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# Writing argumentative compositions

by Austen Ivereigh

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## A What makes a good essay?

- a CONSTRUCTION is vital. You are asked to discuss a question, and you must discuss it in a way that is relevant, concise and persuasive. The essay must open the question, embrace the issues, and end conclusively.
- b Good construction enables you to show off your LANGUAGE. Think of an essay as a skeleton on which to hang words and phrases. Language in an argumentative essay must be formal, concise and accurate.
- c REGISTER is formal, but this should not be confused with pompous, flowery or academic language. CLARITY is all. A good essay gives the impression of objectivity and rigor.

## B What makes a bad essay?

The most common faults are:

- a IRRELEVANCE. Straying from the point or making points which don't directly answer the question. As you are writing, ask yourself: "In what way am I answering the question?" If the connection is tenuous, rub it out. The essays are far too short as it is.
- b LACK OF CLARITY. This usually comes from bad construction. If you are not clear about what you are saying, your language will be unclear, and therefore inaccurate.
- c WRONG REGISTER, TONE, etc. This comes from lack of practice and excessive "personalisation" of the question. Essays which are full of "I think that" and "as far as I am concerned" produce a negative reaction in the reader. This type of essay should have been left behind in First Certificate. Alternatively, some students try desperately to impress with complex structures they have borrowed from their own academic language, which generally translate badly. Tortuously complex sentences weighed down with subordinate clauses are often viable in Spanish but look horrible in English. English prefers short, snappy sentences.
- d POOR ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS. A good essay leads by the nose through the arguments to a convincing conclusion. A bad essay makes the reader stop, re-read, or even start again to try to follow the argument. This comes from not knowing where you are going before you start out.
- e BAD PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS AND INSUFFICIENT SIGNPOSTING. This is really the same thing. If you either (1) put too many points in one paragraph which are arguing different sides of the question; or (2) put the same point or points in different paragraphs, you leave the reader confused as to where you are. Paragraphs act as signposts; they say to the reader: "now we're about to say something different." At the beginning and ends of paragraphs we say what we are going to say and what we just said. In this way, you always tell the reader what you're saying, and language backs this up.

f IMBALANCE. Nothing irritates a reader more than seeing an essay which leans heavily to one side and merely pays lip-service to the possible objections. It is unconvincing, and an argumentative essay must always be convincing. Whatever your views, remember that to conclude X you must show the weaknesses of Y and Z, and you can only do that by treating them fairly.

**C All this sounds terribly difficult. Is there a tried and tested method which can help me avoid the above?**

There is no miracle method, but there are ways of making it easier. From the above, you will see that most of the problems with bad argumentative essays come from bad construction. Language expresses ideas, and if the ideas are clear the language will be too.

This 'Method' has the virtue of being tried and tested. It has produced devotees who swear by it, and others who think it too difficult. It is proposed here as a possibility. Remember that it only works for questions where you are asked to discuss a proposition.

**D The 6 paragraph method**

a STRUCTURE

It works like this. Your essay consists of six paragraphs which treat the question objectively and concisely. With the structure in mind, you can choose the question and with a minimum of preparation start writing. You merely have to remember the structure:

INTRO.

Say why the question is important and relevant (even if you don't think it is). Define the terms.

PARA 2:

Come down heavily in favour.

Make two points which prove categorically that the proposition is correct.

PARA 3:

Modify. Say why what you have just said misses the point or ignores a difficulty, or goes too far.

PARA 4:

Come down heavily against.

Make a couple of points which categorically demonstrate the opposite.

PARA 5:

Modify.

Say why what you have just said goes too far, etc.

PARA 6:

Conclusion.

By this time, it will be clear that the question is relative, difficult and multi-faceted.

Acknowledge this, and come down lightly on one side or the other.

b) EXAMPLE:

Let's take the example: *Censorship is never justified*. The points would divide like this (everyone has different points of course):

PARA 1:

*Pressing question because matter of freedom and rights. Two types of censorship: political (preventing criticism of government) and "moral" (protecting those considered vulnerable). "Never" means "under no circumstances".*

PARA 2:

*Censorship never justified because: freedom of expression and conscience sacred right of all peoples; censorship only ever in the interest of the censor; paternalism produces childishness.*

PARA 3:

*But there are limits to freedom in every society. We need laws and restrictions for the benefit of the weak and vulnerable, or the good of society as a whole. So not that simple.*

