

THE QUICK SPEAKING GUIDE

Speakology.

Take an Interview

SPEAK WITH CONFIDENCE · ANSWER WITH CLARITY

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TOEFL · SPEAKING · C1

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A

STRUCTURE OF BOTH TASKS – JANUARY 2026 UPDATE

Understanding the Speaking Section

The New TOEFL Speaking Section

As of January 21, 2026, the TOEFL iBT underwent a comprehensive redesign. The Speaking section has been completely restructured — the previous four tasks have been replaced by two brand-new task types. Both appear in every test administration.

Task 1 — Listen & Repeat

You hear a native speaker say a sentence and must repeat it back as accurately as possible. This task assesses pronunciation, rhythm, and phonological accuracy. It is NOT a content task — there is nothing to plan. The only goal is accurate reproduction.

How Task 1 Works

You hear a sentence spoken by a native speaker (typically 8–15 words).

You have a short window to repeat the sentence aloud.

You are scored on accuracy of sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation.

No preparation time — just listen and repeat immediately.

PRO TIP

Native speakers connect words smoothly — "pick it up" sounds like "pickit up". When repeating, aim to reproduce the whole melody and rhythm, not word-by-word articulation. Practice by shadowing native English audio for 10 minutes every day.

Task 2 – Take an Interview

This is the main focus of this book. You participate in a simulated interview conducted by a virtual TOEFL interviewer across everyday topics. There is no reading or listening passage — this is a pure speaking task based on your opinions, experiences, and ability to express ideas clearly and naturally.

| Question Type | What It Asks | Your Goal |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Q1 — Personal Experience | Asks about something you have done or experienced. | Give a concrete, personal answer. Be specific. |
| Q2 — Preference / Opinion | Asks which option you prefer and why. | Take a clear position. Support with a reason. |
| Q3 — Future / Opinion | Asks you to speculate about trends or the future. | Use hedging language. Support with an example. |
| Q4 — Agree or Disagree | "Some say X, others say Y. Where do you stand?" | Take a clear position. Nuance is welcome; fence-sitting is not. |

Interview Format & Timing

| Phase | What Happens | Time |
|-------|--|-----------------|
| OPEN | Interviewer introduces themselves and the topic. | Not timed |
| Q1–Q4 | Four questions across the topic. | ~45–90 sec each |
| CLOSE | Interviewer wraps up the conversation. | Not timed |

IMPORTANT: THIS BOOK FOCUSES ON TASK 2

Task 1 (Listen & Repeat) requires daily shadowing practice, not strategic preparation.

All strategies, collocations, simulations, and sample responses in this book are for Task 2: Take an Interview.

For Task 1: shadow native-speaker audio daily and focus on word-linking, stress, and intonation.

B

THE 1-6 BAND SCALE & FOUR ASSESSMENT DIMENSIONS

Scoring Criteria & What TOEFL Looks

The New 1-6 Band Scale

Starting January 2026, TOEFL scores are reported on a 1–6 banded scale. Your Speaking score is one of four equal section scores. During a two-year transition period, an equivalent 0–30 score is also provided alongside the band.

| Band | Level | What It Looks Like in Speaking |
|------|-------------------|---|
| 6 | Expert | Speech is clear, fluid, and natural. Ideas well-developed. Minimal errors. |
| 5 | Advanced | Mostly clear. Minor hesitations but does not impede communication. |
| 4 | High Intermediate | Understandable but pronunciation or fluency issues occasionally affect clarity. |
| 3 | Intermediate | Limited. Frequent pauses or errors impede understanding. |
| 2 | Basic | Very limited. Responses are short, fragmented, or hard to follow. |
| 1 | Below Basic | No meaningful communication. |

The Four Dimensions of Assessment

TOEFL raters — both human and AI-assisted — evaluate your Interview responses across four interconnected dimensions.

1

Delivery

How clearly and naturally you speak. Are your words easy to understand? Is your pace appropriate?

- Speak at a steady, natural pace — not robotically slow.
- Link words naturally in connected speech.
- Avoid long silences or filler sounds like "ummm" or "errr."

2

Language Use

The accuracy and range of your vocabulary and grammar. TOEFL rewards varied, natural language.

- Use topic-specific collocations naturally (Section D of this book).
- Show grammatical range: mix simple, compound, and complex sentences.
- Avoid repeating the same words — use synonyms and paraphrases.

3

Topic Development

How fully and coherently you develop your ideas. Do you answer the question completely?

- Answer ALL parts of the question.
- Always give at least one specific reason or example.
- Do not just repeat the question back in different words.

4

Coherence & Cohesion

How logically your ideas connect. Do you use linking expressions to guide the listener?

- Use linking expressions: "First of all...", "On the other hand...", "That's why..."
- Avoid jumping between unrelated points.
- End your answer clearly — do not trail off mid-sentence.

YOUR TARGET

Aim for Band 5 or 6. Band 5 is achievable with consistent practice on the strategies in Section C.

Most important: always answer the complete question and give a specific reason or example.

Band 6 requires natural delivery AND strong development AND coherent linking.

The Core Strategy: PREP Framework

Every strong TOEFL Speaking response follows a simple four-part structure. Master this framework and you will never run out of things to say.

| Step | What It Means | Signal Phrase |
|-------------------|---|--|
| P — Point | State your main idea or position clearly. | "In my opinion...", "I think...", "I believe..." |
| R — Reason | Explain WHY you hold that position. | "This is because...", "The reason is..." |
| E — Example | Give a specific example to illustrate. | "For instance...", "For example...", "When I..." |
| P — Point (again) | Briefly restate or close your answer. | "So overall...", "That's why...", "In short..." |

PRO TIP

You do not need all four steps for every answer. For Q1 personal experience questions, P+R+E is enough. For Q4 agree/disagree, use the full P+R+E+P to show a rounded argument.

Handling Each Question Type

Q1

Personal Experience

The interviewer asks about something you have personally done, seen, or experienced.

Strategy:

Be concrete and specific. Use past tense. Name a specific example.

Use:

"I once..." / "The last time I..." / "A few years ago, I..."

Avoid:

"I have done that before" with no detail. Vague answers score poorly.

Q2

Preference / Opinion

The interviewer asks which of two options you prefer and why.

Strategy:

Pick one option immediately. Do not sit on the fence. Give two supporting reasons if time allows.

Use:

"I would definitely prefer..." / "Without a doubt, I'd choose..."

Avoid:

"Both options are good..." — this is fence-sitting.

Q3

Future / Opinion

The interviewer asks you to speculate about trends, the future, or a broader issue.

Strategy:

Use hedging language to sound natural and confident. Support with a real-world trend.

Use:

"I think it's likely that..." / "In the near future, I believe..."

Avoid:

"I don't know" or short answers with no support.

Q4

Agree or Disagree

The interviewer presents two contrasting positions. Where do you stand?

Strategy:

Take a clear position. Acknowledge the other side briefly, then return to your view.

Use:

"I strongly agree with..." / "While some may argue..., I believe..."

Avoid:

Changing your position mid-answer or using "it depends" without committing.

Transition & Linking Expressions

These phrases make your responses sound natural, connected, and well-organised.

Opening your answer

| Expression | Example in Use |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| To be honest, | To be honest, I've always preferred working alone. |
| Personally, I think... | Personally, I think technology has changed how we socialise. |
| Off the top of my head,... | Off the top of my head, I'd go with the second option. |
| That's a great question — I'd say... | That's a great question — I'd say online learning suits me better. |

Adding reason or example

| Expression | Example in Use |
|------------------------------|--|
| The reason I say that is... | The reason I say that is that I've experienced it firsthand. |
| A good example of this is... | A good example of this is how my university shifted online. |
| Take my own experience — | Take my own experience — I used to hate cooking until I tried it properly. |
| What I mean is... | What I mean is that balance matters more than perfection. |

Contrasting and conceding

| Expression | Example in Use |
|--|---|
| On the other hand,... | On the other hand, some people find routine more comforting. |
| That said,... | That said, I do understand why others might disagree. |
| While I can see the appeal of..., I still think... | While I can see the appeal of remote work, I still think offices build culture. |
| It's not that I disagree, but... | It's not that I disagree, but I think there's more to it than that. |

Wrapping up

| Expression | Example in Use |
|---|---|
| So all in all,... | So all in all, I'd say exercise has had the biggest impact on my health. |
| That's why I feel strongly that... | That's why I feel strongly that education should be free. |
| In short,... | In short, my experience has made me a strong advocate for teamwork. |
| To sum up my point,... | To sum up my point, I believe both options have merit but I'd choose the first. |

Pronunciation & Fluency Techniques

Fluency means speaking at a natural, comfortable pace with smooth word connections. These techniques will help you sound more natural immediately.

Thought Groups

Pause between ideas, not between words.

Example: "I think / online learning / works best / for self-motivated people."

Word Linking

Connect words ending in consonants to words starting in vowels.

Example: "pick it up" → "pickit up", "take a look" → "taka look"

Stress for Emphasis

Put extra stress on the KEY word in each idea.

Example: "I LOVE cooking." vs "I love COOKING." — different meanings entirely.

Natural Fillers

Use natural thinking sounds — not long "ummm"s.

Example: "Well...", "Let me think...", "That's a good point —"

Hedging Language

Use hedging to sound natural, not overconfident.

Example: "I think...", "As far as I know...", "It seems to me that..."

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Memorising full scripts — raters can tell, and it sounds unnatural.

Starting every answer with "In my opinion, I think that..." — vary your openers.

Using only simple sentences — mix sentence lengths and structures.

Answering in 2–3 sentences and stopping — always develop your point.

Saying "I don't have experience with that" and giving up — always find a relevant angle.

Speaking too fast because you are nervous — slow down, pause between ideas.

D

NATIVE-SPEAKER CONVERSATIONAL VOCABULARY

Essential Collocations by Topic

How to Use These Collocations

Unlike writing collocations, the expressions in this section are the natural, conversational phrases that native English speakers use when discussing everyday topics. They will help your speaking sound genuine and fluent — not over-formal. Study them by topic and practise using them aloud in full sentences.

Learning Strategy

Do not just memorise these — practise saying them aloud in full sentences.

Aim to use 2–3 topic-specific collocations naturally in each Interview answer.

Record yourself using these expressions and listen back for naturalness.

Collocation + Meaning + Example: the three columns work together — study all three.

Education & Learning

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| keep up with the workload | manage all study tasks | "I struggled to keep up with the workload in my first year." |
| fall behind in class | fail to progress at the required pace | "It's easy to fall behind if you miss too many lectures." |
| cram for an exam | study intensively at the last minute | "Most students end up cramming the night before." |
| hands-on learning | learning by doing, not just listening | "I'm a much better learner in hands-on environments." |
| broaden your horizons | expand your knowledge and experiences | "Studying abroad really broadened my horizons." |
| keep an open mind | be willing to consider new ideas | "Good students keep an open mind in every class." |
| pick up a skill | learn something informally | "I picked up coding skills from online videos." |
| take notes | write down key information | "I always take notes during lectures — it really helps." |

Technology & Digital Life

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| stay connected | maintain communication with others | "Social media helps me stay connected with family abroad." |
| scroll through | browse content casually | "I spend too much time scrolling through my phone." |
| cut down on screen time | reduce the time spent on devices | "I've been trying to cut down on screen time before bed." |
| keep up with technology | stay current with tech developments | "It's hard to keep up with technology — it changes so fast." |
| rely heavily on | depend a great deal on | "We rely heavily on technology for almost everything now." |
| work remotely | work from home or outside an office | "Since the pandemic, many people have started working remotely." |
| go viral | spread widely on the internet | "That video went viral overnight — millions of views." |
| go digital | switch to digital processes | "Most companies have gone completely digital." |

Work & Career

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| climb the career ladder | advance in your professional life | "She worked very hard to climb the career ladder." |
| work under pressure | perform well in stressful conditions | "I actually work quite well under pressure." |
| meet a deadline | finish something by the required time | "Meeting deadlines is one of my strongest skills." |
| take initiative | act proactively without being asked | "Employers love people who take initiative." |
| get promoted | be given a higher position at work | "He got promoted after only one year with the company." |
| a steep learning curve | a process that is difficult to learn quickly | "The first week was a steep learning curve." |
| burn out | become exhausted from overwork | "I burned out in my last job — I had no work-life balance." |
| job security | confidence that your job will continue | "Many people prioritise job security over salary." |

Health & Well-being

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| stay in shape | maintain physical fitness | "I try to go running twice a week just to stay in shape." |
| eat a balanced diet | consume a variety of healthy foods | "My doctor told me to eat a more balanced diet." |
| work out | exercise, typically at a gym | "I try to work out three times a week." |
| cut back on | reduce the amount of something | "I've been cutting back on sugar lately." |
| feel run-down | feel tired and unwell | "I always feel run-down at the end of a busy week." |
| boost your immune system | strengthen your body's ability to fight illness | "Exercise and sleep really boost your immune system." |
| get a good night's sleep | sleep for a sufficient amount | "I can't function properly without getting a good night's sleep." |
| take care of yourself | look after your physical and mental health | "Since working from home, I've been better at taking care of myself." |

