TOEFL Essay Writing Tips

I. Understanding the TOEFL question:
There are different types of TOEFL questions. You never know which question you will receive, so you must be prepared to write on ALL the types of questions. It is very important that you completely understand the question BEFORE you begin to write. Below are some different essay question types.

1. Choose a point of view and support that view. (Sample question)
   Some people believe that university students should be required to attend classes. Others believe that going to classes should be optional for students. Which point of view do you agree with? Use specific reasons and details to explain your answer.

   This type of question asks you to look at only ONE side of the issue - the side you agree with. DON'T write about both sides. You tell which side you agree with and support your ideas with details and examples.

   Sample Essay for this question:
   Some people believe that university students should be required to attend classes while others believe that the classes should be optional. I believe that students should absolutely be required to attend classes and I will explain my reasons below.

   To attain a university degree, it is necessary to prove oneself in many areas. You must read countless books and attend lectures, labs and discussions. If a student only had to read books to attain a degree, I don’t think that degree would be worth very much. Of course, we all gain much knowledge from books and articles, but to really have the university experience, we must also gain valuable knowledge from the professors and instructors that help guide us through these readings. The professor chooses the readings for his or her course with the intention of discussing and lecturing about the topics in the books. If you only read the books, you are missing half of the education. We can learn how to interpret ideas from the professors who have more education and experience than we do. A professor can stress for us the important educational points in the assigned readings and share his or her knowledge and experience.

   People go to a university to learn. The experience of a lecture given by a good professor is absolutely a necessary part of learning. Professors can be role models, mentors, teachers of life and education. To say that their lectures and lessons should be optional seems incredible to me. People have been learning from each other at universities for ages. One cannot have a complete education without professors guiding him or her though the educational process. Valuable learning comes though discussions with instructors and professors.

   It is my opinion that university students should be required to attend classes and discussions. Professors are valuable resources in a person’s educational experience and to miss the opportunity of learning one’s knowledge directly from the source would be a missed opportunity indeed.

2. Describe something. (Sample question)
   If you could invent something NEW, what product would you develop? Use specific details to explain why this invention is needed?

   In answering this type of question, you must use a number of adjectives in order to effectively describe something. The reader should be able to really "see" what you are describing. In this particular question, you must also be creative as they are asking you about something that doesn't even exist.

   Sample Essay for this question:
   If I could invent something new, I would develop a chemical germ detector with an attached protection kit that could be worn on the body. This invention is needed because there is a real danger of chemical terrorism in the world. We are not medically equipped to handle such a disaster. Such a device might help to save thousands of lives.

   We have seen the use of chemical and biological warfare in conflicts between nations such as the U.S. and Iraq in the Gulf War. Also, there was a case of social terrorism on the Tokyo subway system in the 1990's when someone released deadly Sarin gas in a passenger train car. An attack of this nature on a much wider scale could happen at any time. It is not a question of whether such a disaster will happen, but when it will occur. If there was an invention that could detect
the immediate presence of a chemical or biological molecule, then a person could protect himself both in military and civilian life.

It has been reported that when a disaster of this kind occurs, the hospitals will not be prepared to handle the situation. If someone released a deadly bacteria in New York City, for example, the hospitals would not have enough antibiotics available to treat the thousands or even millions of people that would be coming in for help. My invention would reduce the need for medicines and medical equipment.

It is also possible that medical personnel would not be well trained to deal with such a catastrophic event. If people were able to help themselves with my invention, then the number of casualties would be greatly reduced. In conclusion, it is not a question of if, but when a chemical or biological catastrophe will happen. Our hospitals are not equipped with enough medicines and properly trained personnel to handle a disaster of this type. Therefore, we need to have the option of equipping ourselves with protective devices in order to help ourselves in the event of a catastrophe like the one described above. If I could invent such a device, I would.

3. **Compare two points of view and tell which one you agree with.** (Sample question)

   Some people think that children should begin their formal education at a very early age and should spend most of their time on school studies. Others believe that young children should spend most of their time playing. Compare these two views. Which view do you agree with? Why?

