

# **Essay Writing B1/B2/ and C1/C2**

## **Teachers' Notes and Keys**

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## General Outlines

### **Session I: Basic Guidelines concerning the Structure and Content of the ‘Classical’ Essay**

It is surprising how very few students know the principles of essay writing. For this session, it may be necessary to explain the five-paragraph structure alongside hints as to what constitutes a good essay as outlined in *Session 1* in the students’ workbook. Warn the students that they will have a practice essay in the following session to be written in class under examination conditions. (Do not count this essay as part of the final mark, but emphasise that it is a practice essay to ascertain the level of essay writing at the beginning of class (as a diagnostic test) so that they will realize how far they need to progress.)

Encourage them to choose any English book/novel they have not read to date in order to write a book review towards the end of the course on the grounds that their writing will improve only if they also regularly read English books and other materials in English. The main aim of this assignment is to motivate the students to enjoy reading – hence, the freedom of choice. I have found that the students seem to have enjoyed this task even though it is rather time consuming, but their reviews have been refreshingly original and individual as there are not many serious literary reviews on the internet for contemporary novels. Three anonymous random samples of students’ reviews are available in the appendix. (At our university we have a small private library for English studies which generally ensures that the students do choose a book they had not read at the beginning of the course, but many other strategies are possible for this task.)

### **Session II: Practice Essay (Either B1/B2 or CI/C2)**

The students are given ninety minutes to write an essay of about 300-400 words for the B1/B2 levels and about 500-600 words for CI/C2 levels. The suggested essay titles in this workbook may be used as they cover a broad range of subjects. Typical B1/B2 and CI/C2 writing tasks such as letters or giving a speech or a tour can be practised at a later date. (Examples of such writing tasks are provided for in the appendix and in the feedback assignments, but pragmatic tasks are not a problematic area. Most conventional courses provide a wide range of writing assignments, but it is better for the instructor to provide his or own tasks according to the

needs of the groups. A commercial class will have different needs from a computer class or a class of adults will differ in its requirements from a class of children, but all these tasks require the basic writing skills. Even a good speech or informative tour of a city will obey structural and stylistic principles similar to those involved in traditional essay writing.

### **Session III: Feedback**

This is a key session both for the instructor and the group. From having marked all the essays according to the suggested scheme, the instructor will have a clear picture of the various levels within the group together with the students' main areas of weakness. Even though my last group comprised twenty students, I managed to see each student individually within the 120-minute session. The students knew that the mark would not count towards their final grade and so there was a relatively relaxed atmosphere and as I saw the students individually, there was no embarrassment in front of the class. (The students can in the meantime be given a Shorter Essay Assignment as in Session III of the *Teacher Workbook* or a pragmatic writing task such as writing a letter to a friend to describe their experiences on a visit to the country of their target culture or a guided tour to their home town or a city of their choice as taken from the conventional TEFL textbooks or from the appendix.) Seeing the students individually for roughly a five-minute slot, the instructor points out the main areas of weakness, possibly with an ironic mock horror reaction to numerous punctuation, spelling or grammar mistakes, but this would also depend on the age level and sensibilities of a particular class. Here, however, the students do need to see their main areas of weakness and virtually all students will make comma and apostrophe mistakes, thus preparing them for the next session.

### **Session IV: The Use of the Comma**

This is rather a dry task, but if the students have seen the number of mistakes they have made in this area from the previous session, they will definitely see the point of devoting a double session to this task. Commas are difficult even for educated native speakers. The instructor needs to be clear as to the difference between main and subordinate clauses, for example, or between defining and non-defining relative clauses. For this exercise, the simplified rules of the comma are included in the booklet before proceeding to the excellent explanations of the

copyright-free OWL (Online Writing Lab) of Purdue University included in the booklet. (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/02/>).