Environment & Transport

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| be environmentally aware | think about the impact on the environment | "Young people today are much more environmentally aware." |
| cut down on emissions | reduce greenhouse gas output | "Cities need to cut down on emissions from transport." |
| use public transport | travel by bus, train, or metro | "I use public transport every day — it's cheaper and greener." |
| reduce your carbon footprint | lessen your impact on the climate | "Eating less meat is one way to reduce your carbon footprint." |
| get stuck in traffic | be delayed by heavy traffic | "I hate driving downtown — I always get stuck in traffic." |
| go green | adopt environmentally friendly practices | "Many companies are going green to attract younger customers." |
| eco-friendly | not harmful to the environment | "I've been trying to buy more eco-friendly products." |
| renewable energy | energy from sustainable sources | "I think renewable energy is the only long-term solution." |

Family & Social Life

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|------------------------|---|---|
| keep in touch | maintain contact with someone | "I try to keep in touch with my school friends online." |
| catch up with | reconnect with someone after time apart | "We had dinner last week to catch up with each other." |
| get along with | have a good relationship with | "I've always gotten along with my siblings really well." |
| spend quality time | give full attention to someone during shared activities | "It's important to spend quality time with your family." |
| a tight-knit community | a group of people who are very close and supportive | "I grew up in a tight-knit community where everyone knew each other." |
| bring up | raise a child | "My parents brought me up to value hard work and honesty." |
| drift apart | gradually lose contact or closeness | "We drifted apart after moving to different cities." |
| grow up | develop from a child to an adult | "I grew up in a small town with a very close-knit community." |

Food & Eating Habits

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|--------------------|--|--|
| eat out | go to a restaurant rather than cooking at home | "We eat out maybe twice a week — it's a treat." |
| grab a bite | eat something quickly and informally | "I usually just grab a bite between classes." |
| skip a meal | not eat at a regular mealtime | "I know I shouldn't skip breakfast, but I often do." |
| a sweet tooth | a strong liking for sweet food | "My biggest weakness is chocolate — I have a real sweet tooth." |
| home-cooked meal | a meal prepared at home | "Nothing beats a home-cooked meal after a long day." |
| watch what you eat | be careful about the food you consume | "Since I turned 30, I've been watching what I eat more carefully." |
| try new cuisine | experiment with food from different cultures | "I love travelling because it's a chance to try new cuisines." |
| go out for dinner | eat at a restaurant in the evening | "We usually go out for dinner on Fridays." |

Hobbies & Leisure

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| take up a hobby | start doing something new for pleasure | "I took up photography during the pandemic." |
| unwind | relax and release stress | "Cooking is how I unwind after a stressful day." |
| be into something | be very interested in something | "I've always been really into music — I play guitar." |
| lose track of time | become unaware of how much time has passed | "I lose track of time when I'm painting." |
| give something a go | try something for the first time | "I decided to give hiking a go last summer — I loved it." |
| be a big fan of | be an enthusiastic supporter or admirer of | "I'm a big fan of jazz — I go to concerts whenever I can." |
| kill time | fill time with something while waiting | "I usually read to kill time on public transport." |
| pick up where you left off | resume something after a break | "I picked up piano again after 10 years." |

Study Habits & Academic Success

| Collocation | Meaning | Example in Conversation |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| stay on top of things | manage your responsibilities well | "The key to university is learning to stay on top of things." |
| pull an all-nighter | stay awake all night, usually to study | "I pulled an all-nighter before my chemistry exam." |
| make progress | advance or improve in something | "I've been making steady progress with my English." |
| struggle with | find something difficult | "I've always struggled with public speaking." |
| go over your notes | review or revise what you have written | "I always go over my notes the night before an exam." |
| set goals | decide on specific aims or objectives | "I sit down every Sunday to set my goals for the week." |
| push yourself | make a great effort to achieve something | "You have to push yourself if you want to improve." |
| a wake-up call | an event that prompts someone to take action | "Failing that exam was a wake-up call for me." |

How to Use This Chapter

Each simulation below mirrors the exact structure of the TOEFL Take an Interview task: four questions progressing from personal experience to analytical opinion. After each set of questions you will find a complete set of Band 5–6 sample responses followed by Teaching Notes highlighting the specific techniques used. Use the questions for timed practice (40–45 seconds per answer) and the samples for close analysis and imitation.

HOW TO USE THIS CHAPTER

Step 1 — Cover the sample responses. Attempt all four questions on a topic out loud, timing yourself at 45 seconds per question.

Step 2 — Read the sample responses and compare.

Step 3 — Study the Teaching Notes carefully.

Step 4 — Attempt the topic again, consciously applying the techniques noted. Repeat each topic at least twice before moving on.

1 Online Education

Q1

Have you ever taken an online class? What kind of course was it, and how did you feel about the experience? If not, what kind of online course would you like to take?

Q2

Some students enjoy online classes because they can study anywhere, while others prefer learning in a physical classroom. Which do you prefer, and why?

Q3

Recently, many schools have started using AI tools to support online learning. Do you think these tools will become essential for education in the future? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people say online learning helps students become more independent learners. Others believe it reduces motivation and social interaction. Which side do you agree with, and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you ever taken an online class?

Sample Response:

Yes, actually I have. Last year I took an online course in graphic design through Coursera. It was completely self-paced, which I really appreciated — I could watch lectures at midnight if I wanted to. The one thing I found tricky was staying motivated without the structure of a physical classroom, but I managed by setting myself weekly goals and treating the coursework like a real commitment.

Interviewer: Online class or physical classroom — which do you prefer?

Sample Response:

I'd have to go with online learning, to be honest. The flexibility is just unmatched. I can pause a lecture, rewatch difficult parts, and study around my other commitments — none of which is possible in a live classroom. That said, I do think in-person learning has its place for subjects that require discussion or hands-on practice. But for content-driven courses, online wins for me.

Interviewer: Will AI tools become essential for online education?

Sample Response:

I'm pretty convinced they will — and sooner than most people think. We're already seeing AI tutors that can identify exactly where a student is struggling and adapt the material in real time. That's something no single teacher can do for thirty students at once. As the technology matures, I think it'll feel as normal as using a calculator feels today.

Interviewer: Does online learning help independence or reduce motivation?

Sample Response:

I think it honestly depends on the learner. For someone like me who is self-driven, online learning has made me more independent — I've learned to organise my time and seek resources on my own. But I've seen friends genuinely struggle with the lack of structure. So at the end of the day, online learning is a powerful tool, but it requires a certain mindset to use effectively.

What to Learn From This Response

- Uses a conversational opener: 'Yes, actually I have.' — natural and warm, not robotic.
- Specific details (Coursera, graphic design, midnight, weekly goals) make the answer credible and vivid.
- Q2 acknowledges the other side ('That said...') without abandoning the chosen position.
- Q3 uses confident hedged language: 'I'm pretty convinced they will — and sooner than most people think.'
- Q4 uses a logical structure: personal view □ example □ concession □ principle conclusion.
- 'At the end of the day' is an excellent spoken-English closer for Q4-type answers — use it freely.

Part-Time Jobs

Q1

Have you or one of your friends ever had a part-time job? For example, have you or someone you know ever worked at a retail store, a campus facility, or a local restaurant? Please describe it.

Q2

When it comes to part-time work, do you think it's better to find a job related to your future career or one that simply offers flexible hours? Why?

Q3

These days, many students earn money through online jobs such as tutoring or freelancing. Do you think remote work will eventually replace traditional part-time jobs for students? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people say that working while studying helps students become more responsible. Others believe it distracts them from academics. What's your view, and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you or a friend ever had a part-time job?

Sample Response:

Yes — my closest friend worked at a campus café throughout her second year. She did early morning shifts before classes, which sounds exhausting, but she actually loved it. She told me the best part wasn't even the money — it was the people she met. She made some of her closest friends among the regular customers. I thought that was a pretty remarkable outcome from a café job.

Interviewer: Career-related job or flexible hours — which is better?

Sample Response:

Flexible hours, for sure — at least while I'm a student. My priority right now is finishing my degree without burning out, and a rigid work schedule on top of coursework would make that extremely difficult. Once I graduate, I would obviously want something in my field. But at this stage, having control over my time matters more than putting my future career on my CV.

Interviewer: Will remote jobs replace traditional part-time jobs for students?

Sample Response:

I think remote jobs will become far more common, but I don't see them completely replacing on-site work. There's something about working in person — interacting with colleagues and customers — that gives you skills you simply can't get from freelancing alone. At the same time, platforms like Fiverr have opened up real income opportunities. So I'd say we'll see a healthy mix, not a full replacement.

Interviewer: Working while studying: responsible or distracting?

Sample Response:

It depends heavily on the workload on both sides. When done in moderation, working teaches you time management and gives you a real sense of independence. But there is definitely a tipping point — if the hours are too long, academic performance suffers. Personally, I think a maximum of 15 to 20 hours a week is manageable, but beyond that, something has to give.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 tells a story about a friend — a perfect strategy when you lack direct personal experience.
- Vivid specifics: 'early morning shifts', 'campus café', 'regular customers' — paint a picture.
- Q2 gives a clear preference then immediately explains why the alternative is less suitable.
- Q3 uses the 'not X, but rather Y' structure — shows balanced thinking without fence-sitting.
- 'Tipping point' in Q4 is a sophisticated, precise collocation for balance-and-consequence arguments.
- Giving a specific number (15–20 hours) makes your opinion sound grounded and credible.

Q1

Have you worked on any group projects at school? What kind of tasks did your group have to complete? For example, did you have to create a presentation, do research, or give a speech?

Q2

When you work in a group, do you prefer to take the lead or follow directions from others? Why?

Q3

Many universities encourage teamwork to prepare students for professional life. Do you think group projects will become even more common in education in the future? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe teamwork helps people develop communication skills. Do you agree with this idea, or do you feel teamwork slows down individual progress? Explain why you think so.

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you worked on group projects at school?

Sample Response:

Yes, quite a few. The most memorable was a research project in my second year where our group had to investigate a local environmental issue and present our findings to the whole department. We divided the work by each person's strength — I handled the data analysis while others wrote the report and prepared the slides. Despite some tense moments near the deadline, it came together really well.

Interviewer: Do you prefer to lead or follow in a group?

Sample Response:

Honestly, I tend to gravitate toward a leadership role, but not in an authoritative way — more as a coordinator who makes sure everyone is heard and moving in the same direction. I find that when there's no clear structure, groups waste a lot of time. So I often step up to provide that structure, while making sure decisions are genuinely shared.

Interviewer: Will group projects become more common in education?

Sample Response:

I think so, yes. The professional world increasingly values collaboration, and universities are aware of that. Also, remote collaboration tools have made group projects far more practical, even when students are in different locations. I'd say the direction of travel is clear — solo assessments will remain, but group work will grow alongside them.

Interviewer: Does teamwork develop communication skills or slow individual progress?

Sample Response:

I genuinely believe it develops communication skills, but only when the group is well-structured. The kind of negotiating, listening, and compromising you do in a real group project simply cannot be replicated alone. That said, if a group is dysfunctional, the stronger members do end up carrying the others, which is frustrating. So teamwork's value depends a great deal on how it is organised.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 uses a specific project (environmental research, department presentation) — avoids vague 'we did a group project'.
- 'Gravitate toward' in Q2 is a natural, elevated verb phrase that signals strong vocabulary.
- Q2's 'not in an authoritative way — more as a coordinator' shows sophisticated self-awareness.
- 'Direction of travel' in Q3 is a polished collocation for trend discussions.
- Q4 uses a balanced structure: strong agreement □ nuanced concession □ final position.
- Excellent pattern.

Q1

What kind of activities do you usually do to stay healthy? For instance, do you exercise regularly, focus on nutrition, or do something else?

Q2

When life gets stressful, do you prefer to deal with it by being physically active, like going for a walk or working out? Or would you rather quietly relax while reading a book or listening to music? Please explain.

Q3

In recent years, many people have started to take medication to help them sleep through the night. Do you think that in the future more people will rely on medication for proper sleep? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people say good health mainly depends on personal choices, while others argue that a healthy lifestyle also requires support from society. What do you think, and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What do you do to stay healthy?

Sample Response:

I try to keep things pretty simple, honestly. I go for a 30-minute walk most evenings — nothing intense, just enough to clear my head after a long day. I also try to cut back on junk food during the week, though I'm not going to pretend I'm perfect about it. And I drink a lot of water — it sounds trivial, but staying hydrated makes a genuine difference to how I feel.

