Essay

Like it or not, essay writing is an inevitable part of life for everyone from secondary school upwards, and at university it is an everyday task. In real life, the essay itself is the last stage of a research or study process. In the essay, the writer has to prove that they have done their research into the subject area and also present their findings and argument in a logical, well-structured, cohesive text.

Naturally there is no research behind an essay written in a language exam, but the logical structuring of your ideas is a requirement. Although most candidates are afraid to choose this option in a language exam (if it is available), the genre has its advantages: clear formatting rules and easy-to-remember language features (see **Main body** below).

Brainstorming the topic and the arguments

In the exam, the topic of the essay is usually a controversial, sometimes provocative statement, which enables the exploration of the topic from both sides. (e.g. '*Some stress is good for all us*').

Before you start writing, think over the topic. It is advisable not to focus too much on your own real conviction on the subject matter. Remember that the assessors are not your debating partners, therefore you do not need to convince them that you are right. What they do is assess how effectively you have managed to convey your argument, how well structured your essay is, or if it is just a random collection of ideas.

So instead of thinking about your real reactions or opinion on the theme, quickly draw up a list of both arguments and counterarguments on the topic and organise them into two columns. If you've finished with the short list, choose the arguments you definitely want to refer to in your essay. Then, number these chosen arguments according to the order in which you want to use them. All this preparation (which doesn't take more than 3-4 minutes) will be worth it in the end when you can almost 'see' the text in front of you.

There are several approaches you can take when structuring your essay (see Main body section below), but whichever you choose, make sure you dedicate a paragraph to each main point of argument.

Opening paragraph

The primary function here is to raise the reader's interest with a strong example, impression or opinion related to the topic. Another main goal is to communicate your position to the reader, but make sure you do so without a direct reference to the title (e.g. '~~I agree with the title~~…'). Think of the title more as a general guideline about the main topic instead.

Main body (2-3 paragraphs)

The main body of your essay is created by paragraphs organised around the main points of argument. Within the paragraph, your main argument is expressed in the so-called 'topic sentence'. The other sentences in the paragraph are there to support, strengthen or expand on the topic sentence.

Do the same with all other points of argument that you have chosen to include from your preliminary list, strictly following a logical structure.

There are several 'techniques' you can choose from here:

- you can choose to only include the arguments that support your stance and can disregard any counterarguments;

- you may decide to include a counterargument in some (or all) paragraphs and you can separate it with a linking word (e.g. '*Alternatively*,…', '*As opposed to this*,…');

- you can choose to have two paragraphs with supportive arguments and then one paragraph with the counterarguments. Just make sure it is clear what kind of arguments are included in the paragraph.

When it comes to essays, linking words play an even bigger role in creating cohesion than in any other genre.

Their presence can help and their lack thereof can hinder the reader's understanding of the writer's logic. Therefore it is important to avoid just merely listing your ideas by using sequencing words such as '~~Firstly~~,…' then '~~Secondly~~,…'. Remember that the connection

between paragraphs is more complex than merely an order of items, and your choice of linking words needs to reflect that.

Here are a few examples of more meaningful linking words and phrases:

- bringing in examples, further thoughts: e.g. '*In other words*,…', '*Admittedly*,…';
- introducing a contrary argument: 'In clear contrast to these points,…', '*On the one hand*,…', '*On the other hand*,…';
- conclusions: '*In consequence*,…', '*As a result*,…';
- summarising: '*To sum up*,…', '*In conclusion*,…';

However, it is important to bear in mind that although these words are important tools to create cohesion, they need to be used wisely.

Make sure you don't use them without a clear purpose and function, just because 'they are a requirement'.

With a view to helping you learn how to use linking words, we included some websites in the **Useful links** section. On this websites, you can find linking words grouped according to their function with example sentences.

Closing

Bring your essay to a conclusion based on your main arguments but without repeating them word for word. Apart from repeating your arguments, another thing you should avoid is adding new arguments to the list even if they would sound good. If it is a really strong argument, you should incorporate it in the main body, otherwise leave it out.

Do not try to convince anyone in the closing. You can even admit that you don't seem to be able to defend your argument with both sides being equally strong. A logical closing is more important than a convincing one.

The style and level of formality of essays

Essays belong in the category of formal genres, thus, just like in formal letters/emails, you must avoid using contractions and colloquial language (e.g. '*stuff*') Try to stay objective and avoid using emotive phrases as well as suggestions (e.g. '~~*you should not*~~…'). Put the emphasis on arguments and fact instead and do so in a neutral tone.

Essays in the business exam

An essay here is a text incorporating a business student's thoughts and opinion on a given business subject in a formal, argumentative essay. Make sure you stay within the boundaries of a business environment.

Useful links

Since essay writing is an integral part of coursework both in secondary and higher education, the number of websites dealing with the subject is vast (even though a large proportion of these are not free of charge). Here, we recommend some useful and free resources:

Tips with sample texts: Essay-Writing-Tips.

List of linking words: Scribd.

Practising essays in the free Euroexam online course

You can find a 2-part tutorial for essays in our free B2 online practice course (Writing tutorial: Task Two − Essay, Parts I. & II.). They are available after a free registration.

Format requirements in the Euroexam writing test

Recommended length: B2 – approx. 150 words; C1 − approx. 200 words. This word count is a recommendation only and normally we do not penalise deviation from it (being overlong is the most common one). However, it is in your own interest to keep yourself to the instructions of the task. Incidentally, counting words is time-consuming and it distracts you from the task. Anyway, before starting the letter, we suggest that you jot down a few keywords and ideas to help yourself decide what to include in the letter and what to leave out.

Using a dictionary in the Euroexam writing test

Although you are allowed to use printeddictionaries throughout the entire writing test, we recommend that you primarily use your active vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Remember that looking up words in a dictionary is time-consuming and therefore only resort to it if it is absolutely necessary in order to express yourself. The dictionary will probably prove more useful when proofreading your finished letter.

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