The OWL website provides many exercises for further practice, which the instructor can either download or photocopy to give as class exercises, or if the students are very varied in their grasp of the comma, they can do as many or few exercises as necessary in their own time. Some of my short sample exercises have been re-written with a slight British bias to balance the US orientation of the OWL exercises of Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana). It is still a good idea to go through the exercises in class with the students reading out the sentence with commas (gross pronunciation mistakes can also be discreetly corrected by the instructor). To vary what could become a rather schoolmasterly exercise, the instructor can refer to the sentence and the students then have to raise their hands to 'vote' for one, two or more commas respectively in the sentence. This means that forty sentences can be covered in a matter of minutes in a relaxed and informal fashion and the students then learn from their wrong guesses without too much embarrassment.

### **Session V: Apostrophes**

The same principles apply as in the previous section. Depending on the knowledge of the class, other aspects of punctuation such as the colon and semi-colon can be covered. These are not included as the other aspects are relatively straightforward and are well covered by OWL.

### **Session VI: Vocabulary Building**

The workbook provides a few exercises to be carried out collectively in class. From the previous session, the students will be aware of their limitations in this respect. If time allows, the tests can be returned individually as in session III, but, if not, the marked tests this time should have a comment on the register. Similarly, if possible within a tight schedule, the lecturer can give two double sessions on vocabulary building by using a thesaurus and choosing lexical fields relevant to the class which may involve either business or technical English.

### **Session VII: Essay Practice**

It is a good idea to have a mid-term test. This time the mark can count towards the final assessment as the students should by now have a clear idea about how to structure an essay and how to produce clear and cogent argumentation.

As already mentioned, it is important for the students to have constant writing practice just as an art class should not be a case of the lecturer talking about art all the time, but students are expected to be constantly producing works of art at home and in the class. Similarly, I would suggest the essay writing lecturer should be giving written assignments after each session. For these, the pragmatic writing tests can be used as from Cambridge exams and courses or similar institutions and so do not need to be repeated in the booklet. These can be marked relatively quickly following the suggested marking scheme and by giving two brief comments at the end of the assignment: one on the main area of grammatical weakness and one, referring either to content, style, or register. In my experience, it is necessary to make one clear point about the main area of grammatical weakness such as the confusion of the simple present tense with the present progressive tense and one area of style or content such as the need to use a more succinct lexicon. We must not forget that students usually have a great number of demands on their time and to provide them with a barrage of mistakes and failures will only discourage their motivation. Theoretically and ideally, if students correct their main fault for each essay, then the faults will disappear or at least diminish with time.

For this session, which should be assessed, the students write an essay in exam conditions, but with one clear difference. They should be allowed to use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as one of the purposes of this test is to make the students aware of the limitations of their own vocabulary and the urgent need for improvement if, as is usually the case, the final test will not allow dictionaries.

Instructors, including the present writer, often feel guilty if they are not talking and the students are doing all the work. However, the practice sessions are extremely effective. It gives the students the opportunity to apply the information they have learnt thus far in the course. During this session which does not require intense moderation, the instructor can catch up on marking the pragmatic tasks and this balances the heavy workload from a course which involves many written assignments.

### **Session VIII: Feedback**

As with session III, individual feedback is very important. Students should be asked to bring their first practice essay to the session so that recurrent mistakes such as wrong usage of the present simple and progressive tenses can be identified.

Most students will make punctuation mistakes, but, at least, they will now be able to refer to comma and apostrophe rules. If there are other punctuation errors such as with colons and semi-colons, the students will appreciate the importance of this rather dry topic if covered in the next session or if OWL exercises are suggested for a homework assignment.

On the whole there should be a great improvement in structure and argumentation so that this feedback session should be very encouraging. Deficiencies can also be identified with the hope that these will be eliminated before the final test essay takes place.

