TASK 6

Make up a list of arguments that *support the use of the car,* and then try to find *counter-arguments* against these. Be careful to make sure that the counter-arguments do not introduce *different* arguments — they must present *directly* opposing arguments to the ones given.

☞ *Answer Key*

4. Selecting Ideas

There are a number of concepts that you must be clear about because they are involved in every kind of writing that you will do. You must be aware of the fact that you will nearly always be dealing with **problems and solutions,** that above all you are **evaluating** ideas and solutions as you write, and that you must select ideas that are **relevant,** that are at the **right level of generalisation,** and that are **ranked logically** for the topic that you are writing about. We will look at all these issues now, and then go on to discuss typical **organisation patterns** in the next section.

4.1 Solutions to Problems

Candidates are assessed on their ability to present the solution to a problem, the IELTS Handbook states. In fact, every topic is really a problem. If it were not a problem, it would not be worth talking about. So, for example, you might be asked to consider this topic:

> *Most cities suffer from traffic congestion. What do you think should be done about it?*

To deal with a question that asks you directly to think of a solution, you should use the brainstorming process (see **3.1**). Mostly, however, you will be offered some suggested solutions, and will be asked to consider them.

There are a number of ways of considering possible solutions to problems. In every case, you will need to use **evaluation.** That is, you will need to evaluate how good the possible solutions are likely to be. In the next section (**Organising Ideas**) we will look at typical organisation patterns for dealing with solutions to problem, but first we must discuss the most important aspect of all your writing:

4.2 Evaluation

Whatever the task, whether it is problem-solving, looking at effects or consequences, defending an opinion, comparing and contrasting evidence or ideas, you will need to evaluate.

Every essay will involve an evaluation of ideas. That simply means that you need to say whether an idea or concept is good or bad, or better or worse than another one. (See **Stage 3** for the language required.)

In some cases the question involves a **definition** which is an **evaluation**. In other words, the key terms of the question involve an evaluation. For example, look at this topic:

> *Modern technology has increased our material wealth but has decreased our personal happiness. To what extent do you agree?*

To be able to discuss this you need to give at least an indirect definition of what you mean by *happiness*. This cannot be defined in any objective way —it is a concept that involves values.

[See also **5.3 Comparisons**]

TASK 7

Look at the following topics and decide which terms require an evaluation:

a) Television does more harm than good, according to many critics. Do you agree with this?

b) It is often claimed that television and films encourage violence. What is your opinion?

c) Computers have improved the quality of our lives. Do you agree?

d) People in modern cities live under too much stress and something should be done about it. Do you agree?

e) Too much money is spent on sport and not enough on serious culture such as music and art. This is making our society shallow.

☛ *Answer Key*

Students often make the mistake of overstating their argument. An evaluation should be **realistic** and **reasonable**, not exaggerated, or over-idealistic, or based on over-generalisations. (See 4.7 below.)

Selecting ideas involves ensuring that your points are **relevant** and at the right level of generalisation. Before we can select the most relevant and appropriate points, we need to do a preliminary organisation of ideas, as shown below.

4.3 Classification of Ideas

After brainstorming, and having looked at the topic again, your next step is to organise the ideas that you have jotted down. This involves classifying your ideas into logical categories, so that you can produce well-organised paragraphs. Generally, more than one system of classification is possible but there is usually one very obvious pattern. Let us look at the examples we used before and find a simple pattern. What follows is just an example of how you might think about classifying your ideas. It is there as a general guideline, not as a model to be copied directly in any way.

In 3.1 we looked at this question:

> *The Internet has revolutionised the modern world, but it has also created new problems and inequalities. Do you agree?*

We then brainstormed the following ideas:

banking   online shopping   email   chat-rooms

distance education   hacking   information for research

airline bookings   concert / theatre bookings   pornography

information for research   business communication

sharing information: for police etc. and for terrorists   viruses

poor people have no access / left out

These ideas can be classified under the two categories of **positive** and **negative** effects:

POSITIVE

banking;   online shopping;   distance education;   airline bookings;

concert / theatre bookings;   business communications;   email;

information for research;   chat-rooms;   police etc. sharing information

NEGATIVE

hacking; pornography;   terrorists sharing information;

poor people have no access / left out

However, this is still not a satisfactory classification to work with. We can also classify the activities according to 3 different types: **business activities; educational / research activities; communication,** and then we can end up with this kind of organisation:

BUSINESS ACTIVITIES	INFORMATION / RESEARCH	COMMUNICATION
Positive:	Positive:	Positive:
online banking	distance education	business communication
online shopping	info. for research	email
airline bookings		sharing info
concert bookings		chat-rooms
theatre bookings		police sharing info
Negative:	Negative:	Negative:
hackers	no access for poor people	terrorists sharing info
pornography		

Once you have got this level of classification, it is easy to write your essay systematically. You may not use all of the ideas, but you have a clear paragraph structure for your essay to follow, and you can decide next how much detail to put into in each category.

