



Go The Distance Writing for exams

1. Planning in exams

You're in the exam room – and time is precious. But don't try to save time by NOT planning your answer. In fact, planning well is vitally important – to make sure that a) you use every available minute effectively and b) you actually answer the question! Let's take a look at two ways you can plan your exam essay.

Understanding the exam question

The first thing you should do in any exam situation is: take a good look at the question, working out exactly what type of essay you have to write, and what points you need to include in your answer. Here's an example essay question:

"The best way to prepare children for later life is to expose them to a range of competitive activities in schools from an early age."

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Provide reasons and examples to support your answer.

The key words in this exam question are:

- prepare children
- later life
- competitive activities
- from an early age
- to what extent
- agree
- disagree
- reasons
- examples

This question is asking us if we agree or disagree: that means we need to write an argumentative essay. The phrase "to what extent" means that you'll have to say how much you agree or disagree with the statement, and provide reasons to support your position.

Activity 1

Write a list of ideas that agree and disagree with the statement in the essay question above, before reading the rest of this worksheet. Check your plan with the one on page 2.

Plan type 1: the list

The first type of plan is the list. This is where you write all of your ideas as bullet points under different section headings. It will help you to generate lots of ideas. You can then organise them into paragraphs and tick them off as you write.

Here is an example of list plan, relating to the exam question above:

Agree	Disagree
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Winning mentality – future career• Deal with losing – cope with challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of co-operation – future career• No team-building ethic - relationships• Alienates children – mental health• Is winning actually important? – values• Lack of empathy – relationships and family• Lowers morale – confidence

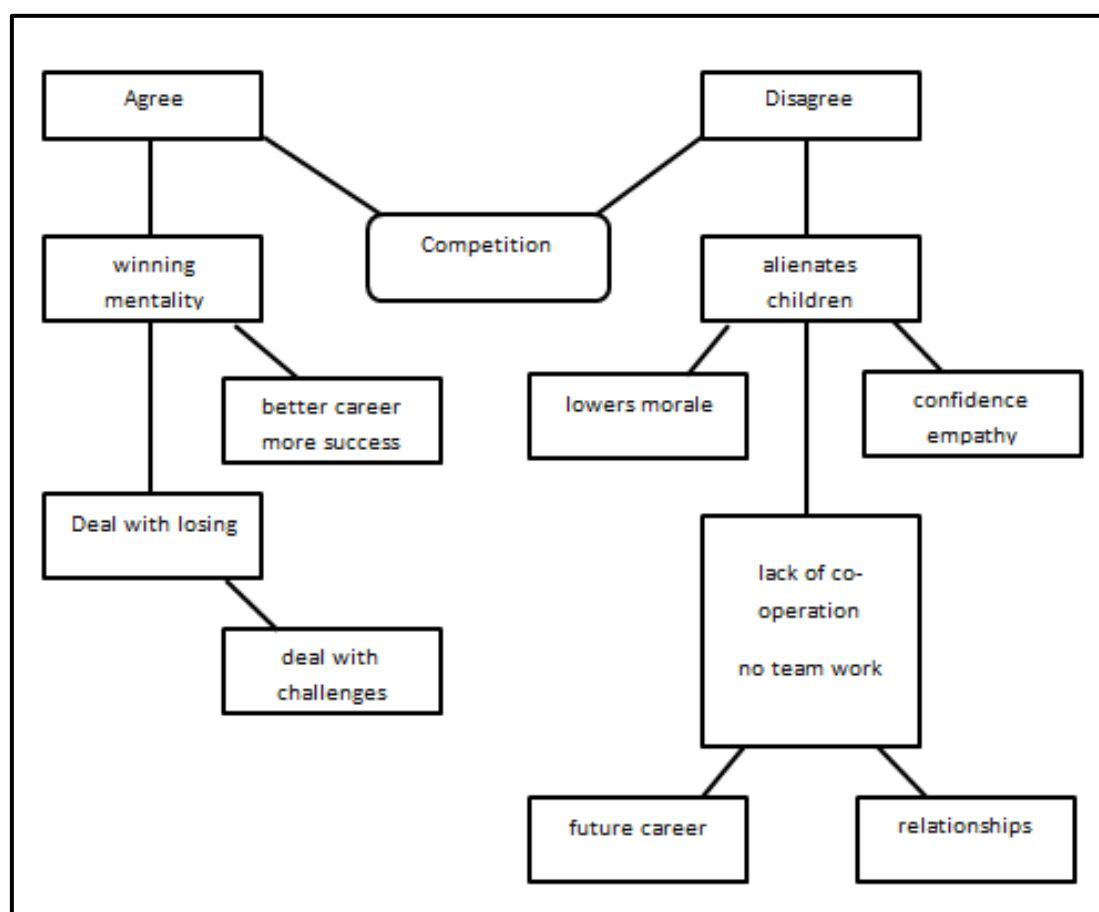
As you can see, the writer of this plan has generated more ideas that disagree with the statement. By planning their answer, they've realised how much they disagree with the statement in the question. This means they can clearly state their overall opinion throughout the essay, which will have a more positive effect on the examiner.

