

Writing Details to Support Generalizations

A common complaint of many students who take essay exams such as the TOEFL iBT writing task is that they did not have enough time to finish the essay. But you must remember that there are two reasons for having you take an essay exam:

- 1). To see how well you can write in English.
- 2). To see if you can finish the essay, that is the introduction, developmental paragraphs, and a conclusion withing the thirty minute timed constraint.

The best way to do this is by sticking to your subject and being thorough within your limits. Sticking to your subject means the topic sentences directly connect back to your thesis and the supporting details directly relate to your topic sentences. Being thorough within your limits means to develop ideas adequately at three coherent layers of meaning: main idea, three support ideas, six sub-support ideas. Or it is also possible to develop ideas adequately in this manner: main idea, two support ideas, and six sub-support ideas. If you try to do any more than that, you will most likely not have enough time to finish the essay, or you will not be able to support your generalities with specific and relevant evidence. Generalizations without support are not good, and details without generalizations are not good either. Read the next two examples of flawed paragraphs:

“Generalizations without Support” Paragraph:

Now TV can affect our lives. When we are bored, we might watch TV. They have a variety of programs, talk shows, news, drama and so on. We have enjoyment if we watch TV. If we are bored or have free time, we can enjoy on TV.

In this example, the writer says that TV has a variety of “programs, talk shows, news, and drama” but does not specifically name any such programs. This paragraph is making several general statements without supporting them with specific details. A revised version of this essay might look something like this:

TV can affect our lives by giving us enjoyment. For example, I enjoy watching **MTV** (Music Television). On that channel, I can watch my favorite singers such as **Michael Jackson, Celine Dion, and Mariah Carey**. Sometimes I sing along with them. Additionally, there is a reality show called “**Survivor**,” whose candidates compete for a million dollar prize. I like to see which candidate will be eliminated each week.

“Details without Generalizations” Paragraph:

First example, a student has to be polite to his/her instructor. Using titles of respect, he/she has to respect him in whatever situation because if he/she doesn't, he/she can catch an F or a zero on a test or an assignment. At the very least, the student may create a bad impression of himself in front of his instructor. Furthermore, an impolite student has to leave the school and go away.

In this example, the writer has a well-developed detail statement (i.e., politeness with instructor) but has failed to write a generalization at the beginning of the essay. It is important to give the essay a topic sentence so that there is an explicit controlling theme to hold the ideas in the paragraph together. A revised version of this essay might look something like this:

Politeness is very important in relationships. First example, a student has to be polite to his/her instructor. Using titles of respect, he/she has to respect him in whatever situation, because if he/she doesn't, he/she can catch an F or zero on a test or an assignment. At the very least, the student may create a bad impression of himself in front of his instructor. Furthermore, an impolite student has to leave the school and go away.

The difficulty you might have when taking a timed essay is it is difficult to think of ideas in a pressure situation. The way to solve that problem is to practice your creativity before taking an actual essay exam. It would be wise for you to read books, magazines, and newspapers about popular American Culture topics. You could do this in your own language, but it would be better to do it in English since you can use the new vocabulary you learn in your writing.

If you get writer's block, or the inability to think of ideas, try asking yourself who, what, where, when, why, and how questions. For example, if you saw the question,

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The invention of the Internet has had negative effects on your civilization. Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

You could ask yourself the following:

1. What is the Internet?
2. Who uses it?
3. Why do people use it?
4. When did the Internet become important?
5. How is the Internet negative?
6. How is it positive?