Interviewer: Physical activity or quiet relaxation for stress?

Sample Response:

I'm definitely a physical activity person. When I'm stressed, sitting still actually makes things worse for me. Going for a brisk walk or doing some light stretching shifts my mood almost immediately. I think it's the combination of getting out of your own head and the physical release of tension that makes it so effective. Reading works beautifully for some people, but for me, movement is the reset button.

Interviewer: Will more people rely on medication for sleep?

Sample Response:

I think it's likely, unfortunately. Stress and screen time are both rising, and they are two of the biggest disruptors of natural sleep. If those trends continue — and there's no sign they won't — more people will turn to medication as the path of least resistance. I do hope we also see growth in sleep hygiene education and mindfulness, but medication will probably win out for most people in the short term.

Interviewer: Personal choices vs. social support for good health?

Sample Response:

I think both are essential — and I'd argue it's a false choice to say one matters more than the other. I make my own decisions about what I eat and whether I exercise, but I can only do that because I grew up in an environment where healthy options were available and affordable. Not everyone has that. Someone living in a neighbourhood with no safe parks and only fast food nearby faces much harder choices. So yes — personal responsibility matters, but so does the environment society creates.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'Cut back on junk food' and 'staying hydrated' are natural health collocations — use them fluently.
- Q1: 'I'm not going to pretend I'm perfect about it' — adds genuine authenticity to the response.
- Q2: 'movement is the reset button' — a vivid, memorable metaphor that signals strong vocabulary.
- Q3 shows critical thinking: acknowledges the likely negative trend while expressing a hopeful counterpoint.
- Q4: 'it's a false choice' is a sophisticated rhetorical move that elevates the academic register.
- The specific scenario in Q4 (no safe parks, only fast food) makes an abstract argument concrete.

Public Transportation

Q1

How do you usually get around your city? Do you walk, drive, or use public transportation?

Q2

If you could improve one thing about transportation where you live, what would it be and why? For example, would you reduce the price, increase the frequency, or renovate existing infrastructure?

Q3

Many people are beginning to use electric vehicles and bicycles for short trips. Do you think more people will choose those options in the future? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe transportation should be fast and convenient, while others prefer it to be affordable and environmentally friendly. Which do you think is more important, and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How do you get around your city?

Sample Response:

Mostly public transportation — the metro and buses. It's by far the most practical option in a busy city: no parking stress, predictable timing, and I can read or listen to something during the commute. I do walk for shorter distances, though. If it's under 20 minutes on foot, I almost always prefer that.

Interviewer: What would you improve about local transportation?

Sample Response:

I would increase the frequency, without a doubt. Nothing is more frustrating than a good metro system that only runs every 20 minutes during off-peak hours. More frequent service would make public transit genuinely competitive with private cars — which it currently isn't, at least in my city. That one change would reduce car use significantly, I think.

Interviewer: Will electric vehicles and bicycles become more popular?

Sample Response:

I'm fairly confident they will, especially in urban areas. We're already seeing cities invest heavily in cycling infrastructure and EV charging networks. And as battery costs drop, electric vehicles are becoming affordable to more people. The main barrier left is habit — many people are simply used to their car. But as infrastructure improves, I think the shift will accelerate.

Interviewer: Speed and convenience vs. affordability and sustainability?

Sample Response:

I think affordability and sustainability have to take priority in the long run. A transport system that is fast but expensive excludes large parts of the population — and one that is convenient but dirty is contributing to a much larger problem. That said, I don't think we have to choose: well-funded public transport can be fast, affordable, and clean. The real question is whether governments are willing to invest seriously.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 gives a clear main mode of transport then adds a nuance (walking for short distances) — shows range.
- 'Without a doubt' in Q2 is a confident, natural intensifier — better than 'definitely'.
- Q3 uses 'We're already seeing...' — one of the most effective phrases for future-trend questions.
- Q4's three-part challenge ('fast but expensive', 'convenient but dirty') shows sophisticated reasoning.
- 'In the long run' is a perfect temporal marker for sustainability discussions.

Q1

What kind of activities do people from your country do after their workday is done? For example, do they prefer exercising, reading, or other activities?

Q2

When you need to take a break from work or studies, do you prefer to spend time alone, or do you like to be with others? Why?

Q3

In recent years, many companies have started offering flexible working hours and remote work options. Do you think that in the future, more companies will adopt these practices? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe that maintaining a good work-life balance is essential for overall well-being. Do you agree with this idea, or do you think there are other important factors to consider? Explain why you think so.

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: After-work activities in your country?

Sample Response:

In my country, evenings are very much social time. People tend to meet friends for dinner rather than heading straight home. Family meals are also a big deal — in many households, dinner is the one guaranteed time everyone sits together. Watching TV is common too, but people in my culture genuinely put a high value on in-person socialising after work.

Interviewer: Time alone or with others during a break?

Sample Response:

With others, without a doubt. I get energised by being around people, so spending a break completely alone doesn't really recharge me the way it does for some. That said, I understand the introvert perspective — I have close friends who find social interaction draining after a long day and genuinely need solo time to recover. So this is very much a personality question rather than a universal answer.

Interviewer: Will more companies offer flexible and remote work?

Sample Response:

Almost certainly. The pandemic essentially ran a massive global experiment that proved remote work is viable at a scale nobody had imagined before. Companies that adopted it saw productivity hold up and employee satisfaction improve. The direction of travel is very clear: hybrid models will become the norm, not the exception.

Interviewer: Is work-life balance essential for well-being?

Sample Response:

Extremely important, yes — but I'd push back a little on the idea that balance means a strict 50-50 split. There are periods in life — launching a business, finishing a dissertation — where you naturally pour more into work, and that's fine if it's temporary and intentional. What damages well-being is when that imbalance becomes permanent and unconscious. So I'd say: balance over the long run, not necessarily at every single moment.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'a big deal' is a perfectly placed conversational intensifier — natural and fluent.
- Q2 shows empathy for a different personality type without abandoning your own position.
- Q3: 'essentially ran a massive global experiment' — a vivid, memorable framing.
- Q4: 'push back a little on the idea' is an excellent way to introduce nuance politely.
- 'Permanent and unconscious' in Q4 is precise and sophisticated — shows strong vocabulary control.

Q1

Do you prefer studying alone or with a group? How often do you study?

Q2

If you were helping someone prepare for a test, what study methods would you recommend? For example, would you suggest using practice tests, taking notes, or something else?

Q3

In recent years, many people have started using digital tools and online apps to study. Do you think these methods should be used in schools or only for personal study? Explain your answer.

Q4

Some people believe that having good study habits is essential for academic success. Do you agree with this idea, or do you think there are other factors that contribute to academic success?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you prefer studying alone or with a group?

Sample Response:

Alone, for the most part. I find I concentrate far better when there are no distractions. I study most evenings for about two hours — I try to treat it like a regular appointment rather than something I squeeze in when I have time. That consistency has made a real difference to how much I retain.

Interviewer: What study methods would you recommend?

Sample Response:

Practice tests, without a doubt — they are the single most effective method I know. The act of retrieving information under test conditions strengthens memory far more than re-reading notes. I'd also recommend spaced repetition for vocabulary and facts — reviewing material just before you're about to forget it. And above all, I'd tell anyone: stay on top of things week by week rather than cramming.

Interviewer: Should digital study tools be used in schools?

Sample Response:

I think they should be integrated thoughtfully, yes. Digital tools can personalise learning in ways a single teacher can't — adapting the pace and content to each student's needs. The risk, of course, is that students use devices for distraction. But the solution is better digital literacy education, not avoidance. Schools that ban devices entirely are arguably doing their students a disservice.

Interviewer: Are good study habits essential, or are other factors more important?

Sample Response:

Study habits are crucial, but they are not sufficient on their own. A student with good habits but serious personal difficulties — poverty, family instability, health problems — may still struggle significantly. And some students succeed partly through natural aptitude or very strong support systems. So I'd say habits are perhaps the most controllable factor in academic success, but certainly not the only one.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'treat it like a regular appointment' — a vivid, original metaphor for consistency.
- Q2: 'without a doubt' + an immediate explanation — confident and structured.
- 'Stay on top of things' in Q2 is a key collocation from Chapter D — applied naturally here.
- Q3: 'thoughtfully' is a nuanced adverb that signals maturity in the response.
- Q4 shows excellent critical thinking: habits matter □ but alone they're not sufficient □ why.

Q1

What kind of exercise do you or your friends like? For example, do you like running, swimming, yoga, or other types?

Q2

When you exercise, do you prefer to do it alone or with other people? Why?

Q3

In the past, most people exercised outdoors, but now many prefer indoor gyms and fitness centres. Do you think that in the future, indoor gyms will become even more popular? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe that exercising regularly is essential for developing self-discipline. Do you agree, or do you think there are other activities that can also help build discipline?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What kind of exercise do you or your friends prefer?

Sample Response:

My closest friends are really into running — one of them has even done a half-marathon. Personally, I prefer cycling because I can combine exercise with getting somewhere useful, like commuting to university. On weekends I do yoga as well, which helps with the mental side of things — flexibility and breathing, not just cardio.

Interviewer: Alone or with others when exercising?

Sample Response:

It depends on the type. For yoga or a long bike ride, I prefer being alone — it's meditative and I can go at my own pace without feeling self-conscious. But for something like a gym session or a sport, having a partner makes a huge difference. You push harder and it's far more motivating. So I'd say: alone for mindful exercise, together for performance-based training.

Interviewer: Will indoor gyms become even more popular?

Sample Response:

I think they will continue to grow, but perhaps not as fast as the last decade. There's been a noticeable counter-movement toward outdoor fitness — park workouts, trail running, outdoor pools. And hybrid gym models that combine both indoor equipment and outdoor spaces are gaining ground. So rather than a simple 'more gyms', I think we'll see a diversification of how people exercise.

Interviewer: Does regular exercise build self-discipline?

Sample Response:

I genuinely believe it does — and I say that from personal experience. Committing to exercise means showing up even when you don't feel like it, which is exactly the muscle you need for discipline in other areas. That said, music practice, long-term creative projects, and even cooking regularly can build the same habits. Exercise is perhaps the most accessible route, but it's not the only one.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 personalises with a friend's experience (half-marathon) then pivots to self — natural and engaging.
- Q2 uses a 'depends on' opening — excellent for nuanced preference questions.
- Q3's 'counter-movement' and 'diversification' show strong academic-register vocabulary.
- Q4: 'I say that from personal experience' — a powerful credibility marker.
- 'Showing up even when you don't feel like it' — vivid, idiomatic, and memorable phrasing.

Q1

When you engage in your favourite hobby, do you prefer to do it alone, or do you like to do it with your family or friends? Why?

Q2

Do you think it is better to spend free time indoors, like in a movie theatre, or outdoors, like in a park? Why?

Q3

Many people have the same hobbies as their friends. Do you think it is necessary for good friends to share hobbies? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe that having hobbies is essential for being happy. Do you agree with this idea, or do you think you can live a happy life without hobbies?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Favourite hobby — alone or with others?

Sample Response:

My main hobby is photography, and honestly it's a deeply solitary activity for me. I go out early in the morning, often alone, looking for interesting light and subjects. The solitude is part of the appeal — it's a form of meditation as much as a creative outlet. I do share the results with friends and family, and that social element matters to me, but the actual process of making photographs is very much a solo one.

Interviewer: Indoors or outdoors for free time?

Sample Response:

Outdoors, by a significant margin. Being outside — whether it's a park, a forest, or just a quiet street — genuinely changes my state of mind in a way that an indoor environment can't. I enjoy cinema, don't get me wrong, but it's a passive experience. Walking or cycling outside engages all your senses simultaneously. I think most people underestimate how restorative being outdoors is.

Interviewer: Do good friends need to share hobbies?

Sample Response:

Not at all, in my view. Some of my closest friendships are built on shared values and a similar sense of humour rather than shared activities. My best friend is into gaming; I'm into photography. We don't do our hobbies together, but we talk about them — and that exchange of worlds is actually enriching. Shared hobbies are a nice bonus, but they're certainly not a requirement for deep friendship.

Interviewer: Are hobbies essential for happiness?

Sample Response:

I think they are for most people, yes. Hobbies give you a sense of competence — you get better at something, you create something, you experience flow. Those things are powerful contributors to well-being. That said, some people find that sense of purpose through their work or their relationships rather than a separate hobby. So I'd say hobbies are one of the most reliable paths to happiness, not the only one.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 describes a hobby with sensory detail ('early morning', 'interesting light') — vivid and memorable.
- 'A form of meditation as much as a creative outlet' in Q1 shows sophisticated, layered expression.
- Q2: 'by a significant margin' is a confident, precise intensifier — native and fluent.
- Q3's 'exchange of worlds' is an original, poetic phrase that will stand out positively.
- Q4 uses the word 'flow' in its psychological sense — demonstrates academic awareness.

