

THIRD EDITION – EXTENSIVELY REVISED

Essay Writing for English Tests

Tác giả **GABI DUIGU**

Chủ giải tiếng Việt

Nguyễn Thành Yến

- **a step by step guide for
self-study & the classroom**
- **with exercises
and answer key**

**Preparing for the
IELTS ACADEMIC WRITING TASK 2**



NHÀ XUẤT BẢN TỔNG HỢP THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Tác giả

Gabi Duigu

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Introduction

This course describes a step-by-step approach to writing essays for the IELTS Academic Writing Module Task 2 and for other similar essay tasks. It provides exercises to practise the stages individually (Appendix A) as well as giving a list of typical essay topics, and there are model essays given in Appendix B. The Answer Key provides explanations as well as answers.

The Purpose

In order to be able to write good essays it is first of all essential to make sure that you understand the purpose of the task. It may seem obvious: the purpose is to test your ability to write essays for university or college in English. However, a moment's reflection will make it clear that the test task is quite unlike a university essay, since it is typically 1 to 2 pages long and is written on an unprepared topic in about 40 minutes. No university essay is like that. Even in university examinations, where you may have to write about two pages in half an hour, you are expected to have studied the subject in advance.

So let us consider some possible purposes for the English test essay. These can be said to be:

- a) to show that you are able to select relevant ideas and information to answer a question
- b) to show your knowledge and understanding of the topic
- c) to show your ability in presenting a logical argument
- d) to show your skills in organising your ideas systematically
- e) to show your ability to use sophisticated English
- f) to show your basic grasp of English grammar and vocabulary

These questions can be grouped into 4 categories, which reflect the 4 aspects of an essay:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Understanding the question | (a) |
| 2. Knowing the subject | (b) |
| 3. Thinking skills | (a & d) |
| 4. Language skills | (e & f) |

How should these be ranked in importance? Here is what the IELTS Handbook says for the Academic Writing Task 2:

In Task 2 candidates are presented with a point of view or argument or problem. Candidates are assessed on their ability to:

- present the solution to a problem
- present and justify an opinion
- compare and contrast evidence, opinions and implications
- evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument

The topics are of general interest and it makes no difference what subjects candidates study. The issues raised are interesting, suitable for and easily understood by candidates entering postgraduate or undergraduate studies.

This shows that your knowledge of the topic is not the main emphasis in this test. That is not surprising – after all, you are being examined for your writing ability in English, not for your knowledge. The main emphasis is in fact on your ability to **think and argue appropriately** about a common issue. This is because university students need to be able to analyse and discuss problems and solutions, and evaluate and express opinions. University study is not simply about presenting facts.

In order to argue appropriately there are two stages involved: a) understanding the question clearly, and b) being able to select the right method to present an opinion in a suitable way. This means organising your ideas and your language.

This book therefore deals with these three stages:

- I. Understanding the question
- II. Selecting and Presenting Ideas Appropriately
- III. Appropriate Language Use

Stage 1

The Question

1. Understanding the Question

The first step in essay writing is to analyse the **essay task** which tells you what the topic is, and also gives an indication of what kind of things you are expected to say about the topic.

Essay topics have 3 components:

- 1) the instruction words, telling you what to do
- 2) the key words indicating the topic
- 3) the words restricting⁽¹⁾ the topic, indicating what aspect⁽²⁾ of the topic you are asked to focus on⁽³⁾.

We will consider these one by one.

1.1 The Instructions

Look at these tasks:

- a) *Describe the role of the Internet in modern society.*
- b) *The environment is the most important issue in the world today. Discuss.*

What are the instruction words?

In a) it is **describe** and in b) it is **discuss**. These two words indicate the two most common types of essay that one can write.

If you are asked to **describe** something, then your essay will mostly present *facts* and not opinions. However, if you are asked to **discuss** something, then your *opinion* is being asked for, and you are usually expected to *evaluate* something, or to *argue* for or against something. At university or college you are expected to be able to discuss problems and ideas, rather than simply to report on facts, and so the IELTS essay question presents a common situation⁽⁴⁾ or a present-day issue⁽⁵⁾ about which people have different opinions, and asks you to give your own views on this topic.

(1) restrict /rɪ'strɪkt/ (vt) to limit sth. *giới hạn*

(2) aspect /'æspekt/ (n, c) one part of a problem, subject, etc. *mặt, khía cạnh*

(3) focus /'fəʊkəs/ (vt) (sth. on sth.) to give a lot of attention to one particular subject or thing *tập trung (vào cái gì)*

(4) situation /,sɪtʃu'eɪʃn/ (n, c) the set of things that are happening and the conditions that exist at a particular time and in a particular place *tình huống*

(5) issue /'ɪʃu:/ (n, c) an important subject or problem *vấn đề*

Here is the new wording of the instructions for the IELTS academic essay task.

