

## 5. Organising Ideas

### 5.1 Ranking Ideas

Once you have selected your points, you need to decide **in what order** to present them. This is important to show that you are in control of your material, and that you understand the relative importance of each of the points you are making. In this section we will deal with different patterns of organisation, but first of all you need to be aware of the need to rank ideas according to one of the following methods:

- a) from **the most important** to the least important
- b) from **the most common** to the least common
- c) from **the most general** to the least general
- d) from **the earlier** to the later (chronological order).

There are other systems possible, but these are the most obvious ones.

There are a number of common organisational patterns that you will find: **cause and effect** (consequences), **comparisons**, **alternatives**, and **speculation**, in addition to the **problem-solution** and **evaluation** schemas that we have already discussed.

### 5.2 Consequences

The most obvious way of discussing a problem, in any situation, not just essays, is to look at the **causes of** (or **reasons for**) the existence of the problem, and then to consider what **consequences** or **results** (or **effects**) there might be if certain solutions are tried. For example, look at this statement:

*Parents should control the amount of time that children spend in front of television or computer screens.*

This is a suggested solution to a problem and you would be expected to give your opinion on it. To do so you would need to a) discuss the consequences of too much time being spent in this way by children and b) discuss the consequences of parents trying to control it.

In many cases a term meaning **cause** or **effect** or **result** is given in the topic itself. For example there might be this statement: *Modernisation is leading to the destruction of the natural environment.* In this case you will need to think of examples, as discussed above.

Often you will be given more details in the question itself. Here is an example:

*At present we rely on oil for most of our energy needs. However, oil is a fossil fuel and causes air pollution, and it will eventually run out. Nuclear energy is the only practical and clean source of energy for the world. Do you agree?*

Here you are given two causes and two effects for oil: a) burning a fossil fuel causes air pollution, and b) fossil fuels are finite and as a result there will be none left one day. So you already have two negative effects to think about: pollution and lack of energy. Now you must consider the consequences of using nuclear energy. The positive consequences are already implied: it does not cause air pollution and it will not run out. But are there other negative consequences? Obviously, or we would all be using it. So, what are they? Once you have thought of these you will have plenty to write about. That does not mean that you have to oppose the question. You can list the benefits of nuclear energy just mentioned, and you can then identify the negative consequences and explain that these can be solved, or that they are not as serious as the negative consequences of using oil. Remember, it is your choice, whether you support or oppose the statement, totally or partly, but even if you support it you should not ignore the problems. Apart from anything else, you would not have very much to write about if you ignore the problems on both sides. [See 3.5]


Remember that whatever effects or consequences you decide to write about, they must be relevant, of the right level of generalisation, and ranked according to how significant they are.

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## TASK 14

Think of as many negative consequences of using nuclear energy as you can.

 Answer Key

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## 5.3 Comparisons

The IELTS Handbook asks you to be able to **compare and contrast evidence, opinions and implications**.

In fact, if you think about it you will see that **evaluation** is a kind of comparison, or that comparison and contrast is a kind of evaluation. When you evaluate something, as we said before, you are comparing the **situation as it is** with an **ideal situation**. At the same time, when you are comparing or contrasting two things you are evaluating them against some other set of criteria. For example, in the above topic we are asked to compare oil and atomic energy as sources of energy for our use. To do that we must have a set of standards or criteria to evaluate them against. What could these be? Look at this analysis:

A perfect source of energy would fulfil the following criteria:

- a) be cheap to produce
- b) be plentiful
- c) be easy to use
- d) be clean to use
- e) be safe to use
- f) never run out

Now if we want to compare oil and nuclear energy we simply match each of these against the criteria, and we find that oil is better than nuclear energy in a), c), e), while nuclear energy is better in the other criteria. However, that is not enough. We also need to **rank** the criteria according to importance. In other words, we may agree that nuclear energy is cleaner to use than oil, but it is much less safe, and for many people the safety factor is far more important than the problem of air pollution. Besides, as we saw above, it is possible to provide counter-arguments, such as that technology can make oil cleaner, but it can never make radio-activity safer. So, at each step of the way you can consider additional criteria for evaluation. Of course there is no time to go into a subject as deeply as this in a test essay, and there is no need to, but it is important to be aware of how any kind of analytical thinking will always involve some form of evaluation and comparison. The more carefully and clearly you can identify the criteria by which you judge or evaluate or compare something, the better your thinking and your judgements will be.

