



# 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 the topic, indicating what aspect of the topic you are asked to focus on.

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 or a present-day issue about which people have different opinions, and asks you to give your own views on this topic.

Here is the typical wording of an IELTS essay task:

**Present a written argument or case to an educated reader with no specialist knowledge of 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 and more on other values.*

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

**You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience to support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.**

The first part of the instruction makes it clear that

- a) you need to present a serious argument in a formal style (for an 'educated reader')
- b) you are not being tested on your deep knowledge or understanding of the subject ('with no specialist knowledge').

The last part of the instruction offers a suggestion about what to include. ('You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience to support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.') We will deal with this more in the next section.

Now let us look at the question itself. This also has two components:

- a) the description of the topic, which is usually expressed as a point of view on a current situation and
- b) 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 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?

- a) to present both sides of the argument?
- b) to either strongly support or strongly oppose the argument, depending on your own personal opinion?
- c) 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:

- a) I agree completely
- b) I agree partly and disagree partly
- c) I disagree completely.

Many students feel that they need to present a strong argument for or against an idea or proposition. This is not true. Even if the words *to what extent* do not appear in the question, it is always acceptable to agree or disagree partly with a proposition.

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 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 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 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.

## 1.2 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 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 with the major issues being discussed in the world. The editorial pages of newspapers and news magazines are important sources of such information, as are current affairs radio and television programs.