead to an amazing discovery that will forever change humanity. I know it's a risk, but sometimes in life you have to take risks to grow. When I was just starting out as a

teacher, I taught in public schools and had a stable career and income. But, after less than a year, I quit and became an independent educator. I didn't know what awaited me, but there was more opportunity for me to grow as a teacher outside of the traditional classroom. I wanted to bring my own teaching philosophy to students in a way that would make an impact not just in my own neighborhood, but online and all over the world. I believe politicians must make the same calculated risk in traveling to space. Sure, you don't know what's going to happen, but the potential benefits outweigh the drawbacks. That's why I believe that governments should invest money in space travel.

It makes sense, right?

This strategy is powerful, but dangerous, so be careful and not to go off topic. Your introduction should be 5-10 seconds, the transition from topic to personal example should be 5 seconds and the story should be about 20 seconds. After the story, be sure to tie it back to the topic at the end so the grader can see how it relates.

Let's take a look at one more question.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Advertising can tell you a lot about a country. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

I immediately think of theme #4 for this example, when experience trumps assumption. Here's my own personal example.

My Personal Example

I decided to become a teacher because I was lazy. In America, public school teachers get a lot of holidays. Actually, public school teachers only work 180 days out of the year. It seemed like a great, stable job with a lot of benefits and vacation. However, when I stepped into the classroom on my first day all that changed. My first class was huge and filled with students from different economic, social and cultural backgrounds. It was so hard to manage the lesson and their behavior at the same time. I was exhausted after teaching just one class for forty minutes. And besides the teaching, I also had to prepare every lesson which took three times as long as the class itself. After that, I understood that how something looks on paper is much different than the reality. Now how can I relate this to a question about a country and advertising?

My Advertising Response (with assumption example)

To me, I don't think advertising can tell you a lot about a country because it's only a small window into a rich and complex culture with a long history. The famous idiom "you can't judge a book by its cover" comes to mind. This remind me of when I just started out teaching. On paper, teaching seemed like an easy job; 180 days a year of work with benefits. But the reality of the classroom was much different. On my first day of class, after just one 40 minute lesson I was exhausted. I didn't realize how much work it would be to prepare a lesson, manage the students and actually teach the class. The reality of not just a job, but a country is so much more complex than how it looks on paper. That's why I think you can't learn a lot about a country through their advertising.

Please keep in mind, this strategy doesn't always work. For example a question like this won't fit into any of the themes (I think).

**If you could go back to some time and place in the past, when and where would you go?
Why? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.**

However, this is a powerful way to prepare for the speaking so you don't have to come up with some random example, but instead, one that you have prepared.

Hack # 3 - Finish on Time with a Conclusion

This lack hack is pretty quick and simple.

Your conclusion should always be like this:

That's why (opinion) (restate the question).

This little sentence is like an extra five seconds that you will always have in your pocket.

If you finish without saying this conclusion sentence, that's okay, but your speaking will sound much better if you have just one short conclusion sentence. A conclusion will make your thoughts and ideas sound complete.

While you speak, you will look at the clock at least twice. Once you see the 40 second mark, it's time to state your conclusion.

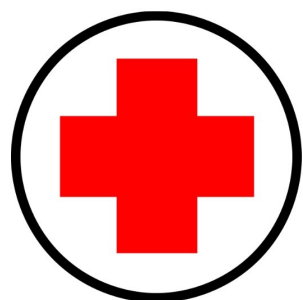
This conclusion will help you manage your time and save you some mental space since you don't have to think much about how you are going to end. You will end with this sentence every single time.

"That's why I believe that governments should invest money in space travel."

"That's why I think you can't learn a lot about a country through their advertising."

That's why (opinion) (restate the question).

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