4.4 Types of classification

As we said before (4.2), because the essay topic requires you to express an opinion, you will need to **evaluate** something. In order to do that you will frequently find yourself with a classification as above, into **positive** and **negative** features.

Another way of thinking about such topics is that you have to make a **comparison.** You are **comparing the positive features with the negative ones.**

For example:
> *'Money cannot buy happiness' it is often claimed. But with money you can buy most of the things that are necessary for happiness: good food; accommodation etc. No wonder most people want to make as much money as possible. Do you agree or disagree?*

Sometimes you may be asked to **speculate** or **suggest alternatives** to an existing situation. In that case you will be comparing the situation that exists in the world with what some people think **should** exist. [See 5.3 Comparisons]

For example:
> *We are surrounded by advertising. Some people think that this is good because it gives us a choice as consumers, but others argue that it makes people selfish and greedy for more and more goods. Do you think there should be less advertising?*

Some topics only require you to consider the **consequences** of something, i.e. a **cause-effect** relationship, as well as giving an evaluation of the effects. [**See 5.2 Consequences**] In each of these cases you still need to **classify** the ideas that you have according to the **type of features** involved, as we did above.

We will deal with each of these types of questions more later. Now try your skill at classifying features.

TASK 8

Consider the following topic and then look at the brainstormed ideas which follow and organise them according to both cause and effect and the type of features involved:

Industrialisation is leading to the destruction of the earth as a home for humans and animals. To what extent do you agree that this is true?

factories	air pollution	waste disposal	cars
rubbish — plastic etc.	water pollution		fish dying
deforestation		animals endangered	lack of fresh water

☞ Answer Key

TASK 9

Do the same with the following, but use an evaluation classification scheme, as well as appropriate categories of features (as in the example in 4.3):

Many modern children spend a great deal of time sitting in front of a television or computer screen. This is extremely harmful for their development. Therefore parents should strictly limit the time that children spend this way. Do you agree?

entertainment   educational information   news   films

general knowledge   music   sport   wastes time

communication through computer   homework not done

not enough exercise: harms bodies   harms eyes   no socialising / friends

advertising makes people buy unnecessary things

☞ Answer Key

4.5 Selecting Relevant Ideas

After brainstorming and while classifying your ideas, it is necessary to eliminate any points that are not relevant. At this point it is useful to look at the question again, to make sure that the ideas that you choose are not only on the topic, but also relevant to the question.

TASK 10

Imagine that for the above question the following list of points have been brainstormed for the negative aspect of TV and computer use:

bad for the eyes   children may forget to eat   don't do homework

waste time   no physical exercise   not enough sleep

computer games are expensive   children don't learn to be creative

arguments in the family about what to watch

Which of the above points would you say are irrelevant to answering the question?

☛ *Answer Key*

4.6 Level of Generalisation

One basis on which to select relevant ideas is to ensure that you choose points at the right **level of generalisation.** In other words, it is necessary to eliminate small, trivial points or examples, and at the same time not to try to tackle concepts that are too broad for such a short essay.

For example, if you were asked to write on the topic:

> *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?*

you might think of the following ideas:

recycling waste material   not throwing rubbish around

saving electricity   educational campaigns for the public

keeping the yard of your house clean   reducing use of packaging

restricting use of water   using more public transport

If you look at the question again you will see that, on the one hand *educational campaigns for the public* is too broad a concept —it is not something that **individuals** can normally undertake, while on the other hand *keeping the yard of your house clean* is too trivial. That is to say, it is not something that is going to help to protect the environment in general, it is simply something that everyone should do anyway. The other points are at the right level of generalisation, and you would need to work with these, by classifying and ranking them. (See 4.3 and 5.1.)

Now test yourself on the following:

TASK 11

Consider this topic:

'Money cannot buy happiness' it is often claimed. But with money you can buy most of the things that are necessary for happiness: good food, accommodation etc. No wonder that most people want to make as much money as possible. Do you agree or disagree?

Here are some brainstormed ideas for this topic:

FOR

healthy food is expensive   good house in good environment

good entertainment   good doctors   can give money to poor people

transport: own car   own aeroplane   travel

set up big project like art gallery or sports stadium for your city

AGAINST

could gamble money away   high taxes

children could argue about inheritance   can't buy friends

definition of 'happiness': spirituality   can't buy love

Which of the above points would you eliminate because they are too broad or too specific or too far off the main idea to be relevant?

