

## ВОПРОСЫ ТЕОРИИ И ПРАКТИКИ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

*The basics of essay writing***A. Konobeev,***associate professor, PhD**ELT Department, Tambou State University**I. All sorts of things.*

There are several kinds of essays. In an exam you may be required to write a **descriptive** essay (in which you mainly *describe* something), a **narrative** essay (in which you *tell* about some event) or a **discursive** essay (in which you *discuss* a problem, *present your own* point of view, *give arguments* for or against something, or *compare* and *contrast* some ideas).

It is easy to see the difference between various text types (i.e. description, narration, etc). Here are two samples, read them and say which belongs to which type of text:

1) In the morning I usually get up at about 7 o'clock. I have many things to do during the day, so I lie still for 5 minutes thinking my plans over, then I take a cool shower, get dressed, have breakfast and go out. This is how my working day begins.

2) I hate getting up early in the morning. Most often it is still dark, and as often as not it is drizzling out of doors, and the alarm clock is rattling like mad. But once I turn the alarm-clock off, the silence and the darkness of the room shroud everything, hiding the room from sight, and I feel like I am still dreaming. However, there is much to be done, so I slowly crawl to the bathroom and take a cool shower, which beats some life into me.

Although the content of both extracts is much the same, in the first extract the author mainly tells about his/her morning, whereas in the second she/he describes his/her feelings and the general atmosphere, consequently, the first extract is the beginning of a narrative essay, and the second is that of a descriptive one.

To understand what kind of essay you need to write, you have to carefully read the exam topic. Some topics require you to describe, others – to tell, or discuss, or just to prove your personal viewpoint by presenting your arguments. Look at the following table and write **WHAT** type of essay is required for each of these examination tasks:

Note: With some topics it is possible to choose different types of essays.

Task	Type of essay
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe your summer holidays.</li> <li>2. Tell about your best friend.</li> <li>3. "To be a good pupil you have to be very clever". What do you think about it?</li> <li>4. Prove the necessity of studying foreign languages.</li> <li>5. My favourite book.</li> <li>6. A Russian holiday.</li> <li>7. How people choose jobs.</li> <li>8. "A good friend always tells you the truth". Discuss this statement.</li> <li>9. It is always better to study abroad. Do you agree?</li> <li>10. An imaginary journey.</li> </ol>	

## II. You name it!

In some countries and even some exams instead of topics you may be given subjects for writing. It is your responsibility to develop subjects into topics. Of course, your topic must be a good one. A good topic is neither too wide (so that you can cover it in the provided time), nor too narrow (so that a single paragraph is enough to cover it). Let us explore a way of making subjects into topics.

- 1) Choose the subject which is the most interesting for you. For example, from Knitting, Drawing, Modern Cars and Geography one may choose Drawing.
- 2) Say in one sentence what you think of this subject, for example: *Drawing helps me to relax.*
- 3) Make the sentence impersonal, for example: *Drawing is a good way to relax.*
- 4) Make it into a title, for example: a) Drawing as a way to relax (for descriptive essays); b) How I relieved a stress (for a narrative essay); c) The best stress reliever (for a discursive essay).

Practice task: Make the following subjects into topics, using the provided skeleton:

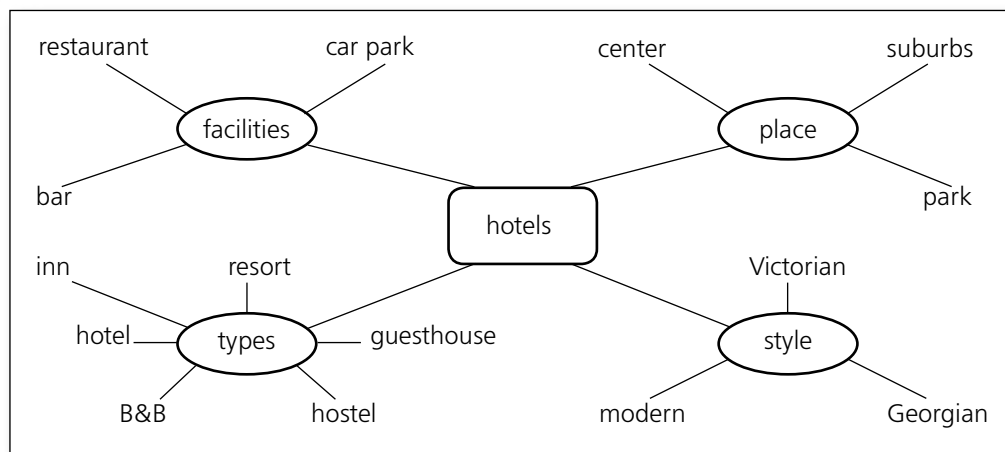
PETS	1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
FRIENDS	1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
HOLIDAYS	1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT	1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
BOOKS	1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____