   In this type of question, you must write about **BOTH** sides of this issue and then tell which side you agree with. You may **NOT** say that you agree with both sides. You **MUST** make a choice. First, give support, details and examples of both sides of the issue. Then, tell which side you agree with and why.

4. **Agree or disagree with something.** (Sample question)

   Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: ONLY people who earn a lot of money are successful. Do you agree or disagree with this definition of success? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

   In this type of question, you **MUST** agree or disagree. You cannot be unsure or indecisive. After you have said whether you agree or disagree, you must give convincing reasons and examples for your choice.

5. **Explain why something is true.** (Sample question)

   People remember special gifts or presents that they have received. Why? Give specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

   In this question, you should use lots of examples. (For this question, you could use examples of gifts one might receive and tell why those gifts are memorable). Do not write in the first person, “I.” Write in more general terms.

6. **Support an idea or plan.** (Sample question)

   It has recently been announced that a new restaurant may be built in your neighborhood. Do you support or oppose this plan? Why? Use specific reasons and details to support your answer.

   In this question, first tell whether you support or oppose the plan and then tell why. Since this question is somewhat personal, it is ok to use personal pronouns such as: “I, me, my” in your answer.

II. **The parts of an essay:**

   In every essay, there should be an introduction, a body and conclusion.

   **A. The introduction:**

   The introduction restates the question using different vocabulary and/or sentence structure. The introduction also includes your thesis statement…the most important sentence in your essay.

   **B. The body:**

   The body of your essay is also the “heart” of your essay. It will include your main ideas and details and examples to support those ideas. Each new idea should be a new paragraph. Typically, a TOEFL essay will have 3 – 4 body paragraphs.
C. The conclusion:
The conclusion will be your final paragraph. It will summarize all the main ideas in your essay and it may also include your opinion.

III. How to write a good introduction:
Let’s look at some more essay questions to see how to restate the question and how to write your thesis statement.

TOEFL essay question #1:
Some people prefer to eat at food stands or restaurants. Other people prefer to prepare and eat food at home. Which do you prefer? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

Restatement & Thesis:
People have two options when deciding where to eat. They can prepare meals and eat at home or they can go out to stands or restaurants. I prefer to go out to eat because the food is more varied and interesting, it is less work for me and it saves time.

Analysis:
The restatement mentions the two types of options people have for eating and tells which one the author prefers. In addition, it gives three reasons for that preference. These three reasons will make up the three main idea paragraphs in the body of the essay.

TOEFL essay question #2:
Is it better for children to participate in team sports or individual sports? Why? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

Restatement & Thesis:
It is better for children to participate in team sports rather than individual sports. In team sports, children learn how to cooperate. They learn good sportsmanship and how to rely on their teammates. These are important lessons that will benefit children throughout their lives.

Analysis:
The first sentence clearly states the author’s opinion. This is followed by three reasons for the opinion. Finally, the author mentions life lessons. In the essay, the three reasons will make up the three main idea paragraphs in the body of the essay. In addition, the author will mention how each main idea is useful throughout life.

TOEFL essay question #3:
Some people prefer to live in a small town. Others prefer to live in a big city. Which place would you prefer to live in? Use specific reasons and details to support your answer.

Restatement & Thesis:
There are many good reasons to live in a big city and an equal number of good reasons to live in a small town. I, myself, prefer to live in a small town because it is more personal and homey; it is easier to get around in and it is safer than a big city.

Analysis:
The first statement says that both a city and town have positive aspects. The next sentence tells the author’s preference and reasons for that preference. These reasons will make up the body of the essay.

IV. How to write good body paragraphs:
Each paragraph in your essay introduces a new idea. It should include a thesis statement followed by support and examples. Be sure to use LOTS of examples. Within and between paragraphs be sure to use transition words like: on the other hand, however, though, for example, in contrast, likewise, in addition, first, finally. The paragraph should end with a concluding sentence which briefly summarizes the ideas in the paragraph.

