

2. Analysing the Question

Understanding the question means more than understanding the instructions or the words of the question. It means recognising the **focus** of the question, and knowing what **approach** 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
- 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. 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?*

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 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 postgraduate 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 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. To what extent do you agree?* Here the question is about **what to do about murder**, and that is very controversial! 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?

It is also necessary to interpret the underlying meaning of a question. Sometimes the wording can be quite different between two questions, but the underlying concepts are the same because of the context.

TASK 1

In the following questions the wording is different but the underlying meaning is sometimes the same. Test your ability to interpret topics by identifying which of the following basically ask the same question. (In each case the statement would be followed by a question asking for your opinion.)

- a) Tertiary education is of greater benefit to the individual receiving it than to the society as a whole. It is therefore not desirable for governments to spend the taxpayers' money on supporting students just so that they can earn more money in future.*
- b) Parents have a greater influence on their children's future success than schools do. Governments should therefore provide 'parent training courses' rather than 'teacher training courses'.*
- c) Free tertiary education is essential for every country since tertiary graduates are the only qualified and educated people that can help countries to progress in the modern world.*
- d) Education is the most important source of children's development. No matter what their background, if children have good schools and teachers they can progress. Governments should therefore put their major resources into school education.*
- e) Modern science and technology can solve environmental problems, such as pollution and global warming, if we apply enough resources to research.*
- f) People throughout the world are ignoring the dangers of environmental pollution and of global warming in the hope that science and technology can find solutions. This is not true. We all need to take responsibility for the damage we are causing, and must change our life-styles.*

TASK 2

Choose 3 questions from Appendix A and consider what the context might be for them: what kind of people might be most concerned about the issue, and for what reasons could these topics be considered problematic?

(Discuss in groups if you are in a class.)

2.3 Defining the Terms

Some books and teachers tell you that you must define the terms that you use so that the reader will understand you. This is sometimes true, but it is necessary to be sensible about it. For example, look again at two of the examples given in 2.1:

- a) Many people believe that the Internet is the most revolutionary new invention of the last century. To what extent do you agree?*
- b) The Internet has revolutionised the modern world, but it has also created new problems and inequalities. Do you agree?*

Which of the following terms do you think need defining?

Internet; revolutionary / revolutionise; new invention; modern world; dangers; inequalities; easy access; World Wide Web.

The “educated reader” that the IELTS test asks you to write for can be assumed to understand these: *Internet; new invention; modern world; easy access; World Wide Web.*

However, the term *revolutionary* or *revolutionise* can be interpreted differently, and in fact you need to explain what you mean by it in question a) otherwise you cannot answer the question. However, that does not mean that you need to define the terms directly. You will need to give an **indirect** definition of the degree of change implied, by showing **how important** you think the changes are that have been produced by the Internet, and whether these changes are more important and dramatic than other changes.

For question b) it is probably not necessary to concern yourself with this term, because you need to focus on the *problems* and *inequalities*, rather than on the degree of change. In this case you would be dealing with indirect definitions of these two concepts. (See 4.2 on p.20, for a discussion on **evaluation** in definitions.)

Now consider again the first sample topic given in this book, and compare it with the sample given in the IELTS Handbook:

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.

Now look at the sample topic given in the IELTS Handbook:

Present a written argument or case to an educated reader with no specialist knowledge of the following topic:

It is inevitable that as technology develops traditional cultures must be lost. Technology and tradition are incompatible — you cannot have both together.

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

Do the two topics ask the same question or not? Both are about technology, and in both cases technology is contrasted with something else. The focus in the first question is on contrasting technology with *other values* while in the second question it is contrasted with *traditional culture*. Whether you treat these questions as basically the same or not depends on your definition of *tradition* and of *other values*. Both are very broad terms, and can be interpreted in different ways, and here it is important to take time to consider what they mean to the average educated reader, and what they mean to you. If you think of *traditional culture* as dealing only with material objects, such as food and clothing, then you will discuss this in one way. If you also include social activities such as music and dance and theatre, then you may give a different answer. And if you include concepts such as religion and social behaviour, then you will be able to consider both questions as basically dealing with the same concepts, since other values in this case would be included in *traditional culture*.

It is up to you to decide how broadly you want to consider the definition of *traditional culture*, but you must make your concept clear to your reader. In the same way, if you have the first question to deal with, you must indicate what you mean by *other values*.

It is not necessary to give a formal definition, which is very difficult to do. In other words, you do not need to write: *Traditional culture can be defined as.....* Instead you can write something like: *By traditional culture I mean not only the things that people make, like hand-woven cloth or houses, but also their ceremonies and performances, such as music and dance.* In other words, you can give examples to help you to define.

What about the terms *technology* and *technological age*? Do they need defining? Not really — again it would be enough to give examples.

TASK 3

Look at the above two questions again and think about their *focus*. If you decide to define *traditional culture* more or less in the same way as *other values* could you write basically the same essay for both?

Time: It is worth spending enough time on stage 1 to ensure that your essay answers the question as it was intended by the examiners. If you spend 2 or 3 minutes thinking about the topic, it may seem like a long time during an exam, but it is time well spent if it helps you to write confidently and appropriately.