## III. Where did you get it from?

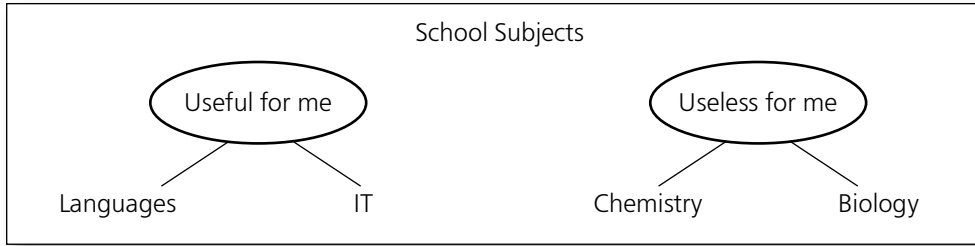
Once you've chosen or developed a topic, you need to collect information for your essay. You may need all kinds of information, such as your personal experience, statistics, books, films, newspapers, what your parents or friends think, etc. You may write it down in any way and order, just as it comes to your mind. It is important, though, to graphically represent it to make all the internal links evident.

There are several convenient ways of representing information:

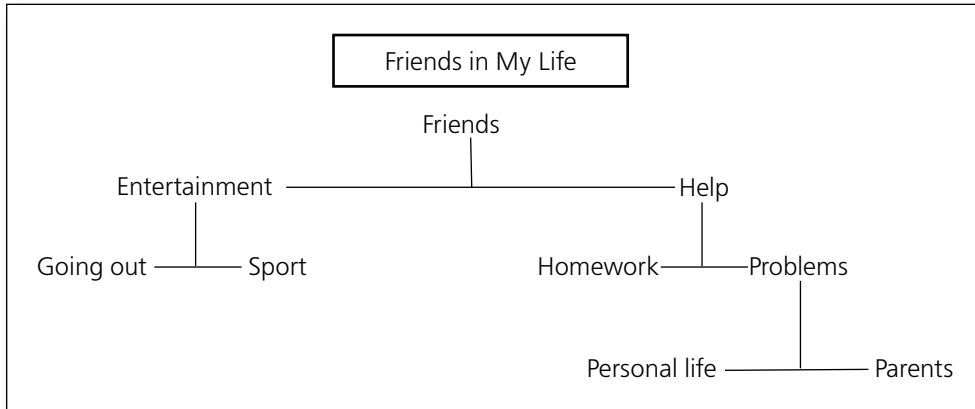
### 1. Brainstorm map



2. Clustering



3. Treeing



**Practice task:** In groups of 3 or 4, organize this information in as many ways as possible.

Flights: hot air balloons, wings, France, zeppelin, Wright brothers, 1903, war, passengers, space, rocket, Tsiolkovsky, Daedalus, Leonardo da Vinci’s ornithopter, glider, space shuttle.

*IV. All of it?*

So, there are many ways of organizing your information. But would you really use all of it? What information you use depends largely on who is going to read your essay. For example, you would choose different details to describe Russian winter to a person from the snowy Sweden and to a student from a hot dry African country.

Now, look at the following pieces of information. Decide which you will use for these readers and fill in the table: *Topic* – “Young people’s pastimes”. *Information:* skating, dancing, studies, dating, reading, cinema, picnics, going to a bar, discussing girlfriends/boyfriends, smoking, alcohol use, helping people, gossiping, watching films. Note: the same items can be placed into different categories.

