

Cambridge IGCSE / IGCSE (9–1) English as a Second Language 0510/0511 / 0993/0991 (for examination from 2024)

Writing an essay

Overview

The purpose of an essay is to present an argument or point of view and give examples or reasons to support it. The topic will be a question or an issue which people generally have different opinions about. The essay could present both sides of the argument, or just one, depending on the instructions given in the task. An essay should be written in a formal or neutral register and should be well organised, with an introduction, main body and a conclusion. It should include language appropriate for expressing opinions, agreeing and disagreeing. The vocabulary required will depend upon the topic.

Content

Content covers:

- Task fulfilment (whether the essay fulfills the task, how relevant the content is and an awareness of style, register, purpose and audience).
- Development of ideas (the detail/explanation provided).

Language

Language covers:

- Range (complexity of grammatical and lexical structures).
- Accuracy (the level of grammatical and lexical accuracy, the type of errors and whether these impede communication).
- Organisation (whether ideas are organised and sequenced effectively, the range of linking words/phrases and other cohesive devices).

Tips for writing an essay

Language

- think about the audience that the essay is for
- the tone of most essays should be neutral or formal
- your essay should clearly present opinions related to the topic
- include a range of grammatical structures and related vocabulary
- avoid writing very simple sentences with the same grammatical structures and simple repetitive vocabulary.

Organisation

An essay should be well organised, with an introduction, main body and a conclusion. It should include well-developed ideas.

You should use linking words/phrases which suit a more formal type of writing (e.g. furthermore, however, in conclusion, etc.) to link ideas in sentences and paragraphs.

One way to structure your essay is to have a balanced argument focusing on one side of the argument, then on the other side of the argument:

- Introduction – briefly outline the argument that the essay will discuss. Engage the reader to make them interested in the topic, for example, ask a rhetorical question to make a point and create a stronger effect.
- Present one side of the argument. Support your ideas with examples and/or reasons.
- Present the other side of the argument. Support your ideas with examples and/or reasons.
- Conclusion – this should briefly summarise what you have said and what you think about the argument. You can link your conclusion back to the beginning and/or encourage the reader to decide what they think about the same viewpoint.

Alternatively, an essay can be one-sided. You present one side of the argument, supported with examples and/or reasons. In this case, the organisation of your essay would be the same as above, with either one extended paragraph for the main body, or two or more shorter paragraphs each presenting a different reason to support your point of view.

Example task

This is an example of a **Paper 1 Exercise 6** task. We have annotated the question below with some **guidance** for candidates to help them prepare their answer and encourage them to focus on what the question is asking for. This guidance is not given to candidates in the examination.

Once you have read through the **task** and all the **instructions**, you should also read the **comments**. Before you start writing, **plan** how many paragraphs you will need and what reasons and examples you want to include in each paragraph.

In class, you have had a discussion about whether teenagers should eat fast food. Your teacher has asked you to write an essay about it.

In your essay, give your opinion about whether teenagers should eat fast food.

Here are some comments from your classmates:

Fast food tastes great!

It's cheaper to cook food at home.

It's not good for you.

Eating fast food saves time!

Now write an essay for your teacher.

The comments above may give you some ideas and you should also use some ideas of your own.

Write about 120 to 160 words.

You will receive up to 6 marks for the content of your essay and up to 9 marks for the language used.

The number of words required by candidates is **120 to 160 words**. Paying attention to the guidance for word limits will help you to plan your time in the examination more effectively.

The **purpose** of the essay is to present an argument about the topic described in the task.

Your teacher is the intended **audience** for the essay.

You can use some of the ideas from the **comments** in your essay, but you should expand on them and/or include other **ideas of your own**.

The response to this question needs to be in the form of an **essay** for your teacher, so the **register** should be **formal to neutral**. It should avoid language that is too idiomatic and colloquial.

Example candidate response and examiner comments

Example Candidate Response – middle	Examiner comments
<p>1 Teenagers love fast food. But is it good for them, or should they avoid it?</p> <p>2 To begin with, 3 it's usually quite tasty. Furthermore, it's quick and easy if you choose to eat fast food. You walk in to a restaurant, give your order, and your food is ready in just few minutes. When you're in a hurry, getting fast food is a good option.</p> <p>4 However, there are some disadvantages. 5 The main one is health. 6 Fast food contains fat, sugar and salt – all things that are bad for you and make you gain weight and becoming ill. The truth is that fresh food, cooked at home, is much better for you, even if it sounds boring to most teenagers. Fast food is also waste of money. It might to seem cheap, but if you buy it a lot, your money will soon disappear.</p> <p>7 Overall, I believe eating fast food ocasionaly isn't a problem, but fresh home-cooked food is best.</p>	<p>1 The candidate introduces the topic in the first paragraph and uses a rhetorical question to engage the reader. No heading is required for an essay.</p> <p>2 The candidate presents arguments in favour of fast food. The second opinion is well supported with reasons.</p> <p>3 The candidate uses a range of appropriate linking words, 'to begin with', 'furthermore', 'so', 'however' and 'also', to link their ideas together.</p> <p>4 In the third paragraph, the candidate presents arguments against fast food and both opinions are well supported with reasons.</p> <p>5 The candidate includes the ideas from the comments, but uses their own language, by changing grammatical structures and vocabulary where possible.</p> <p>6 The candidate uses some extended sentences and makes a few attempts at more complex structures.</p> <p>7 The candidate provides a clear conclusion which shows that the essay is effectively sequenced and organised. The candidate uses an appropriate choice of words for a neutral to formal register.</p> <p>Mark for Content = 6 out of 6 Mark for Language = 6 out of 9 Total mark awarded = 12 out of 15</p>