Write about the following topic:

We live in a technological age. However, technology cannot solve all the world's problems. Therefore some people argue that we need to place less emphasis on technological solutions⁽¹⁾ and more on other values⁽²⁾.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

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

A comment is also supplied with the information (but not in the exam paper):

It is important to note that in the Academic Writing module candidates are expected to write in a style appropriate to an academic context. The writing should therefore be formal.

Because the essay topic must be suitable for candidates from many different backgrounds, the topic cannot be too academic or specialised. That is why you are asked to use your own knowledge and experience. On the other hand, you need to use a formal style because you are being tested for your ability to deal with academic writing.

We will deal with the **content** in the next section, with suggestions about how to use your own experience, and then a suitable **style** is discussed in Stage 3 of this book.

Now let us look at the topic itself.

Here is an example:

We live in a technological age. However, technology cannot solve all the world's problems. Therefore some people argue that we need to place less emphasis on technological solutions and more on other values.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

This has two components:

- the description of the topic, which is usually expressed as a point of view on a current situation and
- a question asking you what your opinion is.

Part a) is generally expressed in 1 to 3 sentences. One or two sentences may present a statement or a question about a situation: ("We live in a technological age, but technology cannot solve all our problems"). The second part will probably present a conclusion that some people draw from this situation ("therefore we should place less emphasis on

(1) solution /sə'lu:ʃn/ (n, c) the answer to a problem *giải pháp*
to solve /sɒlv/ (vt) *giải quyết*

(2) values /'vælju:z/ (n, pl) your beliefs about what is morally right and wrong and what is most important in life *nguyên tắc, chuẩn mực*

technology and more on other values"). This is designed to help you to think about the contents. (More about this in the next section.)

Part b) asks the question. This may be phrased as *to what extent do you agree?* or *what is your opinion?* or *do you agree with this?* or words to that effect.

Now, what is your task?

- to present both sides of the argument?
- to either strongly support or strongly oppose the argument, depending on your own personal opinion?
- to partly support or partly oppose the argument, depending on your own personal opinion?

The correct answer is either b) or c).

The words *to what extent* mean the same as *how much*. That is, your answer will express one of these attitudes:

- I agree completely
- I agree partly and disagree partly
- I disagree completely.

Many students feel that they need to present a strong argument for or against an idea or proposition⁽¹⁾. This is not true. Even if the words in the question are *What is your opinion* you do not have to express a strong opinion one way or the other.

There is another point to remember here. Although it is usually easier to write what you actually believe, it is not absolutely necessary. If you do not have enough ideas or examples to support the side of an argument that you want to support, you can always say something like: *on the one hand ... , but on the other hand* and present arguments for both sides. However, you should not simply contradict⁽²⁾ yourself. That is, you should not say *I agree* in one section and then *I disagree* in the next paragraphs. That sounds as if you are simply confused⁽³⁾ or are not expressing what you think at all. What you can say is: *These are some arguments for and these are some arguments against, and so I only partly agree/disagree*. Or you can say: *There are good arguments on both sides, but on the whole I prefer the arguments for/against*. (Of course you would not use these actual words. They only summarise the possible underlying⁽⁴⁾ meanings in your essay.)

Remember, you are not being examined on your opinions, but only on how well you can express and support some intelligent ideas, whether they are your own or not.

(1) proposition /,prəpə'zɪʃn/ (n, c) idea, opinion ý kiến

(2) contradict /,kɒntrə'dɪkt/ (vt) (oneself) to say that what you have just said is wrong phủ nhận, tự mâu thuẫn

(3) confused /kən'fju:zd/ (adj) unable to think clearly or to understand sth. lúng túng, bối rối

(4) underlying /,ʌndə'laɪɪŋ/ (adj) of the real reason though it is not obvious tiềm ẩn

1.2 Key Terms

This is usually the easiest part of the essay to deal with. Normally the key words deal with a familiar topic, such as the Internet, or television, or technology in general. This is because the examiners are not testing you for your knowledge, but rather for your ability to write well. Therefore the topics chosen will be about concepts and issues that they expect every educated person to know something about. Common topics include:

Education

The environment

Information Technology

The media

Advertising/Consumer issues

Social problems

Health

Lifestyles (including life in cities, traffic problems, quality of life)

Culture and society (music, art, literature, television etc.)

Foreign languages and travel

Sport

Scientific research (including genetic engineering, space travel)

Ethical⁽¹⁾ issues (right and wrong behaviour such as the treatment of animals, law enforcement etc.)

Try to think of other topics that you know have been used in previous examinations, or that you think might occur.

You can find sample questions on all of these topics in Appendix A.

In order to be prepared with ideas on such key concepts, it is necessary to keep up to date⁽²⁾ with the major issues being discussed in the world. The editorial pages⁽³⁾ of newspapers and news magazines are important sources of such information, as are current⁽⁴⁾ affairs radio and television programs.