PARA 4:

*Because of this, there are cases where censorship is always justified: in a war, freedom of press may help the enemy; when the press is irresponsible and fabricates evidence, might require censorship. We cannot allow pornography to be shown to teenagers and children because it degrades women and offends the morals of most citizens.*

PARA 5:

*But who is to decide? Problem of where to draw a line. Isn't it the responsibility of parents to protect the children from immoral influences, according to what they consider immoral? In a war, we can avoid censorship by restricting the information that comes from the government.*

PARA 6:

*Just because it is difficult to draw a line doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Censorship may be necessary in moral matters, and very rarely in political matters.*

The above was written without any planning. You may need to draw a rough skeleton before starting, but many don't find it necessary.

### **E Language**

Now that we have the structure worked out, the language will be clearer. There are certain set expressions which may be useful in each paragraph. For example:

PARA 1:

*This question is the subject of much contemporary debate.  
This is an important /pressing /urgent /question /dilemma /difficulty / subject nowadays /in modern society  
... can be defined as:  
There are two forms of ...  
... can be considered in more than one way.  
At root, the question is asking ...  
The key word is ...*

PARA 2:

*It is clear/obvious that ...  
There can be no doubt about the fact that ...  
It could not possibly be argued /sustained /maintained /held that ...  
So that ...*

PARA 3:

*However, this argument is complicated by ...  
This argument ignores the point that ...  
In reality, it is never that simple, because ...  
This argument goes too far.*

PARA 4:

*Quite the contrary, it is clear that ...  
Indeed, the opposite is true.  
Ironically, therefore ...*

PARA 5:

*This is all very well, but ...  
In theory, this may be true, but how ...  
This position is too extreme.  
We cannot be so categoric about this, because ...*

PARA 6:

*On balance, therefore ...  
The question, as with so many others, comes down to the dilemma of freedom.*

*At the end of the day, we must admit that ...*

For this method to work it requires practice. The more of these you do, the easier it will become. You will discover that the issues often come down to the same: freedom, rights, etc. With enough practice, once in the exam room your essay will be virtually automatic.

Take these titles (these have not been taken from past papers, but they are of the same style) and construct skeletons according to the scheme above.

- a Discuss the proposition that people are reading less.
- b "We should accept unemployment as a fact of life".
- c The power of the mass media is now greater than that of the governments.
- d Do you agree that we live in a safer world?
- e Animals have as many rights as human beings.
- f Military service should be abolished.
- g Do you think the number of people living in cities should be restricted?
- h Pacifism is untenable in all circumstances.
- i It is a good thing that families in Europe are getting smaller.
- j "We do not have a problem with overpopulation, only with distribution of wealth".
- h Young people today do not get enough guidance.
- i The only way of combatting AIDS is for everyone to have forced check-ups.
- j Democracy is the tyranny of the 51 per cent.
- k Big armies cause wars.
- l Violence in the cinema should be censored.

## **F Model Essay**

Now let's put all these elements together, and write a 300-word story on the subject, "Censorship is never justified". Example below.

*Although many of us live in democracies, and perhaps because we do, the question of censorship remains a pressing one. Is it never justified and if so, under what circumstances and why? We should first distinguish two forms of censorship: on the one hand, the invigilation of the media in order to preserve "public order" (this we can call "political"); on the other, the censorship of films and television designed to avoid exposing those considered weak and vulnerable to pornography and violence.*

*Neither is ever justified in a free society. The unrestricted exchange of information and opinion is fundamental. When people are appointed as guardians of morality or obedience, that society ceases to be free.*

*However, we all accept limitations on our freedom as part of living with others. Sometimes, we accept that these particularly vulnerable - the young or the old, the uneducated or the immature - need protection from unlimited freedom for their own good.*

*It is for this reason that censorship is justified. Societies where pornography is readily exposed through television and cinema are societies which have high incidence of rape. Equally, when our country is at war we accept that unlimited freedom of press may assist the enemy.*

*The problem with this argument is that it ignores how we can censor without benefitting certain sectors of society. A government may censor a newspaper in time of war, in order to prevent its citizens knowing that they are losing the war because of the government incompetence.*

*Ultimately, the two forms of censorship are different. We should be conservative in our moral censorship because the protection of our children must come first. Political censorship is never justified, even in time of war, when government is able to restrict the flow of information, so avoiding the need to censor.*

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