

Key Terms

When preparing your essay, first look more closely at the key terms in the prompt. Do they need to be clarified? Are there multiple ways of interpreting the words? In order to make your essay as focused as possible, you might need to limit the key terms to a specific definition or interpretation. If the key terms in the prompt seem pretty straightforward, you still want to note them. By repeatedly returning to these terms in your essay, you'll convey the impression that your essay is strongly organized and on topic.

For the sample prompt above, write down the key terms:

Using key terms from the prompt throughout your essay contributes to its overall coherency.

For this prompt, the key terms are *beauty*, *true*, *exceptional*, and *commonplace*. We need to think about how we're going to use these terms in our essay. For example, what is *true beauty*? Do we want that to mean just natural beauty or can we consider man-made objects? As for the word *beauty*, do we want to limit our discussion to artistic beauty such as paintings and sculptures, or should we consider poems and literature as well? Should we discuss only natural beauty, such as stars and flowers, or should we consider personal beauty as well, such as models and GRE instructors? As you can see, we could write a lot on this topic, if we had the time. But we don't, so it's important to focus. By defining our key terms, we make the essay a lot more manageable and easier to write in a short amount of time. For this essay, let's include both natural objects and man-made artistic feats, but leave out personal beauty.

Opposite Side

In order to score well on the Issue essay, you'll have to consider both sides of the prompt. A simple "I agree, and here's why" essay won't be enough here; rather, you'll need to consider both sides of the issue and state a clear position that you can defend. Take a brief moment to look at the sample prompt again, and then write down the converse of the statement.

"True beauty is found not in the exceptional but in the commonplace."

For this prompt, the opposite side of the argument would be something along the lines of “True beauty is found not in the commonplace, but in the exceptional.” Note that there is no right answer to the prompt; either side is valid. So if you find the opposite of the statement more convincing, that’s fine. As long as you can support your position with some relevant examples, it doesn’t matter what position you take on the prompt. This brings us to the final part of step one—brainstorming examples.

Examples

In many ways, the examples will be the most important part of your essay. Without strong, relevant examples, you cannot expect to achieve a high score on the Issue essay. As the instructions state, you should support your position with examples drawn from your reading, experience, observation, and academic studies. In general, the more specific your examples are, the better your essay score. And examples from history, literature, or current events are better than personal observations or experiences. Imagine that a friend asks you to read her essay and give feedback. Which sentence would you respond more favorably to?

“Few observers would doubt the awesome beauty of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, a work of art produced by the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo.”

“Few observers would doubt the awesome beauty of the various paintings they see in museums, works of art produced by great artists.”

Both sentences essentially say the same thing and use practically the same words. But you would probably respond more favorably to the first sentence because it contains a *specific* example.

Take a moment to jot down some examples for the previous prompt. Make sure you come up with examples for both the original statement and its opposite.

Now take a moment to look over your examples. Are they specific? Are they relevant to the topic? Do they support a position on the topic? The strength of your examples will determine the strength of your argument. It's hard to write a convincing paper with weak examples. Here are some examples that might work for our sample topic, both weaker and stronger:

Avoid hypothetical examples—the more specific your example is, the better.

Okay Example

paintings, artwork
buildings, churches
flowers, natural wonders

Better Example

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*
Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris
Niagara Falls

Good examples are relevant to the topic and contain specific details.

In each case, the better example is the more specific, more detailed example. Also note that we've avoided any personal examples. While you certainly may feel that your boyfriend or girlfriend is the most beautiful person in the world, that sort of personal example won't be as effective as a more academic or global example. Use personal examples only when specifically instructed to by the prompt or as a last resort.

STEP 2» Step 2: Organize

Once you've identified the key terms, considered the opposite side of the issue, and generated some examples, it's time to organize your thoughts. Basically, you should do the following:

1. **Separate Your Examples.** How many of your examples support the pro side and how many support the con side? Divide your examples up and see which side has more support.
2. **Write Your Thesis Statement.** After evaluating the strength of your examples, decide what position you will take in your essay, and then write your thesis. Your thesis is the main point that you want your essay to express.

Let's continue the process on the sample prompt.

Separate Your Examples

Do this before you decide on your thesis statement. Even though you might have a strong preference for one position on the issue, you might notice that the examples you brainstormed tend to support the other side of the issue. Don't expend more time trying to think of examples to support your preconceptions; just write your essay supporting the other side! There is no right or wrong response. All that matters is being able to write a strong, coherent essay in a very limited time. Your personal views or beliefs are unimportant to the ETS graders. If we continue with the examples we used earlier, they would probably break down like this:

Pro

natural wonders

Con

Mona Lisa

Notre Dame

It doesn't matter what side of the issue you take on the GRE.

Based on some of the examples we've come up with, it looks like we'd be better off supporting the idea that "True beauty is found not in the commonplace, but in the exceptional." While natural wonders like sunsets and flowers are pretty commonplace, we've come up with a lot more exceptional examples. And it looks like we could even argue that it is the exceptional natural wonders, such as Niagara Falls, that are truly beautiful.

Write Your Thesis Statement

Now comes the culmination of all of our work. What point do we want to make about the topic? Write it down here:

Our thesis should probably be something along the lines of this: "While certain commonplace natural objects are examples of beauty, true beauty is most often found in rare, exceptional cases."

Now that we have figured out what we want to say, we can focus on proving why we believe it. But remember: Only after working through these steps are we truly ready to write!

Practice: Steps 1 and 2

Work through steps one and two on the following Issue essay prompts below.

PROMPT 1

“Government funding should never be used to support art that the majority of the population finds distasteful or objectionable.”

Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider whether the above statement is always true or whether there are exceptions to it.

On your scratch paper, write the (1) Key Terms, (2) Opposite Side, (3) Examples, and (4) Thesis.

PROMPT 2

“Oftentimes, the results of a particular action are not of consequence; rather, it is the way we go about the action that matters most.”

Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider situations in which the ways matter most as well as situations in which the results matter most.

On your scratch paper, write the (1) Key Terms, (2) Opposite Side, (3) Examples, and (4) Thesis.

Practice: Sample Responses

Obviously, your examples and thesis statements will differ from those given below, but these sample responses will give you a good indication of what to aim for in your actual essay.

Prompt 1

Key Terms: What does *support* mean? Is that just giving money to the artist, or does the government have to commission the work or promote it? What population are we using to judge—the general population, the population of artists, or some other population? What do we mean when we say art is “objectionable” or “distasteful”? What standards are we using to determine that?