V. The elements of a good concluding paragraph:
A good concluding paragraph should include a summary of your main points. It may also include the author’s opinion. It should NOT introduce any new ideas. A good concluding paragraph often leaves an impression on the reader. It may make the reader think more deeply about the topic.

VI. Preparing to write and writing your answer:
a. Read and understand the essay question. (2 minutes).
b. Organize your ideas on paper by writing a short outline of the introduction, body and conclusion. (8 minutes).
c. Write your essay. Remember to restate the question in your introduction. Use clear details and LOTS of examples in the body of your essay. Finally, summarize the main ideas in the concluding paragraph of your essay. (15 minutes).
d. Reread your essay and make any changes in spelling, verb tense, word choice or sentence structure. (5 minutes).
VII. A sample TOEFL outline:
TOEFL Question: In some countries, teenagers have jobs while they are still students. Do you think this is a good idea? Support your opinion by using specific reasons and details.

I. It is a good idea for teenagers to have jobs while they are students because they can learn about responsibility; they can learn the value of money and they can learn how to work as a member of a team.

II. Students can learn responsibility
   a. They have to come to work on time every day
   b. They must serve customers in a friendly manner
   c. They have to maintain the store shelves with inventory

III. Students can learn the value of money
   a. Students will learn that it takes a lot of time and effort to make money
   b. Students will make wiser choices when buying things with their own money

IV. Students will learn how to work as a member of a team
   a. Students will learn how to compromise with other employees (helping out when someone is sick, etc.)
   b. Students will learn about the friendship that comes from teamwork (feeling like you can trust others)

V. Conclusion
   It is a valuable experience for teenagers to have jobs while they are students because they will learn to be responsible adults. They will have an appreciation for money and they will learn about working with others. All of these traits will benefit them throughout their lives.

VIII. A sample TOEFL essay (based on the outline above).
It is a good idea for teenagers to have jobs while they are students because they can learn about responsibility; they can learn the value of money and they can learn how to work as a member of a team.

When teenagers have jobs while they are students, they can learn how to be responsible. As an employee, you must follow a weekly schedule. This means, you have to come to work on time. If you are scheduled to begin work at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning, you have to be there at 8 a.m. It doesn’t matter if you went to a party the night before and do not want to get up. You have to get up. Your boss is relying on you to do your job. As an employee, you also learn that you must serve the customer in a friendly manner. If you are not friendly, the store may lose business and you may lose your job. Finally, an employee is responsible for maintaining the store shelves with inventory. If you work in a department store, you have to keep the shelves filled with merchandise. The products have to be priced and placed on the shelves. If the shelves look empty, customers may get a bad impression of the store and may not continue to shop there. It is good for students to learn responsibility when they are young because it will benefit them as they get older.

Another benefit to teenagers working is that they will learn the value of money. Often students get money from their parents, but they do not realize how hard their parents work for that money. When students work, they begin to appreciate how difficult it can be to make money. They also realize that “money doesn’t grow on trees” as some students seem to believe when asking their parents for money. Another reason it is good for students to work is that they will make wiser choices when they use their own money to buy things. For example, if students work 20 hours per week at $7.00 per hour, they will make $140 per week. In one month, that is about $540. Perhaps a student will think twice about spending $120 for a pair of tennis shoes or $350 for a stereo system when s/he has had to work very hard for that money. On the other hand, when students do spend money for personal objects, they will appreciate them more than if they had gotten the money from their parents.

Finally, working teenagers learn from being members of a team. As employees, students learn to work with others and help one another. For example, if someone is sick, you may be asked to help out. In addition, other employees will depend on you to do your share of the work. If one person does not do his/her job, other employees may have to do extra work to compensate. Students will learn very quickly that it is not good teamwork to expect others to do your work. Finally, students will develop friendships with other employees because they have learned to count on each other. Working as a member of a team will build strong character in students.

To conclude, it is a valuable experience for teenagers to have jobs while they are students because they will learn to be responsible adults. They will have an appreciation for money and they will learn about working with others. These experiences will help them grow into adulthood and benefit them throughout their lives.

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