Q1

What kind of books do your family or friends generally like to read? For example, do they prefer fiction, nonfiction, biographies, or other types?

Q2

When you read your favourite book, do you prefer to read it in a quiet place, or do you like to read it where there is some background noise? Why?

Q3

If you have time to read one novel, do you think it more worthwhile to read an old classic that many readers love, or would you choose a newly published novel that tells a modern story? Why?

Q4

Some people believe that reading helps improve one's imagination and creativity. Do you agree, or do you think there are other activities that can also enhance these skills?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What kind of books do your family prefer?

Sample Response:

My family are all over the map when it comes to books. My mother reads biographies almost exclusively — she says she learns more from a real person's story than any self-help book. My younger brother is deep into science fiction. And I tend to go for literary fiction — novels that explore character psychology rather than just plot. So we're quite different, but we talk about our books a lot, which is its own kind of reading group.

Interviewer: Quiet place or background noise for reading?

Sample Response:

Quiet, without question. I find that even soft music pulls part of my attention away. The books I enjoy most — literary fiction with dense prose — require full concentration. I do know people who can read on a crowded train and absorb everything perfectly, and I genuinely envy that ability. But for me, silence is non-negotiable.

Interviewer: Classic novel or new release?**Sample Response:**

I'd choose the classic, personally. There's a reason certain books have stayed in print for a century — they speak to something fundamental about human experience that doesn't age. Modern novels can certainly be brilliant, but I can't know that without reading them first. A classic comes with a kind of pre-screened guarantee of quality. That said, I always try to mix both in my reading, because they offer very different pleasures.

Interviewer: Does reading improve imagination and creativity?**Sample Response:**

I'm quite convinced it does, especially literary fiction. Reading forces you to construct a world entirely in your own mind — the author gives you words, but you provide the images, sounds, and emotions. That is an active imaginative exercise, not a passive one. That said, music, visual art, and even thoughtful conversation can develop creativity in comparable ways. Reading is probably the most accessible route, but it's not the exclusive path.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 gives three distinct examples within one family — shows range and specificity
- simultaneously.
- Q2: 'silence is non-negotiable' — strong, precise vocabulary that avoids vagueness.
- Q3: 'pre-screened guarantee of quality' — an original, clever metaphor. Risk-taking
- vocabulary is rewarded.
- Q4: 'the author gives you words, but you provide the images' — a memorable and
- insightful formulation.

11 Family Life

Q1

How would you describe your family structure? For example, who do you live with, or who do you consider to be part of your immediate family?

Q2

What are some values or habits that are important in your family, such as how you spend time together or handle responsibilities?

Q3

What do you think helps maintain strong and healthy family relationships? And what do you think causes tension or distance between family members?

Q4

As society changes, family roles and expectations also evolve. Do you think the definition of family is changing in today's world? Why or why not?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Describe your family structure.

Sample Response:

I live with my parents and one younger sister — a fairly traditional nuclear family. But my grandparents live nearby and are very much part of our daily life. We see them several times a week, and my grandmother in particular has been a huge influence on how I think about hard work and patience. So while the formal structure is small, the emotional family is much wider.

Interviewer: What values or habits are important in your family?

Sample Response:

Shared meals are probably the biggest one. No matter how busy everyone gets, we sit down together for dinner. It's become a non-negotiable — a time where phones are put away and everyone actually talks. Beyond that, my parents have always emphasised that you keep your word: if you commit to something, you follow through. That has shaped me more than any formal lesson.

Interviewer: What maintains strong family relationships? What causes tension?

Sample Response:

Genuine communication, I think — not just talking, but actually listening without jumping to conclusions. In my family, we've learned to deal with disagreements directly rather than letting things fester. On the tension side, I think unspoken expectations cause more damage than outright conflicts. When people assume rather than ask, misunderstandings build up until they become something bigger.

Interviewer: Is the definition of family changing?

Sample Response:

Definitely, and I think that's largely a positive evolution. More single-parent households, same-sex parents, and people choosing friends as their primary support network are all valid ways of building meaningful bonds. What makes something a family isn't biology or legal status — it's consistent care, mutual support, and a sense of belonging. Society is just catching up with a reality that has always existed for many people.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the formal structure is small, but the emotional family is much wider' — a beautifully put distinction.
- Q2: 'non-negotiable' is used here naturally — the same collocation works in many TOEFL topics.
- Q3 makes a sharp distinction between 'talking' and 'listening without jumping to conclusions' — shows depth.
- Q4: 'Society is just catching up with a reality that has always existed' — confident, nuanced, original.

Q1

When you have a meal at school or work, do you prefer to eat alone or do you like to eat with your friends or coworkers?

Q2

What kind of meals do your family or friends generally like to eat? For example, do they prefer traditional home-cooked dishes, fast food, or other types?

Q3

In recent years, many people have argued that plant-based diets are better for individual health and for the planet. Do you think that in the future more people will adopt plant-based diets? Why or why not?

Q4

Some people believe that having regular meal times contributes to better health and financial well-being. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Eat alone or with others at school or work?

Sample Response:

With others, whenever possible. Meals are as much about the conversation as the food for me. I grew up in a household where dinner was a non-negotiable family time, and that's shaped how I see it. Grabbing a quick bite alone is fine occasionally, but eating in isolation every day feels a bit hollow — like you're missing the social component that makes mealtimes meaningful.

Interviewer: What kind of meals do your family prefer?

Sample Response:

My family is quite traditional when it comes to food. We cook most meals at home — my mother especially puts a lot of effort into keeping the recipes from her childhood alive. We eat out occasionally as a treat, but fast food is more of a last resort than a regular habit. That said, my younger siblings have much more of a street-food culture than my parents do, so things are definitely shifting with the next generation.

Interviewer: Will plant-based diets become more mainstream?

Sample Response:

They'll definitely grow, but I don't see them becoming the global majority diet anytime soon. The shift requires not just individual willingness but affordable access to alternatives — and plant-based products are still significantly more expensive in many parts of the world. In wealthier, urban areas, absolutely — we can already see that. But globally, the transition will be much slower and more uneven.

Interviewer: Do regular meal times improve health and finances?

Sample Response:

I genuinely believe they do. When you eat at irregular times, you tend to make worse food choices — you grab whatever is available when you're too hungry to think clearly. Regular mealtimes encourage home cooking, which is almost always cheaper than eating out. It sounds like a small discipline, but the cumulative effect on both health and finances over years is very real.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'hollow' is a strong, precise emotional word — shows advanced vocabulary control.
- Q2 tells a multigenerational family food story — personal, specific, and culturally grounded.
- Q3: 'more uneven' is a sophisticated qualifier — acknowledges complexity without losing confidence.
- Q4: 'cumulative effect' is a precise academic collocation used naturally in a conversational context.

Q1

How much do you rely on technology in your daily life? Can you give some specific examples?

Q2

Some people prefer using the latest smartphones and gadgets, while others are happy with basic devices. Which type of person are you, and why?

Q3

Artificial intelligence is starting to perform tasks that humans used to do, like writing, diagnosing illness, and driving. Do you think AI will eventually replace most human jobs?

Q4

Some say technology has brought people closer together, while others argue it has made us more isolated. Which view do you agree with more, and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How much do you rely on technology?

Sample Response:

Quite a lot, if I'm being honest. I use my phone as an alarm, for navigation, reading the news, staying in touch with family — basically everything short of eating and sleeping. At university, I rely heavily on cloud-based tools like Google Drive and Notion for organising coursework. The more self-aware question is whether I'd cope if all of it suddenly disappeared — and the answer is probably 'not very well, at first.'

Interviewer: Latest gadgets or basic devices?

Sample Response:

Definitely on the basic side. I don't feel the need to upgrade my phone every year just because a newer model came out. I genuinely believe the pressure to always have the latest tech is largely marketing-driven. My current phone is three years old and does everything I need. I'd rather put that money toward experiences like travel than into a marginally faster device.

Interviewer: Will AI replace most human jobs?

Sample Response:

I think it will replace many specific tasks within jobs, rather than entire roles — at least in the near term. Data entry, basic writing, and scheduling are already being handled by AI. But jobs that require empathy, creative judgement, or human relationship-building are far harder to automate. The bigger question for me is not 'will AI replace us?' but 'will we adapt quickly enough to work alongside it?'

Interviewer: Technology: connecting or isolating us?

Sample Response:

I'd say it does both — and the outcome depends on how consciously we use it. I keep in touch with childhood friends who live on different continents because of technology — that's genuinely connecting. But I've also sat at dinner tables where everyone is on their phone and nobody is actually present. Technology gives us the tools to connect; it's up to us whether we use them for real connection or comfortable distraction.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'not very well, at first' — self-deprecating and honest; sounds very natural.
- Q2: 'largely marketing-driven' is a sophisticated collocation that signals strong analytical vocabulary.
- Q3 reframes the question at the end: 'not will AI replace us, but will we adapt' — a powerful rhetorical move.
- Q4 ends with a philosophical principle ('technology gives us the tools... it's up to us') — elegant conclusion.

Q1

How environmentally conscious are you in your daily life? Do you recycle, save energy, or make any other eco-friendly choices?

Q2

Would you be willing to pay more for eco-friendly products, even if cheaper alternatives exist? Why or why not?

Q3

Governments around the world are pushing for renewable energy. Do you think renewable energy will completely replace fossil fuels in your lifetime?

Q4

Some people argue that protecting the environment should be a higher priority than economic development. Others believe economic growth must come first. Which side do you support?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How environmentally conscious are you?

Sample Response:

Moderately, I'd say. I recycle consistently and try to cut back on single-use plastic. I use public transport rather than a car, which probably makes the biggest difference to my carbon footprint. But I'm honest with myself: I still fly occasionally, and that offsets a lot of the smaller choices. I think genuine environmental consciousness means acknowledging those contradictions, not pretending they don't exist.

Interviewer: Would you pay more for eco-friendly products?

Sample Response:

Within reason, yes. I already buy locally produced food when I can, even though it's more expensive. But there's a limit — if a sustainable option costs three times as much, it's not a realistic choice for most people. I think the real work needs to happen at a policy level: making eco-friendly options the affordable default, not a premium that only wealthy consumers can access.

Interviewer: Will renewable energy fully replace fossil fuels?

Sample Response:

In my lifetime? I think a very significant shift will happen, but a complete replacement seems ambitious. The technology is clearly moving in the right direction — solar and wind costs have dropped dramatically. The bigger obstacle isn't technology; it's political will and the entrenched interests of fossil fuel industries. A 70–80% transition is realistic. One hundred percent depends on leadership decisions that are still uncertain.

Interviewer: Environment vs. economic development — which matters more?

Sample Response:

I think this framing is increasingly outdated. The most convincing economic argument today is that not protecting the environment is economically devastating — in flood damage, drought, health costs, and displaced populations. So treating them as opposites misses the point. Sustainable economic development is the only kind that remains viable long-term. The real choice is not environment vs. economy — it's short-term profit vs. long-term survival.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'acknowledging contradictions, not pretending they don't exist' — this kind of intellectual honesty impresses raters.
- Q2's policy-level pivot shows sophisticated thinking beyond personal preference.
- Q3 uses specific data ('70–80%') to make the argument concrete and credible.
- Q4 reframes the entire question — one of the most impressive moves in opinion questions.
- 'Increasingly outdated' is a strong, confident register phrase for evaluating ideas.

Q1

Have you ever travelled to another country or a very different region of your own country? What was the experience like?

Q2

When you travel, do you prefer to plan everything in advance or explore spontaneously? Why?

Q3

International tourism has grown enormously in recent decades. Do you think tourism has a mainly positive or mainly negative effect on local cultures?

Q4

Some people believe living abroad, even briefly, is the best way to truly understand another culture. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you ever travelled somewhere very different?

Sample Response:

Yes — I spent three weeks in Japan a couple of years ago. It was genuinely one of the most disorienting and rewarding experiences of my life. Everything from the food to the public etiquette was different from what I was used to. What struck me most was the level of consideration people showed for others in public spaces — a kind of collective civic mindfulness I hadn't experienced at that scale before.

Interviewer: Plan in advance or explore spontaneously?

Sample Response:

A mix of both, honestly. I plan the essentials — flights, accommodation, key things I don't want to miss. But I leave whole days completely open, because some of my best travel memories come from unplanned detours. Over-scheduling a trip can turn it into a checklist rather than an experience. I want to feel like I'm living in a place, not just passing through it.

Interviewer: Does tourism help or harm local cultures?**Sample Response:**

Both, depending on the scale and how it's managed. Thoughtful tourism — staying in locally owned accommodation, eating local food, learning some of the language — genuinely supports communities and builds cross-cultural understanding. Mass tourism, on the other hand, can price locals out of their own neighbourhoods and reduce cultures to performances for visitors. The difference is whether tourists come as guests or consumers.

