

Writing a discursive essay

Overview

The purpose of a discursive essay is to present an argument or point of view and give examples or reasons to support it. The topic to be discussed will often be something controversial which requires presentation of two sides of an argument. An essay should be written in a formal or neutral register and should be well organised, with an introduction that explains the approach to be taken, a main section (using clearly connected paragraphs) and a conclusion that is a considered final judgement of the issues discussed, not merely a repetition of points made. It should include language appropriate for expressing opinions and arguments, and vocabulary that is topic specific. Points made should be supported by clear evidence and examples.

Tips for writing a discursive essay

Language

- think about the audience that the essay is for
- write in a neutral or formal register
- clearly present opinions related to the topic
- include a range of grammatical structures and related vocabulary
- use cohesive devices to link ideas and paragraphs

Organisation

An essay should be well organised, with an introduction, main section and a conclusion. It should include well-developed ideas. You should use linking words/phrases (e.g. furthermore, however, in conclusion, etc.) to link ideas in sentences and paragraphs.

One way to structure your essay is to have a balanced argument focusing on one side of the argument, then on the other side of the argument:

- Introduction – briefly outline the argument that the essay will discuss. Engage the reader to make them interested in the topic, for example, ask a rhetorical question. Leave concluding thoughts for the conclusion.
- Present one side of the argument. Support your ideas with examples and/or reasons.
- Present the other side of the argument. Support your ideas with examples and/or reasons.
- Conclusion – this should briefly summarise what you have said and, on the evidence provided, come to a conclusion on the issue discussed.

Example of a discursive essay

	Comments
<p><i>Secondary schools put too much emphasis on academic success and not enough on the personal development of their pupils. Discuss.</i></p> <p><i>No-one would deny the importance of education in today's world. Over the last ten years, major progress has been made to improve access to education for all. Education often equates to academic results and GCSEs and A levels remain the aim for most UK pupils. But does this mean that too much time is devoted to studying for an exam and not enough on personal development?</i></p> <p><i>It goes without saying that academic performance is the key to success for young people. In fact, throughout the world, secondary schools are required to concentrate on success in a series of exams. The teachers, themselves trained to teach their own subject, are taken on to teach academic lessons and the objective is to pass the exam. It has been suggested that teachers should be paid according to the success rate of their pupils in exams!</i></p> <p><i>This academic success clearly favours not just further progress in education (e.g into university or higher studies) but also access to employment. For employers a major consideration is academic performance, so it is up to schools to do their very best to provide all pupils with the skills necessary to compete. Moreover, we should not forget that success in school can allow social mobility and can drastically improve the chances for pupils to escape poverty.</i></p> <p><i>However, the principle of education also includes many things beyond simply academic success. Young people have a right to cultural, moral and spiritual education. At secondary school, children are in a transitional stage of their lives and can be very vulnerable – they are not children and not yet adults and they are going through adolescence which affects their bodies and brains. Schools have a role to play in supporting young people to manage their physical and emotional wellbeing, to understand diversity</i></p>	<p>The candidate introduces the topic in the first paragraph and uses a rhetorical question to engage the reader.</p> <p>The opening paragraph sets the context for the answer which will focus firstly on the importance of education and its place in setting all students on the path to a future in higher education or work.</p> <p>The candidate then goes on to point out that secondary education should also be concerned with the cultural, moral and spiritual development of young people who can be very vulnerable in the interim phase between childhood and adulthood.</p> <p>The candidate uses some extended sentences and attempts more complex structures.</p> <p>The candidate explains why personal development is an important part of education.</p>

Comments

and differences and to be able to live and work in different contexts. This is the role of personal development classes in school.

It is certainly true that this aspect of secondary education is often neglected either because there are not enough hours in the day to teach the extensive programme for the exam or because the teachers themselves are not competent to teach it. In today's world where the mental health of young people is becoming ever more fragile and technology has revolutionised our lives in particular through social media, schools should be providing guidance for pupils on their personal development.

It is clear that there is a balance to be struck between preparing young people for further study and work and giving them the means to become well rounded people able to live and prosper in society. Schools have been encouraged to concentrate more on the development of their pupils, but with the pressures of the exam system and league tables, it remains to be seen how far they will go towards devoting time to this vital element of education.

The candidate provides a clear conclusion which balances the two parts of the question and provides a finishing comment.