(1) ethical /'eθɪkəl/ (adj) relating to moral principles/what is right or wrong *thuộc về đạo đức*

(2) to keep up to date (exp) *theo sát tình hình, cập nhật*

(3) editorial page /,edɪ'tɔ:riəl peɪdʒ/ (n, c) an article in a newspaper expressing the editor's opinion *trang xã luận*

(4) current /'kʌrənt/ (adj) happening or existing now *hiện thời*
current affairs *các vấn đề thời sự*

2. Analysing the Question

Understanding the question means more than understanding the instructions or the words of the question. It means recognising the **focus**⁽¹⁾ of the question, and knowing what **approach**⁽²⁾ you should take to the topic.

This is, in some ways, the most important aspect of writing the essay, and requires the most thought. You should therefore be prepared to spend at least 3 minutes thinking about what approach to take to the question.

The handbook, you remember, explains that

Candidates are assessed on their ability to:

- present the solution to a problem
- present and justify an opinion
- compare and contrast evidence, opinions and implications⁽³⁾
- evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument.

You will therefore need to decide which of these approaches is the one required for any particular question. You will also need to know when and how much to use **definitions** and **examples**.

In this section we will deal with the following features of a discussion or argument essay:

The Focus

The Context

Definitions

Examples

2.1 Finding the Focus

It is very important to look at the actual question words very closely. Students sometimes jump to conclusions about what they should write by just looking at the topic, and not at the focus of the topic. Consider the following questions:

- a) *Many people believe that the Internet is the most revolutionary new invention of the last century. Do you agree?*
- b) *The Internet has revolutionised the modern world, but many people argue that it has also created new problems and inequalities⁽⁴⁾. What is your opinion?*
- c) *The Internet could revolutionise the world in future, if everyone could have easy access to all the information that is available on the World Wide Web. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?*

(1) focus /'fəʊkəs/ (n, c) the central point *trọng tâm*

(2) approach /ə'prəʊtʃ/ (n, c) method *cách thức, cách tiếp cận*

(3) implications /,ɪmplɪ'keɪʃnz/ (n, c) suggestions *các đề xuất, các ứng dụng*

(4) inequality /,ɪnɪ'kwɒləti/ (n, u) the unfair difference between groups of people in a society when some have more advantages than others *sự điều bất bình đẳng*

In each of the above the topic is the Internet and its revolutionary role in the world. So you must have a basic idea about what the Internet involves and think about what *revolutionise* means, i.e. make *fundamental changes*. However, each one also raises a different question and must be answered differently. It is necessary to look at the remaining words carefully to see what is required:

- a) is the most revolutionary new invention of the last century.
- b) has revolutionised the modern world, but it has also created new problems and inequalities.
- c) could revolutionise the world in future, if everyone could have easy access to all the information that is available on the World Wide Web.

You can see that a) involves comparing the Internet with other inventions, and arguing that it is, or is not, the most revolutionary. On the other hand b) expects you to accept that it is revolutionary, and to consider both its benefits and the problems it has created. Finally c) wants you to speculate⁽¹⁾ about the future, and to consider how much you believe the future benefits will change the world.

2.2 Understanding the Context

Remember that the IELTS Handbook says that the topics are *of general interest and it makes no difference what subjects candidates study*. It goes on to say that *The issues raised are interesting, suitable for and easily understood by candidates entering post-graduate or undergraduate studies*.

The question is always based on an *issue*, or a *problem* which you are asked to analyse and present an opinion on. If something is considered a problem or an issue, it means that reasonable people must have conflicting⁽²⁾ opinions on the topic. You would not, for example, expect a question like this: *Some people consider that murder is wrong. To what extent do you agree?* since there is not much to be said in favour of murder. In other words, it is not just some people who think that murder is wrong, but basically everybody. It is not an issue. However, look at this question: *Some people think that murderers should be executed*⁽³⁾. *To what extent do you agree?* Here the question is about *what to do about murder*, and that is very controversial⁽⁴⁾. There are very strong opinions about this on both sides and you need to be aware of these to deal with such a topic. (In fact it is unlikely that IELTS will present you with very political or emotional issues like this.)

You therefore need to think, before you plan your own answer, why the question is considered to be an issue or a problem by the examiners. What are the different opinions that might exist on the topic? What is the **context** in which this topic is controversial? That is to say, who are the people who are concerned about it and why?

(1) speculate /'spekjuleɪt/ (vi, vt) to guess possible answers to a question when you do not have enough information to be certain *suy đoán*

(2) conflicting /kən'flɪktɪŋ/ (adj) different and not easy to exist together *xung đột*

(3) execute /'eksɪkjʊ:t/ (vt) to kill sb. as a legal punishment *xử tử hình*

(4) controversial /,kɒntrə'vɜ:ʃl/ (adj) causing a lot of disagreement or argument *đáng/cần tranh cãi*