☞ *Answer Key*

4.7 Overgeneralisations and Exaggeration

Generalisations are necessary. We cannot make any sensible conclusions about anything without generalising from specific examples. Especially in your introduction, topic sentences and conclusion (See Stage 3) you will need to generalise. However, there is a danger of **over-generalisation.** Over-generalisations (or *sweeping generalisations* as they are also called) do not help your argument, because they give the impression that you are not very thoughtful. Consider these examples:

i) Everybody uses the Internet nowadays.

ii) No-one can run a business without information technology.

iii) Any business can be successful if it uses modern information technology.

These are clearly over-generalisations or exaggerations, and would not help your argument. An essay is not a political speech or a form of advertising!

TASK 12

Which of the following are reasonable evaluations and which are over-generalisations or exaggerations? Put a mark against any of the following which are not reasonable statements. You may find it easier to discuss this with someone.

1. *Television has a terrible effect on young minds.*

2. *The destruction of our environment is the most serious issue we face, because without enough clean air and water we cannot live.*

3. *Unless governments strictly control the use of the Internet world terrorism will destroy us all.*

4. *Examinations can lead to high levels of stress and even suicide in students.*

5. *Industry causes most pollution and therefore needs to be made responsible for preventing it.*

6. *Improved public transport is a much better solution to traffic problems than building more roads.*

7. *If the government provides better public transport there will be no more traffic congestion in our cities.*

8. *People who claim that nuclear energy is clean are ignoring the dangers of nuclear accidents. Radiation is not 'clean'.*

9. *Nuclear energy is the only possible solution to our energy needs in the future.*

10. *If everyone learns to speak English then all the people in the world will be able to understand each other and then we can live in peace with each other.*

☛ *Answer Key*

TASK 13

Read the following essays and think about which one is more satisfactory. Pay special attention to generalisations and exaggeration.

A.

Modern technology has improved the world in three very important ways. It has given people more time, it has saved enormous amounts of human energy, and it has made it possible for everyone to communicate with each other easily.

Time and effort have been saved in the workplace and in the home. In manufacturing, for example, it is no longer necessary to spend hours planning and designing products because computers can do this quickly. Farmers do not need to plant their harvest slowly by hand; they can use equipment like light aircraft for sowing seeds and large harvesting machines to do the work quickly. Housewives can spend more time with their friends, while the washing machine and the dishwasher wash the clothes and the dishes for them.

In the same way energy is saved. There is no need for hard physical work any more, because modern machines can do it all. Because of modern technology people can relax, where before they had to work very hard.

Another great improvement has been in communications. Because of communication systems such as telephones, fax machines, mobile phones, television etc., and the use of satellites, we can know what is happening at any time in all parts of the world. This leads to better understanding, so there is no need for wars, and countries can help each other. For example, if there is an earthquake in one country, people in other countries can find out about it immediately and send help to the victims.

For all these reasons the world is now a much better place than in earlier times, because of the advantages brought by modern technology.

B.

Everyone thinks that the world has been improved through modern technology, but this is not true because nowadays there are no more traditional skills and everybody is becoming the same, no matter what country they live in, and above all there are no more spiritual values left.

In the olden days, when people had to make their own buildings, and their own clothes, and their own entertainment, they had many traditional skills and values. Each area had its own style of architecture, for example, and people were proud of their craftsmanship. Now all houses are made of concrete and glass and steel and they all look the same, no matter where you are. All over the world people wear the same mass-produced clothes and they even watch the same mass-produced entertainment on their televisions sets. You can hear the same pop songs in every country in the world, and local people no longer produce their own traditional cultural forms of music and dance. Everyone does whatever the latest dance fashion is.

This means that people all over the world are becoming the same. Everybody sees the same films and hears the same music and so they all start to think the same. All they want is more of the same consumer goods, no matter where they live. This means that the world is losing its spiritual values as well as its diversity of culture. In the end, no-one will have any new or individual ideas because modern communication techniques, such as satellite television and the Internet, mean that we are all brainwashed in the same way by the big multi-national owners of the mass media. In other words, they can control us.

Modern technology makes people lazy and greedy for more consumer goods, and so they lose their spiritual values. They become selfish and lose their religion and do not even care about the members of their own families. They put their small children into nurseries, their sick people into hospitals and their old people into old people's homes and then they forget about them. Modern technology can look after them, they think.

It is time we stopped wanting more modern technology and went back to traditional values.

☞ *Answer Key*