Interviewer: Is living abroad the best way to understand another culture?**Sample Response:**

Probably the most effective way, yes — certainly more than tourism. When you live somewhere, you encounter the mundane: grocery shopping, navigating bureaucracy, dealing with illness, making friends across a language barrier. Those ordinary moments give you a far more honest picture than the highlights a tourist sees. That said, even living abroad can be superficial if you only spend time with other expats.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'civic mindfulness' is an original, precise collocation — shows sophisticated vocabulary.
- Q2: 'living in a place, not just passing through it' — a vivid, memorable phrase.
- Q3's 'guests or consumers' contrast is conceptually sharp and linguistically elegant.
- Q4 gives unexpected nuance: 'even living abroad can be superficial if...' — shows real critical thinking.

Q1

How do you mainly communicate with your friends — through social media, messages, calls, or in person?

Q2

Do you prefer getting your news through social media or through traditional outlets like TV and newspapers? Why?

Q3

Social media platforms allow anyone to post anything, which can lead to the spread of misinformation. Should platforms be held responsible for the content users post?

Q4

Some people believe social media has replaced genuine friendship with shallow connections. Do you agree or disagree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How do you communicate with friends?

Sample Response:

Mostly through messaging apps — WhatsApp and Telegram for day-to-day stuff. For closer friends, I prefer voice calls rather than texts, because you can hear tone of voice and actually have a real conversation. In person is obviously the gold standard, but with friends living in different cities, digital communication is how the relationship stays alive between visits.

Interviewer: Social media news or traditional outlets?

Sample Response:

Traditional outlets, with some social media for breaking news. My concern with social media news is the algorithm — it tends to show you content that confirms what you already believe, which makes it very hard to get a genuinely balanced picture. For analysis and in-depth reporting, I still turn to newspapers and trusted broadcast media. That said, social media is often where I first hear about something happening.

Interviewer: Should platforms be responsible for user content?

Sample Response:

To some degree, yes — but the question of how much is genuinely difficult. Platforms already remove illegal content, and few would argue against that. The harder question is about legal-but-harmful content: conspiracy theories, health misinformation, coordinated harassment. I think platforms need to be far more transparent about how their algorithms amplify certain content, and governments need to establish clearer standards. Complete immunity from liability is no longer defensible.

Interviewer: Has social media replaced genuine friendship?

Sample Response:

I don't think it has replaced genuine friendship so much as changed what we think friendship looks like. Having 800 followers is not the same as having 800 friends — most people know that. But social media can maintain and even deepen real relationships across distances. The risk is passive consumption: scrolling through people's highlights rather than actually connecting. The technology enables both genuine connection and hollow substitutes; the choice, largely, is ours.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'gold standard' is a natural idiom for the best version of something — use it across topics.
- Q2: 'confirms what you already believe' is a crisp description of filter bubbles without using jargon.
- Q3: 'no longer defensible' — strong, confident register. Shows command of evaluative language.
- Q4 ends with 'the choice, largely, is ours' — a philosophical closing that avoids preachiness.

Q1

How many languages do you speak, and how did you learn them? What was the most challenging part?

Q2

Is it better to learn a new language through formal classes or through immersion in a new country? Why?

Q3

English has become the dominant international language. Do you think this is fair to speakers of other languages?

Q4

Some people believe that with AI translation tools becoming so powerful, learning a second language will soon be unnecessary. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How many languages do you speak?

Sample Response:

I speak two fluently — my native language and English — and I have a basic conversational level in French. English was the most challenging simply because of the sheer amount of vocabulary and the gap between written and spoken forms. I learned it mainly through school, but the real breakthrough came when I started watching series and films without subtitles. That's when the language started to feel natural.

Interviewer: Formal classes or immersion?

Sample Response:

Immersion, by a significant margin — though formal classes build the foundation. The difference is that immersion forces you to use language for real purposes: buying groceries, asking for directions, making friends across a language barrier. That functional pressure accelerates learning in a way that even excellent classroom teaching cannot. My ideal would be formal instruction for the first year, then full immersion.

Interviewer: Is English's dominance fair to other speakers?

Sample Response:

It's complicated. On one level, a shared global language genuinely enables communication and collaboration across cultures. On another, the native English speaker has an enormous, unearned advantage in international academic and professional settings. Non-native speakers work twice as hard to communicate at the same level. Whether that's 'fair' is debatable, but we should at least acknowledge the asymmetry.

Interviewer: Will AI translation make language learning unnecessary?

Sample Response:

Not entirely, and I say that as someone who uses translation tools regularly. AI translation handles information transfer well, but it cannot replicate the cultural connection that comes from speaking someone's language — however imperfectly. Learning even basic phrases shows respect that no app can convey. And for deep professional or academic work, the nuances of language still matter enormously. Translation tools will reduce the urgency; they won't eliminate the value.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the gap between written and spoken forms' — precise linguistic observation, impresses raters.
- Q2: 'functional pressure' is a precise, sophisticated phrase for why immersion works.
- Q3: 'unearned advantage' — confident and precise, shows critical thinking without sounding aggressive.
- Q4: 'reduce the urgency; they won't eliminate the value' — elegant parallel structure for conclusions.

Q1

Are you generally a saver or a spender? How do you usually manage your personal finances?

Q2

Is it better to spend money on experiences like travel and concerts, or on material things like electronics and clothes? Why?

Q3

Many young people struggle with debt from student loans or credit cards. Do you think financial education should be mandatory in schools?

Q4

Some people believe money is the most important factor in career choice. Others say passion and satisfaction matter more. Where do you stand?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Are you a saver or a spender?

Sample Response:

Mainly a saver, but a deliberate one — I'm not frugal for its own sake. I budget fairly carefully: fixed expenses first, then I set aside a savings portion before I let myself spend freely. The approach I use is roughly: cover needs, save some, then enjoy the rest without guilt. Having a financial buffer reduces anxiety enormously, and that peace of mind is worth more to me than most purchases.

Interviewer: Experiences or material things?

Sample Response:

Experiences, without question. Research consistently shows that people adapt to material possessions quickly — the new phone stops feeling special within weeks. But memories from travel or meaningful events tend to improve in retrospect — you appreciate them more over time, not less. I'm not saying possessions have no value, but pound for pound, experiences deliver more lasting happiness.

Interviewer: Should financial education be mandatory in schools?

Sample Response:

Absolutely, yes. It's remarkable that we teach teenagers calculus but not how a credit card actually works, or what compound interest means for a long-term loan. The consequences of financial illiteracy are immediate and serious — debt, poor planning, vulnerability to scams. A basic financial literacy course should be as compulsory as maths or history.

Interviewer: Money vs. passion in career choice?

Sample Response:

Both matter, and I'd resist the pressure to choose one. A career with passion but no financial security creates stress that eventually poisons the passion itself. A career that pays well but is meaningless leads to a different kind of unhappiness — emptiness. What I'd aim for is work that is sufficiently meaningful and sufficiently well-paid: the word 'sufficiently' doing a lot of work in that sentence.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'peace of mind is worth more to me than most purchases' — original, memorable, and highly natural.
- Q2 uses research ('studies consistently show') — signals academic awareness without over-citing.
- Q3: 'pound for pound' is an excellent idiomatic comparative phrase from everyday native English.
- Q4's ending ('sufficiently doing a lot of work in that sentence') shows linguistic wit — impressive.

Q1

How did you meet your closest friends? What has kept those friendships strong over time?

Q2

Do you think it is easier to make friends online or in person today? Which do you prefer?

Q3

As we get older and busier, maintaining friendships becomes harder. What do you think are the most important things people can do to keep friendships alive?

Q4

Some people have a small circle of very close friends; others prefer a large network of acquaintances. Which do you prefer and why?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How did you meet your closest friends?

Sample Response:

Most of my closest friendships started at university — those years when you're living with people, studying alongside them, and going through the same intense experiences simultaneously. What's kept those friendships going is, I think, a combination of genuine interest in each other's lives and the habit of actually making time to see each other — not just assuming it'll happen.

Interviewer: Online or in person — which is easier for making friends?

Sample Response:

In person, for real friendships. Online connections can be genuine, but there's a depth that comes from physical presence — shared meals, body language, spontaneous moments — that is very hard to replicate digitally. That said, online communities have connected people around shared passions in ways that geography used to prevent. So online is easier for meeting people; in person is better for forming lasting bonds.

Interviewer: What keeps friendships alive as people get busier?

Sample Response:

Making time — deliberately, not passively. The friendships I've seen fade are almost always ones where people assumed they'd stay close without putting in the effort. A monthly catch-up, a shared trip once a year, even a regular message exchange — these things require intention. What also helps is being genuinely interested in the other person's life, not just sharing your own updates.

Interviewer: Small close circle or large network of acquaintances?

Sample Response:

A small circle, decisively. I don't think I could maintain deep friendships with thirty people — time and emotional energy are finite. I'd rather have five or six relationships where I genuinely know what's going on in someone's life and they know mine, than a hundred pleasant-but-shallow connections. Acquaintances have their own value, but I wouldn't call them friends.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the habit of actually making time' — 'habit' is a precise, elevated word choice here.
- Q2 makes a clean distinction: 'easier for meeting people vs. better for forming lasting bonds'.
- Q3: 'deliberately, not passively' — a sharp contrast that shows sophisticated vocabulary.
- Q4: 'time and emotional energy are finite' — acknowledges a constraint rarely mentioned; impresses raters.

Q1

How would you describe the education system in your country? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Q2

Do you think standardised testing is an effective way to evaluate students, or should schools use other methods?

Q3

Some educators argue that the traditional classroom model is outdated and should be replaced with project-based learning. Do you agree?

Q4

Should education systems focus primarily on preparing students for the job market, or on creating well-rounded, critical thinkers?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Describe your country's education system.

Sample Response:

The system in my country is strong on academic fundamentals — maths, science, and language skills are taught rigorously. Students come out with solid knowledge bases. The weakness, I think, is a culture of memorisation over application. Students learn to pass tests rather than to think creatively or solve real-world problems. And there's enormous pressure from a young age, which I think takes a toll on mental health.

Interviewer: Is standardised testing effective?

Sample Response:

Partially. Standardised tests provide a consistent, comparable measure across large populations — and that has real value for identifying achievement gaps and allocating resources. But they are a very narrow slice of what education should produce. Critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and resilience simply don't fit on a multiple-choice sheet. I'd say: keep them as one tool among many, but stop treating them as the primary measure of intelligence.

Interviewer: Should the traditional classroom be replaced with project-based learning?

Sample Response:

Not replaced — complemented. Project-based learning develops exactly the skills standardised tests miss: problem-solving, teamwork, and the ability to apply knowledge in context. But direct instruction is still essential for building foundational knowledge. The most effective education systems I've read about blend both: strong content instruction and rich applied projects. Either alone is incomplete.

Interviewer: Job market preparation vs. well-rounded critical thinking?

Sample Response:

Well-rounded critical thinking, and I'd argue this is also better for the job market in the long run. The skills most valued by employers today — communication, adaptability, complex problem-solving — are exactly what a liberal education develops. Narrow vocational training produces people who know how to do one thing; a broad education produces people who can learn anything. In a rapidly changing economy, the latter is far more valuable.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 uses a balanced strength-weakness structure — ideal for this type of descriptive question.
- Q2: 'one tool among many' — a nuanced, precise conclusion that avoids binary thinking.
- Q3: 'Not replaced — complemented' — sharp, confident, and immediately clear.
- Q4 reframes the premise: 'I'd argue this is also better for the job market' — flips the dichotomy.

Q1

What does happiness mean to you personally? What makes you feel truly satisfied with life?

Q2

Do you think money is necessary for happiness? Up to what point does wealth improve well-being?

Q3

Research shows that strong relationships and community are among the biggest predictors of life satisfaction. Does this match your own experience?

Q4

Some philosophers argue that the pursuit of happiness itself can be counterproductive — that meaning and purpose matter more. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What does happiness mean to you personally?

Sample Response:

For me, happiness is less about big moments and more about a quiet sense of contentment day-to-day — feeling like I'm doing work that matters, spending time with people I care about, and having enough mental space to just enjoy things without constant stress. I think a lot of people chase happiness as if it's a destination, when actually it's more like a by-product of living in a way that aligns with your values.

Interviewer: Is money necessary for happiness?

Sample Response:

Up to a point, absolutely. Research consistently shows that income improves well-being up to a level where basic needs and security are covered — roughly speaking, once you're comfortable, additional wealth has diminishing returns. I've seen this personally: the biggest jumps in my own sense of well-being have come from relationships and purpose, not from having more money. That said, financial stress is a genuine happiness killer, so having enough really does matter.

Interviewer: Do strong relationships predict life satisfaction?