Young Russia teacher	
Elderly Russian teacher	
American student	
Your friend	

Compare your choice with that of your comrades. You will probably see that most of you have chosen similar things, and that the choice of information depends on the addressee of your paper. It is important to select only that information which will be easy to understand or very interesting for the addressee.

*V. Write it now! Ask me how!*

There are different ways of writing one and the same thing. Some of these ways are more successful than others. Let us explore some reasons for success.

**Exploration task:** Read and compare the following two descriptions of a room. Try to draw a schematic plan of the room described.

1) It was a big living-room. To the left of the door there was a bookcase with two chairs – one on each side of it. There were two curtained windows in the left wall, with a pot plant between them. Near one of the windows there was a TV set and a stereo facing the opposite wall. On the wall opposite the door there was a large picture – a painting of some people on the seashore. In the right-hand corner there was a round side table. Next to the table there was a cozy leather arm-chair. At the right-hand wall there was a small sofa with two cushions on it and a coffee table in front. To the right of the sofa there was another arm-chair. And above it there was a small portrait of an old lady. In the middle of the room there was a peach-coloured Persian rug.

2) It was a big living-room. In the middle of the room there was a peach-coloured Persian rug. At the right-hand wall there was a small sofa with two cushions on it and a coffee table in front. There were two curtained windows in the left wall, with a pot plant between them. On the wall opposite the door there was a large picture – a painting of some people on the seashore. To the left of the door there was a bookcase with two chairs – one on each side of it. In the right-hand corner there was a round side table. Next to the table there was a cozy leather arm-chair. Near one of the windows there was a TV set and a stereo facing the opposite wall. To the right of the sofa there was another arm-chair. And above it there was a small portrait of an old lady.

You will agree that the first description is easier to draw. Why? Choose the right answer from the suggested: a) Simpler language is used in it; b) There are fewer details; c) There are more details; d) Details in it are given in a logical order.

Of course, the answer is – you guessed it! – that the details in the first description are given in a logical order. For each text-type there are certain logical orders – or patterns – that make it easy to understand. If you do not follow any of them, your text becomes incoherent, or understandable without special effort. If your essay lacks coherence, you will lose many points in the exam. Now, look at the first description. From the following list choose the pattern that was used to create it: a) from top to the bottom; b) from bottom to the top; c) from the center to the edges; d) from the edges to the center; e) from left to the right; f) from right to the left.

These patterns are usually used in descriptions and any one can be chosen. They create only the general skeleton of the text, other patterns can also be used or even intermingled into these.

**Exercise**

Decide which patterns you would use to describe the following (different patterns can be used to describe the same things):

Subject of description	Pattern
1. A portrait 2. A tall building 3. A landscape 4. A person 5. A room	

Another popular and effective pattern of description is from general to particular features and vice versa.

For narration (stories) the most frequently used pattern is the chronological one, that is, the sequence of events as they happened. Look at the following story:

It is not very easy to find me anywhere, even if you really need. I usually have many things to do, that is why I constantly have to go around the town and do something in different buildings of the university. I have already got used to it, but today was an exception even for me. Just look at what happened! In the morning I had to go to the building of the university where I teach. After it, I was to return to my office, which is in another building. When I had done some work, I received a phone call from the secretary of my boss who said that the boss wanted to see me as soon as possible. Naturally, immediately after it I took a taxi and very soon I was in the main building of the university. It turned out that my boss wanted me to have a meeting with some journalists in an hour and tell them about the work of our department. As I had all the necessary information in my office, I returned to the building where I had been earlier that afternoon. But very soon I had to return to the main building for the meeting. When the meeting was over, I returned to my office and I had some two hours before I had to go back to the building where I had been in the morning for a lesson of English. Well, what do you say? Would you like to live through such a day?

