

Writing to argue, persuade or advise: 1. Typical questions and the general approach

This audio bite is about typical questions and the general approach.

ALIX: Writing to argue, persuade or advise sounds quite complicated, but it isn't really. You only have to answer one of the questions, so you can ignore anything that seems really difficult and pick the one you feel happiest with. But don't rush things – you have plenty of time to decide which question you'd do best at. For example, listen to where Eliot goes wrong here...

ELIOT: I was looking at all these questions when I saw this question about football – I love football, so I started writing about my favourite team. After about ten minutes I stopped and looked again at the question – it was all about persuading pupils at my school to take up other sports besides football. So everything I'd written was a waste of time.

ALIX: Eliot made quite a few mistakes there. Firstly, he chose too quickly – he should have read all the questions properly. He also didn't study the question he had chosen. He should have underlined the key words so that he knew exactly what he had to do. The key words should have been obvious – he was supposed to write about other sports, he was supposed to write for pupils at his school, and he was supposed to be persuading them to try something new.

ELIOT: Yeah, as soon as I read the question slowly and highlighted the key words, I knew what to write about.

ALIX: If he had planned a little as well, he would have been able to do much better. Your plan doesn't have to be very complicated – it could be just deciding on a topic for each paragraph. Eliot?

ELIOT: My first paragraph could be about the range of sports you can see on the TV, such as swimming, athletics, boxing and rugby. Then in my second paragraph I'd write about how good swimming is, and in my third I'd write about athletics. In the next paragraph I'd write about some of the people at school who do other sports, like Sam who does karate, and Karim who goes to a kickboxing class. Finally I'd convince them that there's a lot more to life than football and they should give one of these a go.

ALIX: That's far better. Eliot is showing he understands the question. He knows the subject, he knows the people he's writing for and he knows the purpose too. We'll go over purposes later but the other thing you need to know is the format – what the piece looks like. For instance, a magazine article usually looks different to a leaflet or a letter.

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ELIOT: Each question tells us about the format and there is nothing in the exam to catch you out. In fact, most questions are aimed at people like us. They might be about choices we have to make, or problems we face, or just about school, family or friends.

ALIX: So when you are writing to argue, persuade or advise, read all the questions very slowly. Do not choose something that seems difficult just to impress the examiner. Instead, choose what seems the most straightforward for you.

Then highlight the key words – underline them, colour them in, or circle them. Understanding the question is important – anything else you write about won't get you any marks.

Plan your paragraphs. This will give your writing structure and makes sure you're sticking to the question. It also makes you think about your subject, audience and the format. And leave a little time at the end to check it through and correct any mistakes you spot.