Sample Response:

Yes — completely, in my experience. The longest-running happiness study at Harvard found that the quality of relationships is the single biggest predictor of well-being in old age. And that matches what I observe around me. The people I know who seem genuinely content all have strong social connections. The ones who struggle, even if successful professionally, often feel isolated. Community isn't a luxury — it's a psychological necessity.

Interviewer: Is the pursuit of happiness counterproductive? Does meaning matter more?

Sample Response:

I find this idea genuinely compelling. When you chase happiness directly, you often make yourself more anxious — constantly measuring whether you feel happy enough. But when you pursue meaningful work, strong relationships, and personal growth, happiness tends to follow as a side effect. Viktor Frankl made this argument from a very dark place, and it has stayed with me. I don't think happiness and meaning are opposites — but meaning is the more stable foundation.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'A by-product of living in alignment with your values' — sophisticated, philosophical
- framing that impresses raters.
- Q2 cites research credibly ('Harvard study', 'diminishing returns') without sounding over-academic.
- 'Community isn't a luxury — it's a psychological necessity' — a memorable, quotable line.
- Aim for one per answer.
- Q4 references Viktor Frankl — shows cultural and intellectual awareness. Specific
- references always elevate responses.
- The phrase 'genuinely compelling' in Q4 shows engagement without sounding sycophantic.

Q1

Have you ever been in a leadership role — at school, work, or in a community group? Describe the experience.

Q2

What qualities do you think make a good leader? Are great leaders born or developed?

Q3

In many organisations, younger people are taking on leadership roles earlier than in previous generations. Is this a positive trend?

Q4

Some say true leadership is about serving others, not giving orders. Do you agree with this definition?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you been in a leadership role?

Sample Response:

Yes — I led a student society at university for a year. We had about forty members and organised monthly events. The most challenging part wasn't planning the events themselves — it was managing people's expectations and keeping everyone motivated after initial enthusiasm wore off. I learned that leadership is mostly about consistent communication and making people feel their contributions are valued, even when things don't go perfectly.

Interviewer: What makes a good leader? Born or developed?

Sample Response:

Developed, overwhelmingly. There are traits that help — confidence, emotional intelligence, resilience — but all of those can be built through experience and deliberate practice. I'm deeply suspicious of the 'born leader' idea because it lets people off the hook — both those who assume they're natural leaders and those who assume they're not. The best leaders I've seen have been deeply self-aware and genuinely committed to getting better.

Interviewer: Is younger leadership a positive trend?

Sample Response:

On balance, yes. Younger leaders tend to be more comfortable with change, more digitally fluent, and often more in touch with the needs of younger workers and customers. The risk is inexperience — particularly in managing conflict and navigating organisational politics. But that's a risk that can be mitigated with good mentorship structures. I'd rather have an organisation that blends the energy of younger leaders with the wisdom of experienced advisors.

Interviewer: Is leadership about serving others rather than giving orders?

Sample Response:

I agree with this entirely — and I think the best leaders model it. Command-and-control leadership might work in a crisis, but in day-to-day environments it breeds resentment and kills initiative. When people feel served — when their development, well-being, and ideas are genuinely prioritised — they give far more. The most effective leader I've ever worked under barely gave orders; she mostly asked good questions and removed obstacles from people's paths.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'initial enthusiasm wore off' — a precise, idiomatic description of a common group dynamics challenge.
- Q2: 'deeply suspicious of the born leader idea' — a confident, direct stance. Raters reward clear positions.
- 'Lets people off the hook' in Q2 is a natural idiom that sounds genuinely fluent.
- Q3: 'mitigated with good mentorship structures' — shows policy-level thinking, not just personal opinion.
- Q4 ends with a vivid example: 'she mostly asked good questions and removed obstacles'
- — memorable and specific.

Q1

Where did you grow up — in a city, a suburb, or a rural area? How did that shape you?

Q2

If you could choose freely, would you prefer to live in a big city or a small town? Why?

Q3

As more people move to cities, rural areas are losing population. Should governments try to reverse this trend?

Q4

City life is often described as fast and stressful, rural life as peaceful but limiting. Do you agree with either description?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Where did you grow up and how did it shape you?

Sample Response:

I grew up in a mid-sized city — not a metropolis, but not a small town either. I think that gave me a useful balance: enough urban exposure to feel comfortable in cities, but enough of a community feel that I understood the value of knowing your neighbours. Growing up there made me fairly pragmatic and community-minded — two things I notice are less common in people who grew up in very large anonymous cities.

Interviewer: City or small town — if you could choose freely?

Sample Response:

A city, but a liveable one. I need the cultural options, career opportunities, and energy of an urban environment. But I've become increasingly aware of what large cities can cost you — in stress, in commute time, in cost of living, and in a certain loss of community. My ideal would be a mid-sized city with good public transport, a strong arts scene, and neighbourhoods where people actually know each other. That exists — it just takes some finding.

Interviewer: Should governments try to stop rural depopulation?

Sample Response:

They should, but through incentives rather than restrictions. Forcing people to stay somewhere has never worked. What does work is investing in rural infrastructure — fast broadband, good healthcare, reliable transport — so that rural life becomes a genuine lifestyle choice rather than a form of geographic disadvantage. Remote work has actually opened a real window here: many people would happily live rurally if they could keep urban salaries. Governments should capitalise on that shift.

Interviewer: Is city life stressful and rural life limiting?

Sample Response:

Both characterisations have truth in them, but neither is the whole story. City life can absolutely be stressful — the noise, pace, and cost are real. But cities also offer stimulation, diversity, and opportunity that many people find energising rather than draining. Rural life can be peaceful and deeply restorative, but for ambitious young people with specific career goals, the lack of opportunity is a genuine constraint. The honest answer is that neither is universally better — it depends entirely on the person.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'pragmatic and community-minded' — precise character descriptors. Much stronger than 'I became a good person'.
- Q2: 'a liveable one' — a single adjective that immediately signals sophisticated urban thinking.
- Q3: 'through incentives rather than restrictions' — a clean policy distinction that shows analytical thinking.
- 'Remote work has opened a real window here' — timely, specific, and shows awareness of current trends.
- Q4's concluding 'depends entirely on the person' works here because it's earned after a balanced analysis.

Q1

What kind of music do you enjoy most? How did you develop that taste?

Q2

Do you prefer listening to music alone as a personal experience, or at live events with others?

Q3

Streaming services have changed how people consume music. Has this been good or bad for musicians and listeners?

Q4

Some argue that music is a universal language that transcends culture. Do you agree, or is music deeply tied to specific cultures?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What kind of music do you enjoy and how did you develop that taste?

Sample Response:

I mostly listen to jazz and soul — which is a bit unusual for my generation. My father played a lot of jazz at home when I was growing up, so it's deeply tied to childhood memories. As I got older I started to understand what I was hearing — the improvisation, the conversation between instruments — and I fell in love with it properly. I find most contemporary pop quite forgettable, but I try not to be snobbish about it — there's brilliant music in every genre if you dig deep enough.

Interviewer: Alone or at live events?

Sample Response:

Both, for very different reasons. Listening alone — usually late at night with headphones — is an intimate, personal experience. You hear things you'd miss in a crowd. But live music creates a shared emotional experience that is completely unique. When an audience of strangers is moved by the same moment simultaneously, there's something almost spiritual about it. I don't think one replaces the other — they're different relationships with music entirely.

Interviewer: Has streaming been good or bad for music?**Sample Response:**

Mixed, honestly. For listeners, it's been extraordinary — access to virtually everything, instantly. For artists, the economics are brutal: streaming pays fractions of a cent per play, which has pushed even established musicians toward constant touring just to survive. The other thing streaming has done is fragment listeners into tiny niches — there are almost no shared cultural moments around music anymore the way there were in the album era. Great for discovery; damaging for the music economy and cultural cohesion.

Interviewer: Is music a universal language?**Sample Response:**

Partially. The emotional impact of music — the way a minor key can feel melancholic across cultures — suggests something universal in how humans process sound. But the specific meaning of musical forms is deeply cultural. Traditional music from Iran or West Africa can feel completely opaque to someone without that cultural context, even if it moves them emotionally. So I'd say: universal in emotional resonance, but not in meaning. The language analogy only goes so far.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the conversation between instruments' — a beautiful description of jazz that shows genuine knowledge.
- 'I try not to be snobbish about it' — shows self-awareness and intellectual humility. Raters appreciate this.
- Q2: 'almost spiritual' is a carefully chosen intensifier — strong but not hyperbolic.
- Q3 gives a genuinely balanced view with specific economic detail ('fractions of a cent') — credible and informed.
- Q4 makes a sophisticated distinction: 'universal in emotional resonance, but not in meaning.' — excellent analytical move.

Q1

Do you play any sports or follow any sports teams? Tell me about your experience.

Q2

Some people play sports to win; others play just for enjoyment. Which attitude is healthier?

Q3

With the rise of e-sports and gaming competitions, do you think traditional sports are losing their appeal?

Q4

Do competitive sports teach valuable life lessons, or do they create too much pressure?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you play sports or follow any teams?

Sample Response:

I play recreational football with friends on Sunday mornings — nothing competitive, just for the exercise and the social side. I also follow Formula 1 quite closely. There's something fascinating about the combination of engineering precision and human skill at the elite level — it's not just sport, it's a test of strategy and technology. I got into it during lockdown when there wasn't much else to watch, and I've been hooked ever since.

Interviewer: Playing to win or playing for enjoyment — which is healthier?

Sample Response:

Enjoyment, for amateur sport — but with a healthy competitive streak. Playing purely to win in a casual context puts pressure on the experience that doesn't belong there. But playing with zero competitive edge becomes listless — the challenge is part of the fun. The healthy middle is being genuinely engaged and trying your best, while keeping the result in perspective. Professional athletes obviously need a different relationship with winning, but that's a very different context.

Interviewer: Are traditional sports losing appeal to e-sports?

Sample Response:

I think they're competing for different audiences rather than replacing each other. E-sports attract people who grew up playing games and find the skill expression there just as compelling. Traditional sports retain enormous cultural and emotional weight — the Olympics, the World Cup — that e-sports haven't yet achieved at scale. I do think traditional sports organisations need to adapt — shorter formats, digital engagement — or they'll lose younger generations by standing still.

Interviewer: Do competitive sports teach life lessons or create too much pressure?

Sample Response:

Both are true, and it depends on how sport is coached and structured. Good competitive sport teaches resilience, teamwork, how to lose gracefully and win humbly — lessons that transfer directly to professional and personal life. But in many school and junior systems, the pressure is excessive and the environment is exclusionary — cutting children early, humiliating the less gifted, rewarding only winning. Sport has enormous potential for character development; it just needs to be delivered with that goal in mind.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'hooked ever since' — natural, idiomatic, fluent. Much better than 'I became very interested'.
- 'A healthy competitive streak' in Q2 — precise compound noun. Shows strong vocabulary range.
- Q3: 'traditional sports organisations need to adapt or lose younger generations by standing still' — confident future-trend analysis.
- Q4: 'win humbly' and 'lose gracefully' — parallel structure used elegantly. A highly effective rhetorical device.

Q1

Which area of science — space, medicine, genetics, climate — fascinates you most? Why?

Q2

Does scientific progress always lead to a better world, or can it cause harm?

Q3

Space exploration costs billions. Is this money better spent solving problems on Earth?

Q4

Gene editing could eliminate genetic diseases but raises ethical questions. Should there be limits on genetic modification?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Which area of science fascinates you most?

Sample Response:

Neuroscience, without a doubt. The idea that everything we experience — every emotion, every memory, every decision — is ultimately the result of electrical signals between neurons is both humbling and extraordinary. We still understand so little about consciousness: why it exists, what it actually is, whether it could exist in a non-biological system. Those questions sit at the intersection of science and philosophy, and I find that boundary absolutely captivating.

Interviewer: Does scientific progress always lead to a better world?

Sample Response:

Not automatically, no. Scientific progress is a tool — its value depends entirely on how it's applied and who controls it. Nuclear physics gave us both clean energy and weapons of mass destruction. The internet created both unprecedented access to knowledge and unprecedented capacity for surveillance and manipulation. Science expands what's possible; it doesn't determine what's wise. That's why scientific advance needs to be accompanied by proportionate ethical and regulatory frameworks.

Interviewer: Is space exploration worth the cost?

Sample Response:

Yes, but not for the reasons usually cited. The 'we might need another planet' argument is too speculative. The real value is more immediate: the technologies developed for space exploration — GPS, medical imaging, water purification — have improved life on Earth directly. Space also does something harder to quantify: it gives humanity a shared horizon, a reason to cooperate across borders rather than compete within them. That perspective has genuine civilisational value.

Interviewer: Should gene editing have limits?