In this story underline the words and phrases that show the reader the sequence of events. These words are called *markers*. They are necessary to make your writing easier to understand. The following table shows some of the markers that can be used in different types of texts:

Text type	Markers
Description	<i>Spatial markers</i> : there, in front, on the left, on the right, opposite, between, on top, at the bottom, near, next...
Narration	<i>Time sequence (chronology)</i> : first, next, then, after that was done, before, since...
Discursive	<i>Order of importance</i> : first, the most important, less important, the last but not least, no less important, of primary importance, of vital importance... <i>Problem solution</i> : the problem is, the answer lies in, to solve it, to find the answer... <i>Order of frequency</i> : the most frequent, most often, less often, even less frequent, a more habitual, a less known/popular practice...

### Exercises

1. Look at the following story. Pieces of sentences have been mixed up. Your task is to put the sentences into the correct order. Pay a special attention to the markers.

They got on the train and were marveling at the speed. One / decided one day to take a trip to London. This meant / "No," replied his friend. / adventure for them, as they had never done anything like it / Two old men who lived in a village deep in the country / bananas. They'd never eaten bananas before either. / man decided to try his banana, but just as he was taking a / bite the train entered a tunnel. / "Have you eaten your banana yet?" he called out to his friend. / before. To eat on the journey, they had bought some / town, and there catch the train for London. It was all a big / "Well, don't," said the first man. "I took one bite of mine and / they had to leave their village, get on a bus to the nearest / went blind."

2. Choose the correct marker to fill in the gaps.

There are several reasons for studying a foreign language. (1), one may need it in everyday life. There are now more and more people who go abroad or have foreign friends. Internet makes communication easier every day, and most often one has to do it in a foreign language. (2) is professional development. It is easier to get a good job now if you (3) have a higher education, (4) if you have a good command of a foreign language, and preferably more than one. (5) is personal growth. If you want to be a free person, you need to have access to many sources of information and different viewpoints. Using a foreign language to read different pieces of news and to watch different information channels can help you. And, (6), using a foreign language can be fun. You do not need to wait for a book or a film to be translated into your native language, all you need to do to enjoy it is to listen or watch. (7), there are different reasons, but they all prove the necessity of learning a foreign language.

1. a) Primarily; b) Mainly; c) First of all; d) Generally
2. a) Also; b) The second reason; c) Moreover; d) Nevertheless
3. a) as well; b) plus; c) moreover; d) not only
4. a) as well; b) but also; c) and; d) all the more so
5. a) The third reason; b) It is also important; c) To add; d) Another point
6. a) in the end; b) eventually; c) to conclude; d) last but not least
7. a) In the end; b) In conclusion; c) So; d) I want to say

3. Now, fill in the gaps with markers of your own choice. There can be more than one word in each gap.

Some of my friends at school sometimes argue whether it is more important to develop one's muscles or one's body. I believe that there is something in what each of them says. \_\_\_\_\_, a strong body usually means good health. \_\_\_\_\_, it is very important to stay in good health all your life. \_\_\_\_\_, a strong body means good looks. It is always pleasant to look at a fit person, and such people are attractive. \_\_\_\_\_, physical strength is a good protection if you are in trouble.

\_\_\_\_\_, muscles are not everything that we need for a normal life. Brains must be developed as well. If your brains are not well-trained, you cannot study well and, consequently, get a good job. \_\_\_\_\_, you will be a very boring person. Getting out of trouble is important, but it takes brains not to get into it in the first place.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to remind you of an ancient Greek saying. To describe a deficient person they would say: "He can neither read nor swim". I personally believe that harmonious development is always the best thing for anyone.

*VI. Get to the point!*

What you have read so far are rather rules for general writing. Now let us consider the specifics of an essay. How is an essay different from any other text? Well, an essay has a specific structure that consists of three parts. These parts are: *the introduction*, *the body* of the essay and *the conclusion*. In the introduction you explain why you are writing this essay and what it is going to be about. In the body you describe your subject, tell about your topic, analyze, compare or give arguments for or against a viewpoint. As you see, in an essay you may use all the text types that we have analyzed above. Of course, all that you write has to be logically organized and connected with the help

of markers. Now we will learn what a good introduction, body and conclusion are. Here are some guidelines:

1. The size of both the introduction and the conclusion should be about 2/5 of the whole essay.
2. The introduction usually contains only very general ideas. Its aim is to secure the reader's interest. There are several ways of interesting and effective introductions. You may begin with a startling fact or statistics, unusual quotation or shocking news. You may also start with a very broad idea and narrow it down to your topic. As long as you convince your reader that what you are going to write is important, you have reached your aim and may go on to the body of the essay.
3. The conclusion usually contains general ideas similar to those of the introduction. The difference is that now you have already given your view and confirmed it by your story, description or arguments. In conclusion you confirm that you were right all the way from the very beginning (It is like saying "See? I told ya!" to your friends).
4. It goes without saying that both the introduction and the conclusion should reflect only the content of the body of your essay. Abstract introductions and conclusions will lose you many points in the final mark.

### Exercises

1. Read the essay and choose the introduction which you think is the most suitable one.

First of all, nowadays pupils have to study more than they had ten years ago. The programmes are changing and we all know that if we want to succeed we need to learn really much. And it is very difficult to study days on end.

Although lessons now last less than they used to, we have more lessons a day. We finish classes later, and we still need to do homework when we get home. There is also often housework to be done, so that we have very little time to go out or even do sports. Doctors say that it not only harms health, but that it also ruins our ability to memorise things and to react to questions and problems quickly.

Frequent changes of school programmes leads to teachers telling us to learn many things at home in case some programme changes back and we need this information for an exam in two years or later. When we do not know for sure just what we will need in some time also does not make studies easier.

And another problem is that we now have to take a new type of exam. The tasks in this exam are such that we have not seen before, and just to know the material is simply not enough.

So, when my parents tell me that it is easy to study at school I know that they are mistaken because they have not experienced just the same things that we experience every day.

- a) School is a very difficult time in our lives. It is so for many reasons, and it is difficult to enjoy school.
- b) Very often parents say to me something like: "How come you have not got an excellent mark for it? It is so easy to study it!" When I hear such words, I think that they must have forgotten what it is like to study at school. To study at school is not as easy as it seems, and there are many reasons for it.
- c) When I think about modern schools, I feel sorry for the pupils. They have to go through many difficulties in their life and studies. I think that parents should try to understand their children more and be more supportive and helpful in their studies.

2. Read the following essay and choose the suitable conclusion from those offered.

Many scientists and educators say that the general cultural level of modern students is steadily decreasing. Many pupils lack knowledge and they do not care for reading books because they have so many other forms of entertainment. To improve the situation, teachers set more and more books as compulsory reading at school. But is it really such a good way out?

For some pupils an interesting book really becomes a discovery. But the problem is that to enjoy it they need to already know something about the time when it was written, about

the author and about the importance of this topic. It is not easy to do if this book is read as part of a compulsory course without much explanation.

Now there are many so-called "chrestomathies" which are more like retellings of the books that are most frequently set for reading. Many pupils do not have the time to read the original, so they just read such a chrestomathy and think that they know this book. This also means that their culture remains on the same level.

Another point is that very often this practice instead of making pupils like the books that they are required to read makes them hate them for the time, wasted in efforts to understand, or worse, memorise something that has not explained to them and the practical use of which remains for them a mystery.

- a) So, compulsory reading is a very bad thing. It does not help the students, it only spoils their lives. Therefore, it should be banned at schools.
- b) So, I think that compulsory reading may be effective. But sometimes it is not effective at all. Perhaps it would be a good idea to spend more time on reading and discussing books in class than making pupils read them at home.
- c) So, I think that setting books for compulsory reading to improve the students' cultural level is a mixed blessing and should be treated and applied with care. Otherwise the result may be just the opposite to what was intended.

**3. Read the following essay and choose the suitable introduction and conclusion.**

Some pupils write important information on tiny scraps of paper, and refer to it when they write the test. Others hope to copy from those sitting around them. They expect others to know what they don't. There are also such students who use pagers or mobile phones to receive the necessary information. Of course, there are many other ways of cheating too, and not everyone is easily caught doing it.

