

Teaching Writing

Teaching essay writing skills

Tim Gay teaches ESL in the London Borough of Newham.

Writing good essays is an essential part of many examination courses. Marks are often awarded on the basis of style and organisation as much as on the actual content of the essay. An essay which is 'thin' on material, but which is well organised will always score higher than a muddled essay full of poorly arranged detail. This is a method that has been successfully used in inner city secondary schools teaching pupils whose first language is not English, and whose language skills were of varying standards.

The first part of the lesson involved a teacher-led discussion of an approach to writing an essay on: 'Privatisation, is it good for Britain?'. Students (in this case they were following a Business Studies course) were asked to suggest the various areas to be discussed in the essay. These topics were then written on the board. For each topic some pros and

some cons were listed. For the conclusion to the essay, students were asked to say in which areas privatisation was a good idea, and those areas where it was not. The advantage of giving the students a model of this sort is that they learn to write one paragraph on one topic.

The diagram shows a tilted rectangular box representing an essay structure. At the top, it reads 'Privatisation: Is it good for Britain?'. Below this, the sections are listed as follows:

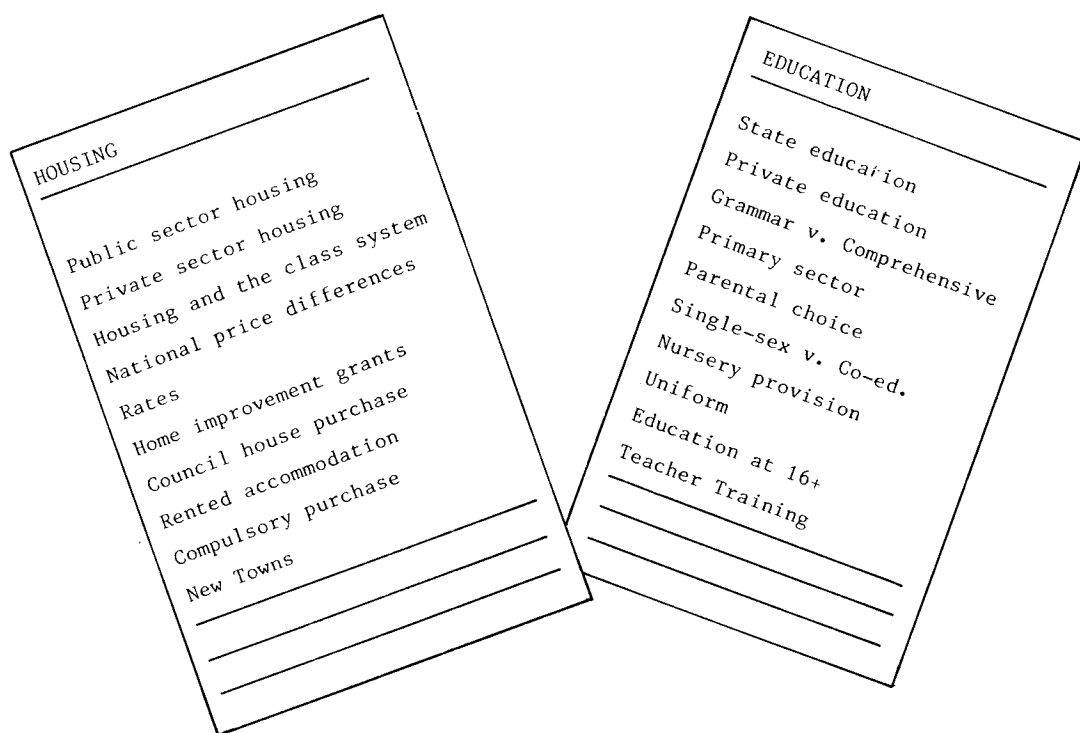
- Introduction
 - What is it?
 - How could it be good or bad for Britain?
 - What does it affect?
- National Health Service
- Transport
- Coal Mining
- Housing
- Social Services
- Conclusion
 - In what areas is it best?
 - In what areas is it worst?
 - Give your own opinions.

The second part of the lesson involved splitting the students into groups, with a scribe appointed to note down the groups' decisions. Each student was given a copy of a format for essay writing (*see below*). The groups of five or six students (in this case we had two) were given a set of cards. Each set dealt with an essay topic, and each card with an issue within that topic. Some of the cards were left blank so that the students could add issues that they felt to be more important than the issues on some of the cards. They were told to aim to finish with ten issues to discuss in the essay, as this is the average number of points that can be made in a sixty-minute essay.

The students' task was to discuss the relative importance of the issues on their cards and arrange them in order of least important to most important. This is essential tactically to keep the reader (examiner) interested in what is being said. The two sets of cards dealt with the following topics:

1. *Analyse critically the British housing system.*
2. *Analyse critically the British education system.*

The ten issues for each topic are listed below, along with the blanks for the students' own suggestions.



The students were finally asked, having arranged their chosen issues in order, to write down three or four points to support each issue. They were then expected to write up the essay individually at home. This exercise was duly accomplished with a surprising improvement in the overall standard of work from the group. Naturally the material chosen can be adapted to suit individual needs, and follow-up exercises of the same kind will maintain the improvement until the students internalise the approach to essay writing described here. It is perhaps worth pointing out that these students, of Asian origin in general, often tackle writing tasks in a roundabout way as this is way they are culturally accustomed to answer a problem. Furthermore, their

subject teachers, with whom the ESL teacher works, often do not realise that coherence is a skill to be taught and not one that is simply picked up.

A format for the essay is set out below. It is useful for the students to see what you expect the shape of the essay to be. Another good idea is to give them a list of expressions to include in their essay. When an ESL teacher is working with a subject teacher, the marking can then be split between them. The ESL teacher marking the linguistic content, giving bonus marks for the inclusion of 'recommended' phrases, and overall shape of the essay while the subject teacher checks the content of the piece of work.

Title

Repeat the title.

General remarks, e.g. There are many factors that influence

There are many issues involved in ... First of all... At first glance ...
In the first place ... It is difficult to say/decide/analyse/ ... The pros
and cons must be weighed up ... The main ideas ... The case for ... The
case against ... Outline ... Sketch ... Describe ...

The first factor/issue/problem/question to be discussed ...

NB THIS SHOULD BE THE LEAST IMPORTANT.

The second factor/issue/problem that arises is ...

NB THE NEXT MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE.

The third ... etc.

Cover all the points from least important to most important.

In conclusion ... It is clear that ... Having weighed up
the pros and cons ...

COME TO A DECISION ABOUT THE PROBLEM SET IN YOUR ESSAY TITLE.