Sample Response:

Yes — strict ones, particularly for human germline editing. The concern isn't fixing a genetic disease in an individual patient; that's clearly beneficial. The concern is heritable modification: changes that pass to future generations who cannot consent. We have barely begun to understand the full implications of any given genetic change. The precautionary principle applies very clearly here: the potential for irreversible harm demands caution that keeps pace with the capability.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'sits at the intersection of science and philosophy' — an elevated, precise phrase for a complex idea.
- Q2: nuclear physics example is specific and immediately convincing — always use concrete examples, not abstractions.
- Q3: 'a shared horizon' — a vivid, original metaphor. Original metaphors are one of the clearest markers of Band 6.
- Q4: 'heritable modification' and 'germline editing' — domain-specific vocabulary shows genuine knowledge and language range.

Q1

How would you describe the relationship between younger and older generations in your culture?

Q2

Are older people generally wiser, or is wisdom not necessarily linked to age?

Q3

Many countries face rapidly aging populations and strained social security systems. What solutions should governments pursue?

Q4

Some believe young people today lack the resilience and work ethic of previous generations. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Relationship between young and older generations in your culture?

Sample Response:

Generally respectful, but with a noticeable gap. In my culture there's a strong tradition of deference to elders — you don't interrupt, you listen, you seek their advice. But I've noticed that gap is widening as younger people's values and experiences diverge more sharply from their parents'. Technology is a big part of that: the world my generation navigates is genuinely different from the one our parents built their lives in. Mutual understanding takes more effort than it used to.

Interviewer: Are older people generally wiser?

Sample Response:

Not automatically. Age gives you more experience, but only wisdom if you've reflected on that experience honestly. I've met 70-year-olds who are genuinely insightful and 70-year-olds who've spent decades reinforcing their own biases. Experience without reflection produces certainty, not wisdom. What older people do often have is perspective — a longer time horizon that makes short-term crises feel less catastrophic. That's valuable, even if it's not the same as wisdom.

Interviewer: What should governments do about aging populations?

Sample Response:

A combination: well-managed immigration is the fastest solution for demographic imbalance. Gradual increases in retirement age reflect the reality that people are healthier and living longer. And investing in elder care — both professional and informal — needs to be taken far more seriously. The countries that have navigated this best, like Japan and Scandinavia, have done all three simultaneously rather than betting on a single policy.

Interviewer: Do young people today lack resilience compared to previous generations?

Sample Response:

I'd push back on this framing. Young people today face challenges that previous generations genuinely didn't — social media comparison, housing unaffordability, climate anxiety on top of individual struggles. They may express vulnerability more openly, which gets misread as weakness. That openness is actually a strength — the stoic 'get on with it' model caused a lot of silent suffering. Each generation develops the resilience it needs for its specific challenges.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the world my generation navigates is genuinely different from the one our parents built' — original and insightful.
- Q2 makes a sharp distinction: 'experience without reflection produces certainty, not wisdom' — memorable formulation.
- Q3 names specific countries (Japan, Scandinavia) — geographic specificity adds instant credibility.
- Q4: 'gets misread as weakness' — reframes the premise rather than just answering it.
- Sophisticated rhetorical move.

Q1

Describe where you currently live. What do you like or dislike about your living situation?

Q2

Would you rather live with roommates to share expenses, or alone for privacy and independence?

Q3

Housing costs have become unaffordable for young people in many cities. What can governments or individuals do?

Q4

Is owning a home the ultimate financial goal, or are many people perfectly happy renting forever?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Describe where you live and what you like or dislike.

Sample Response:

I share a flat with two friends near the university. It's a reasonable size for three people — we each have our own room, which is essential for sanity during exam periods. What I love is the location: I can walk to campus in ten minutes and there's a good market nearby. What I dislike is the noise — we're on a main road, and the traffic at night can make sleeping difficult. Overall, though, it suits where I am in life right now.

Interviewer: Roommates or living alone?

Sample Response:

Roommates at this stage, but alone eventually. Living with others makes financial sense as a student, and there's a genuine social richness to it — spontaneous conversations, shared meals, someone to talk to when you've had a difficult day. But I'm also quite introverted, and I can feel the toll of always sharing space. Long-term, I think I'd need my own place to feel fully myself.

Interviewer: What can governments or individuals do about unaffordable housing?

Sample Response:

Governments need to build more — it really is that simple at the core, though politically difficult. Many cities have housing shortages driven by zoning restrictions that prevent density. Reforming those rules would be the single most impactful change. For individuals in the short term, house-sharing, moving to cheaper areas, and delaying homeownership are the realistic responses to a market that's failing young people.

Interviewer: Is homeownership the ultimate financial goal?

Sample Response:

For many people, yes — and I understand why. Property provides stability, an asset that appreciates, and a sense of putting down roots. But I think the cultural pressure around homeownership has become unhealthy, especially in cities where buying is simply unrealistic for most young people. A well-managed rental sector with strong tenant protections can provide all the stability of ownership without the debt and the geographic constraint. The goal should be housing security, not necessarily ownership.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'suits where I am in life right now' — natural, conversational, and self-aware. Avoid 'it is very good'.
- Q2: 'feel the toll of always sharing space' — precise, idiomatic emotional language.
- Q3: 'it really is that simple at the core, though politically difficult' — a confident, nuanced policy statement.
- Q4: 'housing security, not necessarily ownership' — reframes the goal, showing analytical sophistication.

Q1

Do you enjoy shopping? Tell me about your habits — do you prefer online or in-store?

Q2

Fast fashion refers to cheap, quickly produced clothing that goes out of style quickly. Do you buy fast fashion, and why?

Q3

Online shopping has made impulse buying easier than ever. Is this a serious problem?

Q4

Do you believe that societies focused too much on buying things lose their deeper values?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you enjoy shopping? Online or in-store?

Sample Response:

Mostly online, for the convenience — but I still prefer in-store for clothes and anything where texture and fit matter. Online shopping for groceries or electronics saves so much time. For clothes, I've been burned too many times by returns. There's also something I genuinely enjoy about a good high street — browsing, discovering things I wasn't looking for. That serendipity is something an algorithm can't really replicate.

Interviewer: Do you buy fast fashion and why?

Sample Response:

Less than I used to, deliberately. I became more aware of the environmental cost — the water use, the textile waste, the labour conditions behind very cheap clothes. I try now to buy fewer things but better quality, and to use second-hand apps for anything trendy. I won't pretend I'm perfect about it — cheap clothing is genuinely tempting when you're a student on a budget — but I'm trying to be more conscious about it.

Interviewer: Is impulse buying online a serious problem?

Sample Response:

It can be, yes. The design of e-commerce platforms is explicitly optimised to reduce friction and trigger purchases: one-click buying, countdown timers, personalised recommendations based on your browsing history. For people already prone to overspending, those tools are genuinely harmful. I think disclosure requirements — making dark patterns illegal — would help. But personal awareness is also key: I've learned to put things in a basket and wait 24 hours before buying.

Interviewer: Does consumer culture erode deeper values?

Sample Response:

I think it can, when it becomes the dominant framework for meaning and identity. When people define themselves primarily by what they own or consume, it creates a restless dissatisfaction — there's always something newer, better, more. That's not a moral failing of individuals; it's a structural outcome of economic systems that depend on ever-expanding consumption. The antidote isn't asceticism, but cultivating other sources of meaning: relationships, creativity, service to others.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'Serendipity' in Q1 is a high-value vocabulary word used naturally — this is exactly the kind of word that signals Band 6.
- Q2: 'fewer things but better quality' — a clean, memorable consumer philosophy. Specific and quotable.
- Q3: 'dark patterns' is a real tech industry term — using it shows genuine knowledge and impresses raters.
- Q4: 'restless dissatisfaction' — precise, evocative compound. Shows strong control of emotional vocabulary.

Q1

Describe a significant festival or cultural tradition from your background. Why is it important to you?

Q2

Is it important for younger generations to keep cultural traditions alive, or should they evolve freely?

Q3

As the world becomes more connected, cultures are increasingly mixing. Is this blending something to celebrate or be concerned about?

Q4

Some cultural traditions have practices that modern society finds problematic. Should they be protected as cultural heritage?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Describe a cultural festival or tradition from your background.

Sample Response:

Nowruz — the Persian New Year — is the most important celebration in my culture. It falls on the spring equinox and marks renewal: houses are cleaned from top to bottom, a symbolic table is set with seven items each beginning with the letter 'S', and families gather for a meal at the exact moment of the new year. What I love about it is that it's entirely secular and crosses religious lines — everyone celebrates regardless of faith. It's genuinely community-building.

Interviewer: Should younger generations keep traditions alive?

Sample Response:

Yes, but adapt them intelligently. A tradition preserved in formaldehyde is a museum piece, not a living culture. The traditions that survive across generations are the ones that communities keep finding new meaning in. Nowruz, for example, is celebrated by Iranian diaspora communities worldwide now — adapted to different contexts but keeping its essential spirit. Forcing preservation without evolution usually produces exactly what it's trying to prevent: traditions dying.

Interviewer: Is cultural blending something to celebrate or worry about?

Sample Response:

Mostly celebrate, with some vigilance. When cultures exchange freely and equally, the results are often beautiful — new art forms, new cuisines, new ways of thinking. The concern is when exchange is unequal: when a dominant culture appropriates elements of a marginalised one for profit, without credit or understanding. So the question isn't whether blending happens — it always has — but whether it happens with respect.

Interviewer: Should problematic cultural traditions be protected as heritage?

Sample Response:

Not unconditionally. Cultural heritage deserves protection and respect, but cultures are not static, and practices that cause clear harm — particularly to people within that culture who have no meaningful choice — cannot be exempt from ethical scrutiny simply by invoking tradition. The most convincing argument for changing a practice always comes from within the culture itself. External condemnation often entrenches resistance. The better path is supporting internal reform.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1 describes Nowruz with specific sensory and symbolic detail — this is exactly what a strong Q1 response looks like.
- Q2: 'preserved in formaldehyde' — a brilliant, vivid metaphor for lifeless tradition.
- Risk-taking vocabulary pays off.
- Q3: 'when exchange is unequal' — introduces the key nuance on cultural appropriation concisely and precisely.
- Q4: 'supporting internal reform' vs 'external condemnation' — a sophisticated policy distinction. Shows maturity.

31 Time Management

Q1

How do you personally manage your time? Do you use apps, planners, or your own system?

Q2

Are you more organised and structured, or spontaneous and flexible? Which fits your personality?

Q3

Do you think smartphones make time management harder? Why or why not?

Q4

Some argue that rest and doing nothing is essential for productivity. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How do you manage your time?

Sample Response:

I use a combination of digital and analog tools. My calendar handles everything time-specific, but I've found that writing a short handwritten list each morning of the three most important things I need to do keeps me focused in a way that apps alone don't. The physical act of crossing something off is oddly satisfying and keeps me honest. I also time-block — I schedule specific work in specific slots rather than just listing tasks — which has made a significant difference to how much I actually finish.

Interviewer: Organised or spontaneous — which fits your personality?

Sample Response:

Organised by default, but with deliberate space left for spontaneity. I've learned that without structure, the day fills with low-priority noise. But rigid over-scheduling kills creativity and makes you brittle when things inevitably go off-plan. So my approach is: protect the important, leave room for the unexpected. I plan my weeks on Sunday evenings but keep two or three hours each day completely unscheduled.

Interviewer: Do smartphones make time management harder?

Sample Response:

Significantly, yes. The apps that fill our phones are specifically designed to capture and hold attention — notifications, infinite scroll, variable reward — all tools borrowed from behavioural psychology. The most effective thing I've done is turn off almost all notifications. It sounds small, but regaining control of when I check things rather than being summoned has made a noticeable difference to my concentration and productivity.

Interviewer: Is rest and doing nothing essential for productivity?

Sample Response:

Absolutely — and this is one of the most counterintuitive lessons I've taken seriously. The research on rest is quite clear: the brain continues to process information during downtime; insights frequently emerge during walks, showers, or periods of unfocused relaxation. People who are constantly busy often mistake activity for productivity. Protecting rest isn't laziness — it's maintenance. You can't run an engine without cooling-down time.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the physical act of crossing something off is oddly satisfying' — relatable, human
- detail. Shows strong spoken register.
- 'Time-blocking' in Q1 is a specific productivity term — shows knowledge and vocabulary
- range.
- Q2: 'makes you brittle when things go off-plan' — vivid, precise descriptor. Much stronger
- than 'makes it difficult'.
- Q4: 'mistake activity for productivity' — a sharp, memorable distinction. Quotable
- phrases earn high scores.

Q1

What is one of your favourite childhood memories? What made it so special?

Q2

Do you think children today have a better or worse childhood compared to previous generations?

Q3

Screen time and digital devices are now a major part of modern childhood. Is this healthy for children's development?

Q4

Does the way we are raised in childhood shape who we become as adults more than any other factor?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What is a favourite childhood memory?