Also, they've made notes about the way each idea is relevant to the essay question. The writer can now link their ideas back to the original statement, include reasons and examples, and therefore write a good, fully developed essay.

Plan type 2: the spider diagram

In this type of plan the writer maps out their ideas and connects them together. Don't worry – no actual spiders are involved! If you prefer, you can call this plan type a **mind map**. On the next page, you can see what a spider diagram looks like.

Like the list, this plan clearly indicates that the writer has more ideas that disagree with the essay statement. The writer should voice this opinion clearly in their essay.



So, which is better? A list or a spider diagram?

The answer to that question is – neither. It depends on you! Some people are more visual and prefer mapping things out like in the spider diagram. Others find that writing a list is quicker (which is important in an exam!). Whichever method you use, remember: your ideas must be connected to the essay question.

Using the plan

After you've written your plan, you need to decide which paragraphs your ideas fit into. You can do this by numbering the ideas. Cross them off as you use them, to make sure that you haven't missed or repeated anything. Of course, you don't have to follow your plan exactly, but it's helpful to have an overall idea before you begin writing. Don't forget to put a line through your plan so the examiner knows not to mark it!

Activity 2

1. Look at this essay title. What type of essay do you need to write? Hint: Do you have to discuss two opinions before reaching a conclusion?

Some historians believe that the fall of the British Empire was a result of the rise of nationalism. Others attribute it to the economic crisis that followed the Second World War.

This is a ...

- a) argumentative essay
- b) discussion essay
- c) advantages and disadvantages essay

2. Read this essay title. What type of essay do you need to write? Hint: Are you arguing a particular point of view?

It is said that social media has a direct influence on how people vote in elections. To what degree is this true?

This is a ...

- a) argumentative essay
- b) discussion essay
- c) advantages and disadvantages essay

3. Which words are key words in this essay question? Hint: Which option covers all of the important points in both the statement and the task?

Some people believe that regular exercise is the best way to improve your health. Others believe that maintaining a healthy diet is better. Discuss both views and give your opinion.

- a) Some people, your health, others, maintaining, discuss
- b) Believe, exercise, healthy diet, discuss, views, opinion,
- c) Exercise, the best, healthy diet, better, both views, opinion

Look at this question and plan. Which ideas should the writer NOT include in their essay? A key word has been underlined to help you. Hint: Which idea is not directly linked to key words in the question?

Promotion of environmental issues is the responsibility of everyone in a community, not just campaigners and governments.

Plan

- A) Parents help by setting a good example for children
- B) Schools have lessons teaching younger people about environment
- C) Space should be made to build more parks in cities

4. Take a look at this exam question and plan. What mistake has the writer made? Hint: What was the advice about how long to spend on your plan?

Some people argue that having more free time was the most important factor for the growth of Britain's culture and economy.

To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Plan

I agree with the overall statement for several reasons.

1. Bank holidays gave people more free time to spend with their family. Clearly, this benefits everyone.
2. The building of the rail network allowed people to travel more freely. This meant they could visit seaside towns like Brighton more regularly.
3. The growth of the middle class meant people have more money to spend. This results in economic growth.

- a) Nothing, it's perfect!
- b) They haven't spent enough time writing it.
- c) They've wasted valuable time by writing in sentences.

2. Organising your essay

Now that you have your plan, it's time to start writing your essay. You need to make sure that your essay is well structured, and that your ideas follow a logical order.

The first paragraph

Ideally, after your introduction, your first paragraph should contain the argument that you can develop and support the most. In an exam situation where time is limited, you don't want to leave this until the end, and risk running out of time! Remember that each paragraph should really have one main focus. If you include multiple ideas in one paragraph in an exam situation, the overall purpose of the paragraph might be difficult for the examiner to understand. Try to express your arguments as clearly as possible.

The body paragraphs

After the first paragraph, your essay should then include supporting arguments organised into paragraphs. You should also try to include counterarguments to give your essay balance. This will show the examiner that you have a thorough understanding of the subject.

The conclusion

Remember, your conclusion needs to match the rest of your essay. For example, if your essay focusses on mainly positives, your conclusion should reflect this. If your essay focusses on positives and your conclusion is negative, it might have a very negative effect on the examiner!

Let's look at the list plan from earlier.

Agree <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Winning mentality – future career• Deal with losing – cope with challenges	Disagree <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of co-operation – future career• No team-building ethic - relationships• Alienates children – mental health• Is winning actually important? – values• Lack of empathy – relationships and family• Lowers morale – confidence
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As you can see, the writer has lots of supporting ideas for 'alienates children'. They should put that last, right? Wrong! Here is a sample structure showing where they could include all of their ideas.

Introduction Paraphrase statement
Paragraph 1 - Disagree Alienates children Future life: confidence, motivation, making friends, getting a job and building future career
Paragraph 2 - Disagree Lack of co-operation Future Life: team work, relationships, future career
Paragraph 3 - Counter Deal with losing Future life: cope with challenges
Conclusion Summarise main arguments

Looking at this essay structure, you can see that the writer has decided not to include a few ideas from their plan. In the **disagree** section, they've not included ideas that are similar, such as 'lowers morale' and 'no team-building ethic'. This means that they will avoid repeating ideas. Similarly, they've also chosen not to include 'winning mentality' from the **agree** section. This is because their essay is focussing more on disagreeing with the original statement. If they include too many counterarguments, there is a risk that their conclusion won't match the rest of the essay.

