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In response to the growing popularity of IELTS the Taipei Times, in conjunction with the British Council, brings our readers an IELTS preparation page which will run every Saturday on p14 of the Taipei Times. Each week will focus on a different area of the test. IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, is an upper-intermediate test of English communication. It can be used for university entry and emigration around the English-speaking world and beyond. It measures your ability to communicate across the four language skills — reading, writing, listening and speaking — through authentic challenging tasks. With over 700,000 people taking IELTS annually, it is one of the fastest growing English tests in the world, trusted and accepted by over 4,000 organisations and faculties worldwide, and is a great alternative to TOEFL.

Writing Task 2

Writing a problem and solution essay

In both the academic and general versions of the IELTS test, the second part of the writing test is a discussion essay. You have 40 minutes, should write 250 words and need to include ideas, reasons and examples from your own experience.

Sometimes, you will be asked to think about problems and suggest some possible solutions. The question could be about social, economic, political or environmental problems.

Example Question 1

In many countries an increasing number of teenagers suffer from obesity. What are the causes of this, and what are some solutions?

Task approach

1. Study the question carefully. Highlight any keywords and think about what they really mean, for example:

- **Many countries** – which countries? Is this a problem in Taiwan?
- **Obesity** – being very overweight

2. Brainstorm a list of possible causes of this problem, and try to think of supporting examples. For example:

- watching TV, eg, soap operas
- junk food, eg, hamburgers, fizzy drinks
- lack of outdoor activity, eg, video games replacing team sports such as football or basketball
- pressure to study, eg, university entrance exams

3. Think of a list of possible solutions. Try and link these to the causes you have mentioned.

- limiting TV viewing time
- banning advertising for junk food
- investing in sports facilities
- making sports part of the school curriculum

4. Write an introduction briefly outlining the main problem. This could include a rhetorical question, for example — **But what are the best approaches to this problem?** Finish the paragraph with a thesis statement explaining what you are going to write about — **In this essay I will outline the social causes of this problem and suggest some possible counter-measures.**



The British Council, Taipei.
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5. Write a paragraph explaining causes of the problem. Remember to include real examples from your own knowledge and experience. You only need to write about two or three of these, so select the ones you can explain most clearly.

6. Write a third paragraph giving possible solutions. Remember to explain how each solution would work and also any possible problems with it.

7. Write a final paragraph which evaluates the solutions, perhaps saying which ones would be most realistic.

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EXAMPLE QUESTION 2

Global warming is seen by many people as the most serious problem facing the world today. What are the causes of global warming, and what should be done about it?

Below is a student's answer that follows the steps mentioned on the left of the page, but the paragraphs are in the wrong order. Read through them and reorganise the essay by numbering the paragraphs in the order they should be in.

A __
One solution would be to develop alternative forms of transport, such as electric cars and planes driven by fuel cells, which would drastically reduce the amount of pollution caused by traffic. This would be very expensive, however, and development of the technology could take years. Another answer could be to offer countries with rainforests, such as Brazil, more money to help them protect these areas. This would also allow them to develop industries that didn't cause environmental damage. However, this would require a great deal of international cooperation.

B __
Having looked at two alternatives, it seems that the solution to the problem of global warming will require a lot of investment by both governments around the world and industries that currently contribute to the problem.

C __
Nowadays, most people agree that the problem of global warming poses a very real threat to the future safety of our planet, and even to the human race. Despite this there seems to be little agreement when it comes to the best way of addressing this issue — so what should be done? In this essay I will outline some of the causes of this potential environmental disaster and suggest some possible solutions.

D __
One of the main causes of the global rise in temperatures is our reliance on oil for energy and transportation. The increasing popularity of air travel and our reliance on cars cause massive amounts of carbon dioxide to be released into the atmosphere, and this leads to the greenhouse effect. The problem also results from the destruction of the world's rainforests such as the Amazon, which absorb and store large amounts of carbon.

Look at this weak answer. What is wrong with it?

Nowadays, global warming was a problem. Global warming is seen by many people as the most serious problem facing the world today. What are the causes of global warming, and what should be done about global warming? But every coin has its two sides. In my essay I will discuss this contentious issue. Global warming has many causes. The causes are very serious and these causes make the problem worse and worse. They make the situation become terrible. One cause is the people. Another cause is the government. The last cause is companies who only love money. On the other hand, what are the solutions to these causes? One solution is the government can make a law. The law will stop global warming very quickly. The other solution is by the people. They can do everything, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, on this matter. The business also must be changed. In conclusion, this problem is a double edged sword. As a wise man once said, 'When you go to Rome, copy the Roman way!' Then we can solve global warming, isn't it?

Problems

- ▶ Too short
- ▶ The tense in the first line is wrong
- ▶ The writer has copied the question word for word
- ▶ 'Global warming' is repeated many times
- ▶ There are memorised, unrelated expressions and sayings, some of which are wrong
- ▶ There are no examples
- ▶ The writer doesn't explain his or her point of view
- ▶ Paragraphing is inadequate



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Key language —



▶ **Opening sentences:**
Nowadays, the problem of teenage obesity **is becoming** increasingly serious. (Present continuous tense)

In recent years, the problem of teenage obesity **has become** increasingly serious. (Present perfect tense)

▶ **Causes:**
One reason for this is the amount of junk food teenagers eat. This problem is also **caused by** teenagers watching too much TV. The problem **results from** a lack of exercise.

▶ **Introducing solutions:**
One solution would be to limit the amount of time teenagers watch TV.
Another alternative would be to increase the amount of sports teenagers do at school.

"Would" for imagining consequences:
Building more sports facilities **would** encourage students to exercise more, but it **would** obviously be quite expensive.

▶ **Conclusions:**
Having looked at a number of options, it seems that the most realistic way of helping young people with weight problems is through a combination of education and government legislation.

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. A 4. B