How the candidate could have improved their answer

The example answer shows that the candidate has a clear understanding of how to write an essay. The task is fulfilled and the ideas presented are all relevant. The audience is engaged in the introductory paragraph by the use of a rhetorical question. The candidate chose to present a balanced argument in this essay, focusing on each side of the argument in turn. The first main paragraph, which deals with the advantages of fast food, might be clearer if it began with a topic sentence, such as 'There are some obvious advantages of fast food.' Two advantages of fast food are included: the first is not supported with reasons or examples, but the second one is well developed. The second main paragraph focuses on the disadvantages of fast food and includes two ideas, both of which are well developed. The candidate then provides a clear conclusion, which is linked to the ideas presented in the previous two paragraphs and demonstrates an excellent sense of purpose and audience.

In terms of language, the candidate communicates the argument very clearly. The vocabulary used is appropriate to the topic and there is a good range, although this tends to be more common. The candidate could have chosen some less common vocabulary, e.g. 'take into consideration', 'lead to weight gain', 'lacks appeal', 'a bargain', 'constantly buy it', etc. The candidate uses a good range of simple structures, with some well-extended sentences, but could have included some more complex structures, such as, 'Not only is it quite tasty, it's also quick and easy...' and '... disadvantages to consider, the main one being your health.' The level of accuracy is generally good. There are a couple of spelling mistakes ('usually' and 'ocasionally'), missing articles ('just few minutes' and 'waste of money') and problems with verb forms ('becoming ill' and 'might to seem'), but these do not impede communication. Checking carefully for mistakes would help the candidate to gain a higher mark for language.

The candidate effectively organizes and sequences their ideas and uses a range of linking words to link ideas within and between paragraphs.

Common mistakes

Candidates should make sure that they read the task carefully and that they focus on the argument described, rather than writing about wider, more general issues associated with the topic.

If the task instructions state that arguments for and against should be included, then it is important that candidates address both points of view. They could present each point of view in separate paragraphs, as in this response, or they could combine them in a longer paragraph, as long as their argument is logically presented and developed clearly.

Some candidates try to introduce too many different ideas in their writing, which means that none are particularly well developed. It is better to include fewer ideas and develop one or two in greater depth. In this way, candidates can include some of their own ideas, which the task asks them to do.

Candidates should avoid overlong introductions and conclusions. They should also avoid pre-learned language for these parts of the essay, as this may not be totally relevant or might sound unnatural. Candidates should also ensure that their conclusion reflects the argument they have presented in the main body of the essay, so that the reader is fully informed as to the candidate's overall opinion.

Some candidates tend to overuse linking words, for example using 'Firstly', 'Secondly', and so on at the start of each sentence. This can make the essay difficult to read and feels unnatural, so it is sometimes better to limit their use and try to include other cohesive devices – relative clauses, exemplification, pronouns, punctuation, synonyms, etc.

Essays should be written in a neutral, semi-formal or formal style, in contrast with the informal style that is required for the email in Exercise 5. Therefore, candidates should avoid colloquial or 'chatty' language that would be more appropriate when writing to a friend and should use more neutral or formal language and structures in their writing.

Candidates should avoid copying the comments given in the task. Instead, they should try to use their own words as much as possible, by presenting the idea in each comment using different structures and vocabulary. In this way they can be credited for the language they use. Learning different ways of giving opinions and supporting them with examples and reasons is therefore advisable.

Examination preparation

Learners should practice writing essays in class. They should be encouraged to come up with ideas relevant to the topic, by brainstorming individually then in pairs or groups. It might help if they imagine they are a different person, for example considering what an older or younger person might think about the topic. They could also brainstorm topic-related vocabulary and different language for expressing opinions, as well as produce mind maps to share with each other. The next stage is to create a plan. To do this, learners need to consider the overall structure or organisation that they are going to use, which could be presented using a range of model answers or a writing frame. Learners should be encouraged to try different ways of organizing their essay, as long as the ideas are clear and the argument is easy to follow. After planning what to include in each paragraph, learners can produce a first draft. They should always check their own work, perhaps using checklists which focus on the main criteria that are described in the mark scheme and can also swap drafts with a partner to provide peer feedback.