Of course, this structure is flexible and depends on the type of essay you have to write and what your overall opinion is.

3. Structuring paragraphs

Your paragraph should include three main parts.

The topic sentence

The topic sentence introduces your main idea for the paragraph. The topic sentence can be divided into two parts – the topic and the controlling idea. Take a look at this example:

Competitive activities can make children lose their confidence.

In this example, the topic is 'competitive activities' and the controlling idea is 'make children lose their confidence'. The topic is the theme of the paragraph, and the controlling idea gives more specific information about the theme. This helps you to limit your paragraph to one topic.

Supporting ideas

The sentences that follow the topic sentence should provide reasons or evidence to support or develop the topic sentence. This is very important in an exam, as you need to justify your points. You may have to remember specific dates or events, depending on your chosen area of study. Make sure all of your supporting sentences are connected to the topic sentence! Take a look at this example paragraph:

Competitive activities can make children lose their confidence. The results of the U.K government's survey in 2016 showed a remarkable drop in self-belief among children who practised regular sports at school. Significantly, this lack of belief was more prevalent with children aged 7-9. Additionally, this point was raised at the annual primary school conference in London in July, 2017. So, although it has been claimed that competitive activities can help build confidence, the evidence provided suggests otherwise.

The concluding sentence

Your concluding sentence can do one of two things. It can conclude the paragraph, or it can provide a link to the next one. This is where revising useful linking words and expressions comes in handy! In the example above, the concluding sentence starts with the linking word 'So'.

Activity 3

1. Look at this exam question and plan. Which idea should the writer include in the first paragraph? Hint: Which idea can the writer develop the most?

"Some people argue that having a reduced curriculum and spending less time at school can benefit children." To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Ideas

- A) Reducing curriculum – helps focus on skills, gives children chance to find their passion, lowers stress levels, removes unnecessary subjects
- B) More time at home – build social relationships
- C) Relax more - energy

2. Look at this plan. What mistake has the writer made? Hint: Is anything missing from this plan?

Paragraph 1 – First view Rise in world temperatures result of industry
Paragraph 2 – Second View Changing temperatures = natural process.
Paragraph 3 – Opinion We can do more to reduce carbon emissions
Conclusion Summarise main points and opinion

- a) It looks fine to me. Start writing!
 - b) Paragraph 2 should go first.
 - c) They've forgotten an introduction!
3. Can you identify the controlling idea in this paragraph? Hint: Which is the topic of the sentence? Which is the supporting idea?

Most scientists agree that society benefits from increased free time. This is because it gives people more free time to relax which gives people more energy during the working week.

Is it ...

- a) Most scientists agree
- b) that society benefits from more free time.
- c) This is because it gives people more free time to relax which gives people more energy during the working week.

4. Can you put the sentences in the correct order to build a good paragraph? Hint: Look for the topic sentence first.

1. This means that the banking sector should make radical reforms to avoid repetition of the financial crisis and help their customers ensure they better manage their own finances.
2. Many people blame the banks for the global recession.
3. They believe that it was down to flawed processes in the banking system itself, which was allowed to get worse and worse.

- a) 1, 2, 3
- b) 2, 3, 1
- c) 2, 1, 3

5. Which sentence doesn't belong in this paragraph? Hint: Which idea is not connected to **transforming areas**, as stated in the topic sentence?

1. Providing more funding for outdoor spaces in cities can radically transform areas.
2. Areas that have more green spaces have lower crime rates and healthier residents.
3. Parks are excellent places for children to have fun.
4. As a result, this reduces pressure on local hospitals and police forces, and allows more money to go back into the local economy.

- a) Number 3
- b) Number 2
- c) Number 4

More

Remember to check our Academic Writing webpages for information and activities to practise:

- Creating effective presentations
- Academic vocabulary
- Understanding assignment questions
- Writing effective paragraphs
- Citing sources correctly
- And more!

You can find these materials at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/gothedistance/academicwriting>

Answers

Activity 2

1. It's b). This is a discussion essay. You have two opposing views and must discuss both before drawing your own conclusions.
2. It's a). This is an argumentative essay. Here, you'll need to decide on whether you agree or disagree with the statement and support your opinion.
3. c). You can almost work out what the question and task are just by reading those key words.
4. c). The problem with c) is it is not focussing on responsibility, which is a key word in the question.
5. c). There is not enough time to write in full sentences. Remember – you only need to spend a couple of minutes planning. Write down key words!

Activity 3

1. a). This idea can be expanded on in much more detail than the others, and should be the main argument.
2. c). They've forgotten their introduction! You should paraphrase the original statement, and provide some background information.
3. b). The controlling idea is more specific than the topic.
4. b). Sentence 3 supports 2, and sentence 1 provides a conclusion to the paragraph.
5. a). While it may be true, there's no connection to the theme of the paragraph.