

Types of Essay Question and how to answer them.

1. The discussion

Here you are given a social issue or problem and asked directly to discuss it and very often asked to suggest a solution for it.

Two examples

In this type of question you are given the problem (here in red) and then told how to discuss it/your task (in blue).

In many countries schools have severe problems with student behaviour. What do you think are the causes of this? What solutions can you suggest?

and

Many universities charge higher fees for foreign students. Why do they do this? Do you believe that it is fair?

Typical task words

- “Why do they think that?”
- “What solutions can you suggest?”

Typical problems

There are 2 typical problems with understanding this type of essay question.

1. You are being asked for your personal opinion: it is not enough to talk generally about the topic. You must give your personal view.
2. Very often you are given two tasks: for example, to discuss the causes and the solution. If you discuss only one of these, you will be penalised on Task Achievement.
3. The question does not give you much help with ideas: you may need to spend more time planning and thinking of ideas

2. The proposal

Here you are given an opinion about some social issue to discuss. Typically, you are asked whether or to what extent you agree with it.

Two examples

In this type of question you are given an opinion (in red) and then told how to discuss it/your task (in blue). Sometimes the question is longer and you are given some background information (in green), then the opinion and then the task.

Fatherhood ought to be emphasized as much as motherhood. The idea that women are solely responsible for deciding whether or not to have babies leads on to the idea that they are also responsible for bringing the children up. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

and

Currently there is a trend towards the use of alternative forms of medicine. However, at best these methods are ineffective, and at worst they may be dangerous. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Typical task words

- “What is your opinion?”
- “Do you agree that...”
- “To what extent do you agree?”
- Discuss

Typical problems

There are three typical problems with understanding this type of essay question:

1. The questions are simply longer to read and sometimes harder to understand. Spend plenty of time reading the question and underlining the key words and making sure you understand what words like “this” and “these” refer to.
2. It can be easy to confuse the background information from the opinion. You must discuss the opinion (the bit in red). If you only discuss the topic (the bit in green), you will be penalised on Task Achievement.
3. You need to discuss the opinion in the question. You cannot only give your opinion.

3. The argument

Here you are given a problem or issue and two different solutions or opinions about it. Typically, you are then asked to decide which solution/opinion is the better.

Two examples

The argument type essay question has two main types. In the first type, you get two different situations or opinions (red) and then your task (in blue) is to decide between them.

In some countries people pay different rates of tax depending on their salary, in other countries everyone pays the same rate. Which do you believe is the best system?

In the second type, you get a solution (in red) to a situation (in green) and you then your task (in blue) is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of that solution.

Unemployment is one of the most serious problems facing developed nations today. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of reducing the working week to thirty five hours?

Typical task words

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?”

Typical problems

There are two typical problems here:

1. The essay discusses the problem generally and doesn't talk about advantages or disadvantages or make a choice between the two options. Again this will be penalised under Task Achievement.
2. The essay only looks at the advantages or the disadvantages. It needs to look at both sides of the question.

Other question types

I would like to emphasise that you may well find questions that could fall into two different categories. That is not so important. What really matters is learning to look at each question and deciding what precisely it is asking you to do and what possible problems it poses.

A checklist

This is my very simple checklist to help you decide which type of question you are looking at:

1. Does it ask me what my own opinion is about a topic? → Discussion question → Use my own opinions
2. Does it ask me to discuss a particular proposal? → Proposal question → Discuss that proposal
3. Does it ask me to decide between two different opinions or look at the advantages and disadvantages of a topic → Argument question → Discuss both sides and come to a decision

An exercise

Look at these reported recent IELTS questions and decide which type of essay you need to write:

1. Many people have an unhealthy diet and do not take enough exercise. What do you think are the reasons for this and what can be done to encourage people to lead a more healthy lifestyle?
2. Although countries with long average working hours are economically successful, this often has some negative social consequences. To what extent do you agree or disagree?
3. Some people think that paying taxes is enough to contribute to society. Others argue that being a citizen involves more responsibilities. Discuss.
4. Many people argue that children should stay in school until the age of eighteen. What are the advantages and disadvantages of making school compulsory until the age of 18?
5. Many people nowadays leave their country to work abroad and take their family with them. What are the advantages and disadvantages in terms of family development?

Guided Answer Task 2 Writing

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

These days, more and more people are going to other countries for significant periods of time, either to find a job or to study. There are clearly many benefits to doing this, but people who live abroad can also face some difficulties.

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living and working in a foreign country.

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge of experience.

Write at least 250 words.

My Ideas

Advantages

Disadvantages

_____, starting life in a foreign country is never easy. You need to
w_____ up the pros of the better lifestyle, weather and so on, and the
cons of c_____ s_____ and language barrier. Personally, I believe
that _____