Attitudes to cheating differ in different countries. In Russia, for example, pupils usually try to help each other, and they can even give their own secret notes to their mates. In Israel there is a lot of competition. Not only no notes will be given to others, but pupils can also report those cheating to the teacher. In other countries there are other attitudes too.

- a) It is not always easy to write a test. When you are not sure, you want to know what your classmates think. But if you ask them for help, or read over their shoulder, this is called cheating. There are different ways of cheating in tests, and different attitudes to it.

Of course, whether to cheat or not to cheat is your own choice. However, one should always remember that, apart from the possibility of being caught, cheating means that you do not know the material very well, and making passing a test easy does not mean easifying your future professional career. However, the choice is yours.

- b) If you are going to write a test, it is very important to make sure that you can do it. There are different ways of learning information, and it is done differently in different countries. Some students even cheat!

When you've finished writing the test, it is important to go over it once again to see that you have made no mistakes. Here again the information that you have collected and written down somewhere can be invaluable.

- c) When you are going to write a test, there are many ways in which you can make the task easier. You can either learn everything by heart, or try to cheat. Cheating in a test can be of a great help.

If you decide to use any kind of help when you write a test, it is very important not to be caught. If you can do it in a clever way, you will have good grades throughout the year, and everyone will see what a successful student you are.

**4. Look at the following paragraphs. Together they make an essay. However, some of them contain irrelevant information. Cross out the irrelevant ones.**

- 1. There are many different people in the world, and it is not easy to find a true friend. So once you have found one, you really value this person and feel very close to him or her.
- 2. My best friend is Angela. She is a student at the University studying engineering, and I think she is very clever to study such a difficult subject.
- 3. We have many common interests. We both like poetry and music. We often discuss



the books we read and exchange music tapes. Sometimes we disagree on how good a book or a song is, but we respect each other's opinion.

4. Respect is one of the most important social qualities of people. Only when you feel and show respect, you will be successful in socializing. That is why I always try to show respect to other people.
5. Angela is a very reliable person. I know that I can tell her anything, and she will keep it secret. We often tell each other about our private lives and sometimes get good advice from each other. It is wonderful to have someone you can rely on, someone who is always ready to help you.
6. Angela likes to help people in general, and she is very kind. She never refuses to help an old lady to cross the street, or sometimes she helps her elderly neighbours to do their shopping or to do small things around the house. Recently Angela joined "Help the Aged" organization, and she is always very active trying to help people. That's why everybody likes her.
7. I am also very fond of Angela. I like her more than any other friend. I am glad that I have found such a good friend among so many different people in this big world. To have a true friend is almost the same as to have another sister.

**5. Read the following descriptive paragraph. Identify which sentence contains irrelevant information.**

Though we have known each other for over a year now, I still remember the first impression that he made on me. The first thing I noticed was a beautiful tattoo on his arm. His whole arm seemed to be covered with seaweed, and it was done very artistically. Some people find tattoos off-putting. In some cultures tattoos are a sign of manhood. I really admired this wonderful work of art of a tattoo. Then I looked at the regular features of his face, his blue eyes with sparkles of joy, and his tasteful clothes. I thought that he must be an interesting person.

**6. Choose a topic and write an essay.**

- a) "Tell me what you read and I'll tell you what kind of person you are." Do you agree with this statement?
- b) My best friend.
- c) How people choose jobs.
- d) My best weekend.
- e) We must always fight for truth. Do you agree?

### *Checklist*

When you've finished writing an essay, use this checklist to see if you've got it right.

#### Ideas

- Is there one central idea of the whole essay?
- Is there one main idea for each of the paragraphs?
- Do the ideas of the paragraphs naturally lead one to another?
- Are there irrelevant sentences or bits of irrelevant information?

#### Structure

- Is there an introduction and a conclusion?
- Does the body develop the ideas of the introduction?
- Does the conclusion sum up the ideas of the body of the essay?

#### Logic

- Is every idea developed and illustrated in the body of the essay?
- Do you prove what you say?

#### Technicalities

- Is the grammar, the spelling and vocabulary in the essay correct?