Classroom activities

Assessment objectives (AOs)	Learning objectives	Suggested teaching activities
<p>AO2 Writing</p> <p>W1 communicate information, ideas and opinions</p> <p>W2 organise ideas into coherent text using a range of linking devices</p> <p>W3 use a range of appropriate grammatical structures and vocabulary</p> <p>W4 use appropriate register and style for the given purpose and audience</p>	<p>Writing strategies:</p> <p>Writing an essay</p> <p>Learners are able to plan and draft their writing and produce a coherent, well-organised structure.</p> <p>Learners understand the purpose, audience and form of an essay and can show this in their own writing.</p> <p>Learners are able to use vocabulary which is relevant to the topic of the essay.</p> <p>Learners can use a range of structures for giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing.</p> <p>Learners can check their writing to see if there are ways in which it could be improved.</p>	<p>Pre-learning (optional): This task could follow on from a reading or listening activity on the same topic, so learners already have some ideas. You could also ask learners to do some research into the topic for homework, either providing a range of resources or letting learners find their own.</p> <p>Starter: Display a statement on the board. For the topic of fast food, write one of the following:</p> <p><i>Fast food: good or bad? OR</i></p> <p><i>Some people think that fast food should be banned.</i></p> <p>Using the 'Think-Pair-Share' technique, ask learners to note down as many good things and bad things about fast food that they can think of, individually, in one or two minutes. Then put the learners into pairs (or small groups) to compare and combine their ideas and produce a simple mind map. Monitor learners while they are doing this. If they are struggling to produce ideas, combine two pairs (or small groups) into fours (or larger groups) to continue sharing.</p> <p>Give each group ten blank cards or pieces of paper (for example cut a page into quarters). Ask them to take two of the pieces, and write 'AGREE' on one and 'DISAGREE' on the other. Learners then need to choose four good things about fast food and four bad things about fast food from their mind maps and write one on each of the remaining pieces of paper in full sentences.</p> <p>When they have finished, ask learners to mix up their eight sentences so they are in a random order and place the AGREE and DISAGREE pieces at the bottom of the pile. Then each group should give their sentences to another group, and place them upside down on the table in front of them.</p> <p>First, each group should turn over the first two pieces (AGREE and DISAGREE) and place them on either side of the pile. Then each learner in turn should turn over a piece of paper, read the sentence to their group, say if they agree or disagree with it and say why. The group should then decide</p>

Assessment objectives (AOs)	Learning objectives	Suggested teaching activities
		<p>together which side to place the paper on, before the next learner continues with the next statement.</p> <p>When each group has finished, ask one or two learners to stay with their display while the others go around the class, looking at the other groups' ideas and commenting or asking questions as necessary. They should then return to their original tables and report back on what they observed.</p> <p>Development: Learners choose four statements: two good things and two bad things about fast food. Using the structure outlined in the 'Tips for writing an essay' section above, learners consider how they will write their essay.</p> <p>They should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how they will engage the reader at the start • what reasons or examples they will give to support the statements • what their overall opinion is. <p>As part of this planning stage, suitable vocabulary for the topic and ways of expressing opinions could be explored. Ensure learners understand the target audience and the formality that the task requires.</p> <p>Main task: Learners draft their essay on the topic. They should write in neutral or relatively formal English and use appropriate vocabulary throughout. Encourage learners to produce between 120 and 160 words.</p> <p>When learners have finished, provide them with a list of points to check their work against. This could be a series of questions, e.g. 'Is my spelling accurate?', 'Have I included an introduction, main paragraph(s) and a conclusion?' 'Have I used a range of vocabulary (or have I repeated the same words several times)?' and so on.</p> <p>Plenary: As learners finish checking and amending their work as necessary, they can swap their work with someone else to read and provide feedback. Ask them to write comments in the form of 'two stars and a wish': they should write two (or more) things they like about the essay and one suggestion (or more) for improvement.</p>

Useful resources

The [School Support Hub](#) provides teachers with a wide range of practical resources, detailed guidance and innovative training and professional development so that you can give your learners the best possible preparation for Cambridge IGCSE.

Teaching and learning resources (for examination from 2024)

- Scheme of Work
- Writing a report
- Writing a review
- Writing an article
- Writing an essay
- Writing skills lesson plans
- Specimen Paper Answers
- Example Candidate Responses (January 2025)

Please note: The website links below provide direct access to internet resources. Cambridge is not responsible for the accuracy or content of information contained in these sites. The inclusion of a link to an external website should not be understood to be an endorsement of that website or the site's owners (or their products/services). The website pages were selected when the guide was produced. Other aspects of the sites were not checked.

B2 First is a handbook for teachers preparing candidates for *Cambridge English Qualifications: B2 First*. Pdf and digital versions are available.

An essay about for and against use of the internet

This British Council website provides classroom material and lesson ideas which can be used to introduce techniques on how to write an essay on whether the internet is bad for young people.

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