

6 Help yourself

Thinking skills activity

IELTS and academic study require you to think clearly and critically about ideas and arguments. These three questions illustrate three areas of critical thinking: identifying underlying assumptions, spotting flaws in arguments, and separating main conclusions from secondary details.

- 1 Read each text then answer the questions. Check your answers in the key and reflect on the thinking process you used.

Wild cat conservation

Many wild cat species, such as tigers and pumas, are endangered and may face extinction without human intervention. As human settlements have expanded, territories that can provide enough natural prey for these animals have shrunk. Hunting, a further factor in their decline, is normally in response to wild cats killing livestock to supplement their usual food sources. Where measures have been taken to establish conservation areas of sufficient size, the decline in species numbers has been reversed.

Which of these is a major *underlying assumption* of this passage?

- A Wild cats rely on livestock for their food.
- B Most wild cat decline is due to hunting.
- C Wild cats ideally require territories of a certain size.
- D Only conservation areas can ensure wild cat survival.

An *underlying assumption* is an idea contained in a text which the author expects you to accept as true.

2

VITAMINS

So how worried should we be about getting enough vitamins in our diets? Nutritionists have known for decades that a minimum intake of vitamins is necessary for the healthy working of the human body. Therefore, if we get the correct amount of vitamins in our diets, we will ensure that we have good health.

Which of these is the best statement of the *flaw* in this argument?

- A It assumes that vitamins are necessary for good health.
- B It assumes that vitamins alone are enough for good health.
- C It ignores the fact that some vitamins are better than others.
- D It assumes that everyone requires the same amount of vitamins.

A *flaw* is a mistake in the logic of an argument. This normally happens when someone draws the wrong conclusion from the facts given.

3

Speed cameras

The last ten years have seen a large increase in the use of cameras as a way of deterring speeding. Their success means that there should be no reduction in their use as a traffic management method. Motorists have complained that police and local authorities have introduced them to raise money, but this misses the point that a great advantage of these schemes is that they have been self-financing with money from fines. Other methods such as narrower roads and lower speed limits are common, but even here the speed camera is useful to encourage motorists to obey the law.

Which of these statements expresses the *main conclusion* of the above argument?

- A Motorists often object unreasonably to speed cameras.
- B Cameras can be used with other methods of reducing speed.
- C Money from fines makes speed cameras a relatively cheap option.
- D The use of cameras to control car speeds should be continued.

The *main conclusion* is the most important idea that the writer wants us to draw from the information given.

How can being aware of critical thinking skills like these help you in the IELTS Reading paper? Which tasks does it relate to?

How can being aware of critical thinking skills help you in the IELTS Writing paper?

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Answer

1 Wild cat conservation

- A Incorrect. You probably made the connection between livestock and food. Wild cats eat livestock for food, but the phrase 'rely on' overstates the importance of livestock.
- B Incorrect. You probably identified hunting as a threat. Hunting is a stated factor in their decline, but 'most' overstates the impact of hunting.
- C Correct. It is implied that wild cats need territories that can 'provide enough natural prey'.
- D Incorrect. You probably ignored the word 'only'. Conservation areas can ensure their survival, but they may be other methods.

2 Vitamins

- A Incorrect. You probably identified this as an assumption, which it is. However, it is a reasonable assumption, and does not make the argument invalid.
- B Correct. Vitamins are necessary for good health. However, they are not sufficient for good health. Other factors, such as exercise, are also required.
- C Incorrect. You probably noticed that this fact was ignored. However, it is not necessary to take into account all factors for an argument to be valid.
- D Incorrect. You probably noticed the phrase 'the correct amount'. This could mean 'the correct amount for each person', but itself does not make the argument invalid.

3 Speed cameras

- A Incorrect. You probably noticed that motorists' complaints 'miss the point'. However, this is a subsidiary point.
- B Incorrect. You probably noticed 'narrower roads and lower speed limits,' but this is a subsidiary point.
- C Incorrect. You probably noticed that speed cameras are 'self-financing', but this is a subsidiary point.
- D Correct. The passage state 'there should be no reduction in their use' near the start. The later points deal with objections to this main conclusion.