

# IELTS Writing – a discursive composition

There are five steps in the process of writing a discursive essay in the Writing part of IELTS.

step 5	check the answer
step 4	write the answer
step 3	plan the answer
step 2	think about the answer
step 1	analyse the question (topic)

## STEP 1 (approx. 1 minute)

Questions in both parts of the exam are of 2 basic types. Let's refer to them as 'argue' type and 'describe' type questions.

### 'Argue' type questions

Firstly, there are questions requiring an **argument** as an answer. Essays that contain an argument are those in which your opinions regarding a topic are essential, as is your understanding and presentation of conflicting opinions. You should consider the argument as having two sides (usually **yes/no**, or **positive/negative**), one of which you support.

If you reduce the argument to a **yes/no** question, the essay you write will be much like a debate in which you present both sides of the issue: the side you believe in, and the side the opponents of your views believe in. You should support your argument with sufficient evidence in order to prove your point, as well as prove that the opposing side of the argument is wrong or untrue.

### 'Describe' type questions

Secondly, there are questions which require an **account** as an answer. Essays of this type ask you to describe and explore the situation regarding the topic, with less emphasis on giving opinions. You should describe the situation regarding the topic, and explore the reasons for the situation being what it is. Although in this case you do not have to support an argument, it is wise to provide evidence of the truth (or otherwise) of the situation.

In both 'argue' and 'describe' questions you may need to make recommendations, offer solutions or give advice.

### Exercise 1

Look at these tasks and determine question type, 'argue' or 'describe'. Then check with the answers given at the bottom of this page.

**Task 1** *Studying the English language in an English-speaking country is the best but not the only way to learn the language. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?*

**Task 2** *Describe some of the problems that overpopulation causes, and suggest at least one possible solution.*

**Task 3** *Discuss the causes and some effects of widespread drug use by young people in modern day society. Make any recommendations you feel are necessary to help fight youth drug abuse.*

**Task 4** *To what extent is nuclear technology a danger to life on Earth? What are the benefits and risks associated with its use?*

### Topic and topic question

It will help when planning your answer to consider the writing tasks as being written in either **wh/how**, or **yes/no** question form. The latter is especially helpful when considering an 'argue' type (argument) question because it makes it easier to determine the opposing sides of the argument.

Look at the writing/speaking tasks in Exercise 1 and notice how they are turned into questions:

**Task 1** becomes a **yes/no** question:

*Studying the English language in an English-speaking country is the best, but is it the only way to learn the language?*

**Task 2** becomes a **wh** question:

*What problems does overpopulation cause? Can you suggest at least one possible solution?*

**Task 3** becomes two **wh** questions:

*What are the causes and effects of widespread drug use by young people in modern day society.*

*What recommendations do you feel are necessary to help fight youth drug abuse?*

**Task 4** becomes a **yes/no** question (and the original **wh** question):

*Is nuclear technology a danger to life on Earth? What are the benefits and risks associated with its use?*

## STEP 2 (approx. 2 minutes)

You are strongly advised to spend a few minutes brainstorming and planning. You will definitely need 5–7 minutes before turning your attention to the writing task itself.

Before you can plan your essay, you need to think of 2 or more main ideas that you will use to support what you have to say in your essay. This step is often referred to as "brainstorming". In a true brainstorming session you write down as many ideas and words as you can that come into your head as you think about the topic. Do not judge the worth of the ideas as they come to you — that comes later, after you have put the notes you have made into groups of associated words and ideas.

This preparatory brainstorm session — alone, with a partner, or in a group — is essential when writing essays. It shows the complexity of the task, and reveals what you already know and what you need to know about the topic in order to complete the essay. Practise brainstorming well in advance of taking the exam. Write down on a blank piece of paper as many ideas and words as you can about the topic you choose.

Look at the following brainstorming session.

<i>studying English</i>		
<i>English-speaking country</i>	<i>non-English-speaking country</i>	
<i>language school</i>	<i>at secondary school</i>	<i>parent's help</i>
<i>problems with homesickness</i>	<i>learn from books</i>	<i>less stressful</i>
<i>live with British family/people</i>	<i>advantages – money</i>	<i>dedication</i>
<i>pronunciation better</i>	<i>spoken English not good</i>	
<i>teachers — native speakers</i>	<i>secondary school/university</i>	
<i>culture</i>	<i>students must work hard</i>	
<i>home stay</i>	<i>study and living costs</i>	
<i>listening reading</i>	<i>grammar — skill good for later</i>	

With 'argue' type questions, you will only write a successful essay if you can think of a minimum of 2 main supporting arguments for the case you wish to present. Similarly with 'describe' type questions, you will need a minimum of 2 main areas of discussion on which to base your essay about the topic.

### STEP 3 (approx. 2 minutes)

You do not have time in the actual exam to write a detailed plan like the sample plan shown below. Your plan will need to be much shorter, and perhaps only “written” in your head. However, once you have thought of the main ideas that your answer will contain, you do need to **structure and organise** your answer. Evidence of organisational ability counts to your final score.

You should only take a few minutes to read and understand the question, and to think of and construct an answer (approximately 5 minutes for steps 1 to 3). Therefore, it is important to know how to form a well-organised plan quickly and skillfully with the ideas you have brainstormed.

Look at the plan for the model answer for Task 1:

<b>PLAN (Task 1)</b>	
<b>TOPIC:</b>	<i>Studying English in an English-speaking country</i>
<b>ARGUE TYPE QUESTION:</b>	<i>It is the best, but is (the topic) the only way?</i>
<b>INTRO:</b> (approx. 30 words)	<i>there are advantages of English study in Britain</i> <b>BUT</b> <i>my opinion</i> — <b>NO</b> , <i>not the only way</i> <b>+ REASONS</b>
<b>BODY:</b>	
<b>PARAGRAPH 1</b> (approx. 50 words): (NO + REASONS)	<i>students learn English at high school and university</i> · <i>grammar skills often advanced, but speaking poor</i> · <i>good grammar will assist later in Britain</i>
<b>PARAGRAPH 2</b> (approx. 50 words): (NO + REASONS)	<i>English study at home less stressful and fewer problems</i> · <i>with accommodation</i> · <i>with study and living costs</i> · <i>with daily survival in foreign country</i>
<b>PARAGRAPH 3</b> (approx. 50 words): (BEST WAY + REASONS)	<i>advantages of English study in Britain</i> · <i>can practise listening to/speaking with native speakers</i> · <i>can experience the culture (assists language study)</i> · <i>should live with British family/people</i> · <i>should attend language school with native speakers</i>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> (approx. 20 words): (NO + REASONS)	<i>possible to reach good English level, if clever + work hard</i>
<b>200 words maximum)</b>	

Note these points about the plan:

- The plan is composed of 5 parts; topic, question type, introduction, body and conclusion.
- The purpose of the introduction is to express the topic clearly. Also, since the task in this case is to present an argument, the writer's opinion will be expressed in the introduction as well.
- There are 3 main ideas expressed in the body of the essay. The body consists of 3 paragraphs containing 2 main ideas to support the writer's opinion, and 1 main idea to balance the writer's opinion with the alternative viewpoint.
- The conclusion of the essay contains one minor point that is not fully developed, and a viewpoint that is conditional.
- The total of the proposed minimum number of words for each paragraph is the minimum number of words required to adequately complete the task.