## 5.4 Alternatives

Sometimes you have to think of **alternatives** to an existing situation. Look at this topic again for example:

*In every city the car is king of the road. Cars cause death and injury and air pollution, and make life difficult and dangerous for others. It is time to reduce the number of cars in our cities and to encourage other means of transport. Do you agree with this opinion?*

Here you need to look at alternative means of transport, and evaluate these. Be careful to be realistic in your discussion of the alternatives. Considering other forms of transport is very like looking at the consequences of a policy and, as we said above, it is necessary to look at the situation honestly, and to acknowledge the problems that exist on both sides of the argument. Students who make exaggerated claims are not writing good essays.

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### TASK 15

Which of the following alternative means of transport would be worth writing about in an essay that answers the above question?

- |                    |                             |             |       |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-------|
| bicycles           | moving footpaths            | trams       | buses |
| underground trains | elevated trains / monorails | helicopters |       |
| motorbikes         | motorised three-wheelers    |             |       |

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## 5.5 Speculation

In some cases you may be asked to think about an alternative that does not exist, i.e. to **speculate** about what **might be**. Here is an example of a topic like that:

*As there is increasing unemployment in the world, while at the same time those who have jobs are working harder and harder, it would be better to have a four-day working week for everyone, and so to create more jobs. What is your opinion about this suggestion?*

Again, you must think about the possible **consequences** of this suggestion, and you must **evaluate** these against the criteria that you think apply when talking about work and leisure. Once again, you should try to be realistic, and not exaggerate with your suggestions.

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## TASK 16

Study the following list of points that have been brainstormed in relation to the topic given above. First, decide which points should be eliminated because they are irrelevant, or exaggerated, and then classify the remaining points under suitable headings. Finally, rank the points in order of importance.

1. *Everyone would earn less money - would not have enough to live on.*
2. *People earning less money would spend less, and this would reduce demand for goods and services and make the economy shrink.*
3. *More time away from work means more time for the family and friends.*
4. *More free time means more opportunity to do things like sport, art, music.*
5. *More free time means people are more bored — more drinking and gambling.*
6. *Employers would have problems training and managing and paying more people.*
7. *What about teachers? Would schools only operate on 4 days too, or would some teachers only work 1 day a week?*
8. *If someone owns their own small business and has to work 6 or 7 days it is not fair for others to be working only 4 days.*
9. *The unemployed are usually not qualified people, so they could not fill the jobs anyway that would be created.*
10. *Imagine that you do a job for 4 days and then someone else comes and does it after you and they do not know what you have in mind and they spoil it all.*

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TASK 17

Finally, look at the following topics and decide which type of organisation pattern is mainly required in each case: *comparison; consequences; evaluation; examples; speculation.*

1. *The environment is one of the most important issues in the world today, but governments are not doing enough about it. To what extent do you think that individuals can help to protect the environment*
2. *Most pollution, especially air and water pollution, is caused by industry. If we want to protect the environment we should make factories and other forms of industry pay for all the pollution that they cause. That is the only way to make sure that the owners will make a serious effort to reduce the pollution that they cause.  
To what extent do you agree with this opinion?*
3. *To be successful in education it is more important to be a good student than to have good teachers.  
Would you support this statement?*
4. *The increasing role of English in the world today means that the learning of other languages is being neglected. This will have serious results for the continued use of these languages and their cultures.  
What is your opinion on this statement?*
5. *Tobacco and alcohol are drugs that cause addiction and health problems. Should they be made illegal, like other drugs? Or should all drugs be legalised?  
What do you think about these ideas?*
6. *We know that many kinds of animals feel pain and emotional suffering just as humans do. It is therefore necessary to support animal rights as well as human rights.  
Do you agree?*