

Writing a discursive composition (1)

This section discusses how to write a composition in which you present an argument. Depending on how the task is worded, you may need to:

- present both sides of an argument in a balanced discussion
- present one point of view, giving supporting evidence.

In this section you will see the best way to plan your writing and organise your ideas for presenting a balanced discussion.

1 You need to understand exactly what the question is asking you to write about. Look at the following writing task and underline the key words. Then answer the questions below.

Protecting the environment is the most important problem facing the world today. Discuss. (About 350 words.)

1 Should you:

- a) write about all the different ways of protecting the environment?
- b) omit the environment and only write about the other problems facing the world today?
- c) discuss whether the environment or a different problem(s) is the most important in the world today?

2 What problems would you include in your answer to the question?

2 Read the following composition, which was written in answer to the task. What issues does the writer discuss? Would you have selected the same problems to write about?

The modern world faces many major problems to which there are no easy solutions. These include unemployment, health, overpopulation and of course the environment. All have a bearing on all our lives, but is the environment really the most important?

If people are unemployed, they are unable to earn money and it is a fact of life that without an income it is difficult to live. Of course, work provides more than financial support; it gives people self-esteem and pride. However, technological developments and other factors mean that the job market is shrinking world-wide and young people have reduced prospects for work. Although this is certainly a major threat to people's well-being, it needs to be addressed by individual governments rather than globally.

Health is clearly an important concern that affects both individuals and the planet as a whole. Even though many illnesses have been eradicated, others remain a threat,

and the overuse of antibiotics has led to the development of resistant strains of virus. However, on the whole, general health is improving, and in the developing countries medical aid programmes are already working towards creating a healthier population.

Overpopulation has implications for the entire planet and improved general health means that people are living longer. However, as with health, there are already programmes in place implementing measures to deal with not only a rising population, but an ageing population.

So what about the environment? There are urgent issues that need to be faced, including global warming, pollution and species loss. Unlike the other issues discussed, there is no clearly discernible global move to deal with these problems. Also, unlike the other issues, changes in the environment have a direct impact on the whole planet. Climate change and destruction of ecosystems could endanger all life on the planet if not dealt with quickly and at an international level.

In conclusion, other problems primarily affect only the quality of life, whereas environmental issues affect the actual existence of life itself. It is clear, therefore, that protecting the environment is the most important problem facing the world today.

3 Now answer these questions.

1. What is the purpose of the introduction? How has the writer attempted to draw the reader into the discussion?
2. In what order are the issues introduced?
3. Underline the linking expressions used in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4. Which organisational pattern has the writer used?
 - a) a list of specific examples
 - b) contrasting and conceding points
4. What is the writer's opinion about these issues in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4? How important does he/she consider them to be?
5. In what way(s) is the issue of the environment different, according to the writer?
6. The writer has discussed the issue that he/she considers most important last. What is the reason for this?
7. What is the purpose of the conclusion?

4 Now read the following extracts from another composition written in answer to the same task. In what way is the organisation of the composition different?

There are many important issues facing the world today, including unemployment, health and overpopulation. Whether these issues are more important than environmental problems is debatable.

The growth in unemployment is a serious problem world-wide. It has partly been caused by improvements in technology as well as changing economic factors, which together mean that the job market is shrinking. While unemployment can of course have

a devastating effect on the quality of life of individuals, an environmental issue such as the burning of fossil fuels is potentially more serious. It has resulted in global warming causing climate change which could threaten the existence of entire nations. Is full employment worth this risk?

From this it must be clear that protecting the environment is the most important issue facing the world today. We ignore it at our peril. If we look after the houses we live in as individuals, why do we not take care of the larger house we all share?

5 Read the first composition again, and complete the following outline in note form.

Introduction

Statement of topic: *The world faces many problems.*

Plan of development: *Unemployment, health, overpopulation, environment.*

First supporting paragraph

Issue 1: *Unemployment*

Details: *Need work to live, for self-esteem; but local issue, not global.*

Second supporting paragraph

Issue 2:.....

Details:.....

Third supporting paragraph

Issue 3:

Details:.....

Fourth supporting paragraph

Issue 4:

Details:.....

Closing paragraph

Conclusion:

Now use information from the first composition and your own ideas to complete the following outline of the second composition.

Introduction

Statement of topic: *Many important issues facing world today.*

Plan of development: *Unemployment, health, overpopulation*

First supporting paragraph

Issue 1: *Unemployment*

Details:

Environmental issue 1:

Second supporting paragraph

Issue 2:

Details:

Environmental issue 2:

(e.g. *skin cancer caused by depletion of the ozone layer*)

Third supporting paragraph

Issue 3:

Details:.....

Environmental issue 3:

Closing paragraph

Conclusion:

Both approaches are acceptable for an exam answer. However, one is more focused and more complex than the other. Decide which one, and give your reasons.

6

- Read the task below and underline the key words. Decide what the question requires you to write.

Generally, the future for the planet looks bright. Those who argue otherwise are only being pessimistic about the state of the environment. Discuss.
(About 200 words.)

- Jot down some ideas. What issues do you want to raise? What supporting evidence can you think of?
- Decide on the approach you want to take and write an outline.
- Now write your composition, making sure that you support your ideas with plenty of evidence.
- Exchange your composition with a partner. Evaluate each other's work. Use your partner's comments to help you improve your composition.

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