

What is an English Language essay?

From year 7-10 the traditional essays we have written have had an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion in which we write about characters, plot points and themes. Hence, it is understandable that upon entering English Language in year 11 or 12, it can be difficult to grasp a hold of how to write an essay without characters, plots or themes.

To be precise, the requirement in an English Language essay is to 'use key linguistic concepts and metalanguage appropriately to discuss/analyse/investigate...in an objective and systematic way" (English Language Study Design).

What does this mean?

Essentially, in section C of the exam, you are required to present a discussion of a given idea. The word 'discussion' is defined as 'a conversation or debate about a specific topic.' In this sense, your essay is effectively a written conversation which needs to display an understanding of both sides of the topic.

In saying that, it is still important to form a contention, such as 'indeed non-standard varieties are more acceptable in speaking than in writing in the Australian context' however in arguing this contention, you must to explore both sides to show the examiner your understanding of language in Australian society.

The overarching idea of the essay is presented to you in the form of a prompt. For example, in the 2016 VCAA exam, a possible essay prompt given was: "In Australia today, variations from the standard tends to be more acceptable in speaking than in writing."

In this prompt, the idea to be discussed is standard vs. non-standard Australian English. The main idea or topic forms an umbrella under which the essay is formed. This is the foundation of your essay. Each main argument will relate to this topic. In this example, standard vs non-standard Australian English is a topic from which an array of sub-topics can be extracted, the choice of which is to your discretion.

The sub-topics you choose to delve into will depend on your preferences and strengths. You may choose to discuss online-speak, ethnolects, Australian slang or leet-speak in relation to non-standard English or legalese, political jargon in relation to standard English.

Regardless of the choice of sub-topic, each body paragraph must explicitly link to three things; the prompt, the topic sentence and the contention. This is the criteria for your discussion. Ensuring clear links to these three will assure the examiner that you have confidence in the material you are discussing.

Your body paragraphs should be used to show the examiner how the ideas you have chosen to talk about relate to the prompt provided. Here it is necessary to use a combination of contemporary media examples, personal examples and linguist quotes as a means to prove the link between your chosen paragraph idea, your contention and the prompt. Try to find the most relevant examples which clearly demonstrate your line of thinking to the examiner. You don't want to give them a reason to question the arguments you choose to present.

Because of this, it is also important to be wary of this so that your essay flows in an orderly, sequential manner. Each idea presented within a paragraph and across the essay itself should follow a pathway; one leading into another. Use the ending of each body paragraph to come back to your

essay prompt and reiterate your contention. This ensures you stay on topic the examiner can clearly visualize your understanding of your topic.

In the end, your job in your essay is to present a discussion of a given prompt; an understanding of both sides. Use examples and explanations to show your examiner that you comprehend how the prompt can be debated.

Helpful Hints:

- Writing the very first sentence of your essay can be difficult. Sometimes, to get yourself into the flow of writing, it can be helpful to integrate a linguistic quote into your first sentence. This also helps solidify your contention. For example:
 - o "One's idiolect, particularly lexical choices and accent can be strongly indicative of their unique identity and the social groups to which they belong; it is 'the most natural badge of symbol of public and private identity (David Crystal)"
- Your topic sentence for each paragraph should contain a link to the essay prompt, to the topic of your paragraph and to your contention. A link to all three elements should be identifiable. Below is an example of a topic sentence for the given essay prompt. "The language we use is the best indicator of who we are, individually, socially and culturally. Discuss."
 - o Ethnolects are a quintessential indicator of cultural identity as they are strongly identifiable by their unique phonological characteristics.
 - o This topic sentence shows a clear identification of the topic of the paragraph (ethnolects), a connection with the prompt, (cultural belonging) and a contention, (ethnolects are indeed indicative of cultural identity)
- Rather than introducing linguist quotes with expressions such as "in the words of..." or "as said by..." using linguist quotes discretely where they are integrated as part of the sentence will improve the flow of your essay. Consider this example.
 - o "The use of the interjectory 'reh' expresses the cultural indentity individuals associate themselves with and is part of the language they use as 'a means to an end of understanding who [they] are and what society is like (David Crystal)."
- Not all your contemporary essay examples need to come from news articles or social media. Students can often get caught up doing aimless research trying to find examples through research which really isn't all that necessary. You should try to find examples of language use in every-day life. Perhaps consider other school subjects you study and the jargon you used within these subjects. You can quite easily discuss this use of language in your essays. Here is an example of a student using the metalanguage from VCE Accounting as an example for their essay.
 - o Jargon and taboo language are often used to express social identity as they are demonstrative of social groups one wishes to belong to. Jargon terms such as, 'equity,' 'profit margin', 'cash flow statement,' 'debt ratio' and 'accrued' belong to the financial and accounting semantic field. Their use suggests the individual is knowledgeable in business and finance and further suggests they are likely to be working in the business sector. The use of jargon in one's vernacular can therefore

provide hints of the individual's social identity and is significant to their individual identity.