### **Session IX: Summaries**

Some instructors prefer to cover this aspect earlier in their courses, but here it is left until later. Not only are summaries a vital skill in the world of work whether giving the minutes of a meeting, an abstract for an academic paper or writing a business report, they also provide training for the essential essay writing skill of writing succinctly. Here, they are left to a later stage as the students should have improved their range of vocabulary, and thus be able to write more precisely and concisely. I have offered relatively elementary summary passages to convey the basic idea of writing summaries. If the instructor chooses an article he or she is passionately interested in for the students to summarise, this will cause more work but also a much more interesting session as the instructor can provide background information and possibly provoke a discussion. (However, if copyright permission has not been obtained, the instructor may need to rewrite the article in his or her own words. This task has the advantage that the new passage can be tailor-made to the groups' requirements and also re-enforce specific vocabulary learned during the course.)

### **Session X: Register**

Students should from the outset be encouraged to learn ten new lexical items per day during their course, but how this will manifest in the concrete situation is dependent on the nature and level of the group,

The exercises on register will increase student awareness of various registers. Many, even advanced students, still write essays in a colloquial register. Students need to be encouraged to read formal literature pertaining to their areas of interest, which may vary from computers, articles in the business world to academic and literary articles.

The sample essays in this booklet reflect the expected levels of register.

## **Session XI: Final Test**

If possible, it is advisable to give the final test on the penultimate week so that, in the final week, the students may see their essays in the presence of the instructor and thus learn from their mistakes. This also avoids any complaints after the results have been issued. The lecturer may have made a mistake in adding up the marks. This can be rectified on the spot without any rancour.

## **Session XII: Return of Tests**

Students receive their papers and final mark. They can check their papers for any mistakes made by the instructor in a friendly, fair and open atmosphere. Depending on the age, maturity and level of the students as well as on the nature of the educational institution, it is a good idea to have an informal class celebration.

## **Session I: Basic Guidelines concerning the Structure and Content of the ‘Classical’ Essay**

### **Essay Writing: 10 Points to Watch**

#### **Session I: Essay Writing: 10 Points to Watch**

1. **Plan** your essay structure beforehand: (a) by listing the points you want to make in your preparation on a sheet of ‘rough’ paper (b) by producing counterarguments and (c) by arranging your points thematically into three paragraphs for the body of the essay.
2. Use the **five-paragraph structure** (Introduction (1), body (3) and conclusion (1)). This applies not only to shorter essays (300-1,000 words) in examination conditions but also to some pragmatic tasks such as speeches.
3. **Introduction.** You may refer to the question, but do not quote the essay title in full although you may refer to the title by quoting no more than a couple of phrases. State a clear thesis or intended argumentation by mentioning three aspects, corresponding to the three paragraphs in the body of the essay.
4. Keep the **paragraphs** clearly defined and consistent. Do not have ‘half’ paragraphs. (It is a good idea to have a full line space between the five paragraphs so that the structure is ‘transparent’.)

5. Try to keep a clear thread based on your main argument throughout the essay. Your essay should have **clear argumentation**, which strongly supports your stance whilst at the same time dealing fairly with counterarguments.
6. Have a clear **conclusion**, which does not merely reiterate the points made in the introduction, but which makes a statement of wider scope. In your conclusion, use phrases such as ‘In conclusion, it has been shown that ...’. Do not end your essay with an inconclusive conclusion such as ‘the internet has provided the world with many advantages, but also an equal number of disadvantages.’
7. **Avoid contractions** such as *wasn't*; *it's* and *mustn't*. (This usage is, however, now accepted by many examiners, but it is still better to avoid these forms in order to give your essay greater formality and thus, authority.)
8. Do not begin your sentences with the co-ordinating conjunction **BUT**. Even though many quality newspaper articles do this, academic and scientific conventions still prefer the use of ‘however’ and other contrastive connectives for beginning a sentence. (The co-ordinating conjunction *but* is normally preceded by a comma except for the conjunctive formulation *not only . . . but also*.)
9. Except for phrasal verbs such as *to get up*, **avoid the verb *to get*** by using verbs such as *to receive*, *to obtain* and *to acquire* and also, except for standard collocations such as *to get dressed*, do not use the verb *get* to form the passive: NOT: Bill GOT helped by his brother; BUT: Bill WAS helped by his brother.
10. Many words in English have many different meanings (polysemy); use your dictionaries to check **the exact meaning**.

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