

Selecting and Presenting Ideas

3. Finding Ideas

In an essay of 250 words, to be written in 40 minutes, you cannot be too ambitious about what you write. Some students make the mistake of trying to express very deep ideas and they never get past writing an introduction to what would be a long essay if there was time. On the other hand, if you do not have any specific ideas at all you may find yourself saying only one thing over and over again in several different ways. This is not the way to get a good score. Look at the following example:

The Internet has provided great benefits to modern society because it has helped everyone in their work. It makes everything easier. It has helped all sectors of society. Without the Internet, everything is much more difficult and takes a long time. But since we have the Internet every kind of work is much easier to do. Therefore the Internet has provided great benefits to everyone.

This little “essay” says almost nothing. There is virtually no information and there are no ideas. If someone whose English is not very accurate writes like this, the reader has no ideas to think about and will only notice the grammatical and vocabulary mistakes.

Generally what you need is to have a basic proposition statement (e.g. one that answers the question *to what extent* by indicating *a great deal, a little, partly* (see above) plus about three points or examples to support your argument.

Three is a good number (although it can be less or more), since that gives you a 5 paragraph essay, which is about the right length:

- Paragraph
- 1

2

3

4

5
- Introduction

Supporting point

Supporting point

Supporting point

Conclusion

The easiest way to find and organise ideas is to brainstorm.

3.1 Brainstorming

In order to organise your ideas for a topic, it is first of all necessary to pin them down. Most students find that the best way to deal with this is to **brainstorm** their ideas first. This simply means jotting down any concepts that come into your head associated with the given topic, in note form, and in random order (i.e. in any order in which they occur to you).

Let us look at a simple example. The question may be:

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

We need to find ideas for both parts of the question –the revolutionising effect of the Internet, and also its problems. We might come up with the following:


- 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

TASK 4

Write a brainstormed list of ideas relating to the topic:

Children spend far too much time in front of television and computer screens. Their time should be strictly controlled.

Discuss your ideas with someone else. You can also practise brainstorming with other topics from the list provided in the appendix. The more you practise, the easier it will be for you to think of ideas quickly during the test.

 Answer Key

3.2 Finding More Ideas

If you are having difficulties thinking up ideas at the right level of generalisation (see p.26 for a discussion about this), then a good technique is to think of very specific, concrete examples, and then try to find a higher level of abstraction that the examples belong to. Let me explain this with a simple illustration. Imagine that you are asked to write about this: *The importance of animals to people is not always recognised. We should pay more attention to how we look after and protect animals.* First you need to think about how important animals are to people. Begin by thinking of specific animals –any animals, including insects:

cow	cat	lion
mosquito	sheep	dog
kangaroo	butterfly	

Now organise these under a higher level of classification, e.g.

DOMESTIC ANIMALS	WILD ANIMALS	INSECTS
cow cat	lion	mosquito
dog sheep	kangaroo	butterfly

Think again, and come up with a sub-division of domestic animals:

ANIMALS WHOSE PRODUCTS WE USE	PETS
cow	dog
sheep	cat

Under insects we have harmful ones —mosquitoes, and useful ones — butterflies, which help to pollinate plants.

Now we can go back to our topic, the importance of animals to people, and we can say:

- 1) some animals are important to us directly because we use their products (e.g. cows, sheep, goats etc.)
- 2) some animals give us pleasure as pets (dogs, cats, birds etc.)
- 3) some animals help us indirectly e.g. by pollinating plants (butterflies, bees etc.)
- 4) some animals are just interesting and attract tourists (lions, kangaroos etc.)

And if, after thinking all that in our brainstorming and classifying, we suddenly think of horses, we may add the category of *animals that work for us* (and then remember water buffaloes, donkeys, camels etc.). In your essay you will then write about these categories of animals, rather than about individual species.

This is a simple example, but the same principle can be applied to many topics and it should help to provide ideas for you to write about.

TASK 5

Practise brainstorming concrete ideas and then classifying them under abstract headings as in the above example with the following topics:

- a) People should not work too hard — they should remember the importance of leisure activities.*
- b) Education is the most important possession a person can have.*
- c) City life is too stressful.*

3.3 Using Examples

In all essays you must give specific points to support your argument. Sometimes a topic will be quite abstract and it is important to realise that you need to use **examples** to support your point of view — and to make sure that you have enough to say! The IELTS examination question itself specifies that **You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience to support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.**

Look at this topic:

Young people are said to have lost many of the traditional values of the older generation. This does not matter, because the old values have no relevance in the modern world. We need to develop a whole new set of values. Do you support this statement?

Many students make the mistake of trying to write only in general statements about a topic like this. That is difficult to do, because you need very abstract, philosophical language to do it well. It is much better to think of specific examples of values and to use two or three of these to illustrate and support your point of view.

3.4 The “What if Not” Situation

It can happen that you are faced with a question that you have never thought about at all, and where it is difficult to think of concrete examples. Remember, however, that the examiners select topics which have been considered controversial by many people and that there is always a social context for these questions. Imagine, for example, that you get a question about whether you think the government should fund more research into the causes of cancer. All you know is that cancer is dangerous and kills many people. How are you going to write at least 250 words on this question?

The first step is to think about **why** anyone would suggest this question. There are two components to the question: a) the problem of cancer and b) the question of funding for research — who should do it? It may be very difficult for you to say anything sensible in answer to the first question if you do not know any facts about cancer.

However, the second question should give you some ideas to work with. Even if you know nothing about cancer research you can think about the ‘*what if not?*’ situation. That is to say: *What if the government does not fund this research?* Who should fund it? Should medical research be conducted by governments or by private institutions? If it is funded by private institutions, who pays and why?

Or perhaps no one will pay, and the research will not be done. On the other hand, if the government does fund this research, from what budget is it to come? (Do not assume that governments have an endless supply of money, as students often do in their essays!) If the government does not fund this research, can it use the same money for more useful medical work, such as health education to prevent common diseases?

If you follow this line of thinking you will be able to write a great deal, without having to know very much about cancer or cancer research, because basically the question is about **money**: government as against private spending on health, or the priorities in health spending in cases where funds are limited.

These kinds of ideas can also be brainstormed by jotting down notes on the question part of your paper. The examiner will not look at any notes you make.

3.5 Looking at the Other Side

Remember that if you are presenting an argument it is not necessary to present only the points that support your side of the argument. In fact, if you want to be convincing and to give a balanced statement, you need to look at what the supporters of the other side are likely to say, and to give a response to that. This will also give you many more ideas to write about.

For example, look at this topic:

In every city the car is king of the road. Cars cause death and injury and air pollution and they make life dangerous for others. It is time to reduce the number of cars in our cities and to encourage other means of transport.

There are already four arguments given to **support** the statement. To these you could add traffic congestion, roads destroying the landscape and making it unsafe for children to play outside their houses etc. Now what are the **counter-arguments**? You could suggest that strict speed limits can be implemented, that car engines are already causing less pollution than before and that research is likely to produce clean fuels in the near future, and that special walking paths and bicycle paths are already in use in some countries.