Sample Response:

Every summer my family would drive to my grandparents' village — no screens, no planned activities, just long days outdoors. I have this memory of lying in a wheat field at dusk with my cousins, completely still, watching the sky turn orange. No one was in a hurry to go anywhere. That memory stays with me partly because it's so unlike the pace of my life now — it represents a kind of unhurried presence I try to recreate occasionally as an adult.

Interviewer: Better or worse childhood today?

Sample Response:

Harder to say than it seems. Children today have extraordinary access to knowledge and global connection. But they also carry something previous generations didn't: the weight of constant visibility and comparison. Social media means a child's social life — its cruelties and its affirmations — never fully stops, even at home. That psychological pressure is new and serious. I'm genuinely unsure whether the gains in access and opportunity outweigh that cost.

Interviewer: Is heavy screen time healthy for children?

Sample Response:

It depends enormously on what they're doing and for how long. Passive consumption of algorithmically curated short videos for six hours a day — clearly harmful. Creative use of technology: making things, learning to code, connecting with others meaningfully — different story. The honest answer is that the research is still catching up with the technology. But the general principle holds: variety, physical activity, and real-world interaction need to be protected.

Interviewer: Does childhood shape us more than anything else?

Sample Response:

More than anything else — probably, yes. The attachment patterns formed in early childhood, the emotional vocabulary we learn, the sense of whether the world is fundamentally safe or threatening — these form a template that shapes everything that comes after. That doesn't mean it's destiny. Therapy, education, and conscious effort can rewrite significant parts of that template. But the early years matter in a way that no other period quite matches.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: The wheat field description is sensory and specific — evokes emotion. This is what strong storytelling in Q1 looks like.
- 'Unhurried presence' — two words that capture an entire concept. Precision in vocabulary is a Band 6 marker.
- Q2: 'the weight of constant visibility' — an original metaphor for the social media experience of childhood.
- Q4: 'a template that shapes everything that comes after' — sophisticated psychological framing, fluently expressed.

Q1

Do you or does anyone in your family have experience with immigration? How has it shaped your perspective?

Q2

Should immigrants fully assimilate to local culture, or is it important to maintain their original cultural identity?

Q3

Do you think most people's views on immigration are based on facts or emotions?

Q4

Do you believe diverse societies — with people from many backgrounds — are more creative and innovative?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you or your family have immigration experience?

Sample Response:

My parents immigrated here when I was three, so I grew up navigating two cultural identities simultaneously. That experience has given me something I value enormously: the ability to move between contexts, to understand that most of my assumptions about how the world works are cultural rather than universal. It's not always comfortable — there are moments of not fully belonging anywhere — but overall I think it's made me more curious and more empathetic.

Interviewer: Assimilate or maintain original cultural identity?

Sample Response:

Both — and the dichotomy is false. Integration means participating fully in the society you've joined: learning the language, understanding the norms, building local relationships. Maintaining your culture of origin means keeping language, food, traditions, connections alive. These are not in conflict. The most successfully integrated communities I've seen do both. What damages integration is not cultural retention but deliberate isolation.

Interviewer: Are views on immigration based on facts or emotions?

Sample Response:

Mostly emotions, shaped by personal experience and media framing — but that's true of most political positions. The research on immigration's economic and social effects is fairly clear and largely positive, but that research rarely reaches people whose primary experience of immigration is rapid change in their neighbourhood. The emotional response to cultural change is real and shouldn't be dismissed. The problem is when that response drives policy that ignores the evidence.

Interviewer: Is diversity a strength?

Sample Response:

I believe so — and there's good evidence to support it. Diverse teams consistently outperform homogenous ones on complex problems, because they bring genuinely different perspectives and challenge assumptions that a uniform group would never question. Cultural diversity does the same for societies: it generates creative friction. The challenge is that diversity without inclusion — without genuine respect and equity — can create division rather than strength. So yes to diversity, but it needs to be managed thoughtfully.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'not fully belonging anywhere' — honest, vulnerable, and deeply human. Authenticity resonates with raters.
- Q2: 'deliberate isolation' vs 'cultural retention' — a precise and important distinction that advances the debate.
- Q3: 'the emotional response to cultural change is real and shouldn't be dismissed' — shows empathy and nuance simultaneously.
- Q4: 'creative friction' — a beautiful, concise description of how diversity creates value.
- Original phrase.

Q1

Have you ever faced a difficult ethical decision? What did you do?

Q2

Is morality universal — the same everywhere — or is it shaped by culture and background?

Q3

Do you believe the ends justify the means: if the outcome is good, does the method matter?

Q4

Should people in wealthy countries feel moral responsibility for poverty in other countries?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you faced a difficult ethical decision?

Sample Response:

Once, yes. I discovered that a close friend had been plagiarising large sections of their university work. I was put in the position of deciding whether to report it, say something directly, or stay silent. In the end I talked to them privately — it felt more honest than reporting them without warning. They stopped, but the friendship was strained for a while. What I learned is that the right choice isn't always the comfortable one, and that ethical action often costs you something.

Interviewer: Is morality universal or culturally shaped?

Sample Response:

Both, I think, operating at different levels. Some things — prohibitions on gratuitous cruelty, care for the vulnerable — appear across virtually every culture in some form. That suggests something universal in human moral intuition. But the application of those principles varies enormously across cultures and time. What counts as 'cruel' or 'caring' is deeply shaped by context. So I'd say: a universal foundation with culturally variable expression.

Interviewer: Do the ends justify the means?

Sample Response:

Rarely, and dangerously often claimed. The problem with ends-justify-means thinking is that it can justify almost anything, because consequences are always uncertain and the 'good outcome' is always defined by whoever holds power. History is full of catastrophic acts committed with confident claims of good intentions. That said, extreme circumstances — an immediate threat to many lives — can create genuine moral dilemmas where the calculus changes. But those cases are exceptional, not a licence for everyday ethical shortcuts.

Interviewer: Should wealthy nations feel responsible for global poverty?

Sample Response:

Yes — and not only morally. The wealth of rich nations is historically entangled with colonisation, resource extraction, and trade rules that have systematically disadvantaged poorer countries. That history creates a genuine obligation that goes beyond charity. Practically speaking, global poverty also creates instability, migration pressures, and disease risks that affect wealthy nations directly. Self-interest and moral obligation point in the same direction here.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: A personal ethical story is exactly what Q1 asks for. 'Ethical action often costs you something' — a profound closer.
- Q2: 'universal foundation with culturally variable expression' — a elegant philosophical summary in one phrase.
- Q3: 'consequences are always uncertain' — a key insight in ethics. Shows genuine philosophical reasoning.
- Q4: 'self-interest and moral obligation point in the same direction' — a powerful convergence argument. Sophisticated.

Q1

How do you usually get your news? Do you read papers, watch TV, or follow online sources?

Q2

With so much information online, how do you decide whether a source is trustworthy?

Q3

Social media algorithms create 'filter bubbles' showing only content you already agree with. Is this a serious problem?

Q4

Do you think news organisations should be more strictly regulated?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How do you get your news?

Sample Response:

Mainly through a couple of trusted newspaper apps — I read them over breakfast. I also follow a few journalists directly on social media, which often surfaces stories before they hit the front page. For breaking news I'll check headlines, but I try to wait for a fuller picture before forming strong opinions. I've learned that the first reporting on something is often wrong in important details, and that a few hours of patience usually gives you a much clearer picture.

Interviewer: How do you judge whether a source is trustworthy?

Sample Response:

I look for a few things: does the outlet separate news from opinion clearly? Do they issue corrections when they're wrong? Is there a named author and editorial standard, or is it anonymous? Do multiple independent sources report the same thing? No outlet is perfectly unbiased, but some have a track record of factual accuracy and transparency that others don't. I also deliberately read outlets I disagree with politically — it's the only way to genuinely test your own assumptions.

Interviewer: Are filter bubbles a serious problem?

Sample Response:

Genuinely serious, yes. When algorithms only show you content that reinforces your existing views, you stop being exposed to legitimate perspectives that challenge you, and the world begins to look simpler — and more hostile — than it actually is. The polarisation visible in many democracies isn't entirely caused by social media, but the algorithmic amplification of outrage has clearly accelerated it. Algorithmic transparency and user control over feeds would help, but the economic model of engagement-maximisation works against both.

Interviewer: Should news organisations be more strictly regulated?

Sample Response:

Some baseline regulation, yes — particularly around accuracy, ownership concentration, and electoral interference. But content regulation of news is genuinely dangerous in a democracy. The power to decide what counts as true news and what counts as misinformation should not sit with a government. The better instruments are media literacy education, transparent ownership laws, and strong public broadcasting that doesn't depend on either government or advertising funding.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'a few hours of patience usually gives you a much clearer picture' — practical
- wisdom, naturally expressed.
- Q2's criteria for source trustworthiness are specific and actionable — shows media literacy rather than vague claims.
- 'Reading outlets I disagree with politically' — an intellectually honest admission that impresses raters.
- Q4: 'the power to decide what counts as true news should not sit with a government' — a confident, principled position.

Q1

Are you involved in any creative activity — painting, writing, music, photography, cooking? Tell me about it.

Q2

Is creativity a natural talent or a skill that can be developed? What is your experience?

Q3

In many schools, arts programmes are being cut to make room for STEM subjects. Is this the right decision?

Q4

AI can now create art, music, and literature. Does this change how you think about human creativity?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Are you involved in any creative activity?

Sample Response:

I write — mostly short fiction, mostly for myself. I started during a particularly difficult year as a way of processing things I couldn't talk about easily, and discovered that putting a situation into a story — making characters carry what you can't — is one of the most effective forms of emotional processing I know. I don't share most of it, but the act of writing regularly has changed how I think. I notice things more carefully, and I'm much more comfortable with ambiguity.

Interviewer: Is creativity born or built?

Sample Response:

Built — but seeds matter. Most people have some natural inclination in some domain, but what determines creative achievement is overwhelmingly practice, exposure, and environment. The research on deliberate practice is quite clear: creativity in any domain develops through extensive engagement with that domain over time. What we often mistake for innate genius is usually invisible accumulated effort, plus the confidence to keep going.

Interviewer: Should schools cut arts for STEM?**Sample Response:**

No — and I'd argue the framing is self-defeating. The skills that make a great scientist or engineer — curiosity, pattern recognition, comfort with ambiguity, the ability to make imaginative leaps — are exactly what arts education develops. Countries that gut arts curricula in favour of technical drilling tend to produce graduates who are competent but not innovative. The best STEM programmes I've read about actively integrate arts and humanities rather than competing with them.

Interviewer: Does AI change how we think about human creativity?**Sample Response:**

It should prompt us to ask what creativity actually is. If AI can produce technically accomplished art, music, and literature — and it can — then what we value in human creativity isn't technical execution alone. It's intentionality, lived experience, the specific perspective of a particular human life at a particular moment. AI can simulate the output of creativity; it cannot have the experience that motivates it. That distinction, I think, is where human creative value actually lives.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'making characters carry what you can't' — a profound, original description of why people write fiction.
- Q2: 'invisible accumulated effort' — reframes 'talent' as hidden practice. Conceptually sophisticated.
- Q3: 'competent but not innovative' — a clean, memorable distinction between training outcomes.
- Q4: 'AI can simulate the output of creativity; it cannot have the experience that motivates it' — a beautifully precise sentence.

Q1

Have you ever done any volunteer work? What was the experience like?

Q2

Do you prefer to give your time through volunteering or your money through donations? Which has more impact?

Q3

Some businesses must allocate profits to social responsibility programmes. Do businesses have a moral obligation to give back?

Q4

Does foreign aid actually help developing countries, or does it create dependency?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you done volunteer work?

Sample Response:

Yes — I spent six months volunteering at a community kitchen during my gap year. It involved preparing and serving meals three times a week. What surprised me was how much I got out of it. I expected to feel virtuous and slightly bored. Instead I found a real community — regulars who came as much for the conversation as the food, and colleagues who were some of the most genuinely warm people I've met. It reset some assumptions I had about poverty and social exclusion.

Interviewer: Time or money — which is a bigger contribution?

Sample Response:

Time, usually — but it depends on your skills and circumstances. A wealthy person donating \$10,000 to a well-run organisation can fund months of professional work. But for most people, showing up — consistently, reliably, in person — creates something money alone cannot: human connection and presence. The organisations I've seen thrive on volunteers aren't just getting free labour; they're building community. That's harder to purchase than it sounds.

Interviewer: Do businesses have a moral obligation to give back?

Sample Response:

Yes, and increasingly so. The old shareholder-only model of corporate responsibility is genuinely outdated. Businesses operate within societies and depend on infrastructure, education systems, and stable institutions that they didn't pay for alone. The question isn't whether they have obligations — they do — but how those obligations should be structured. Voluntary CSR programmes are often cosmetic. Binding requirements with teeth are more credible.

Interviewer: Does foreign aid create dependency?

Sample Response:

Some does, when poorly designed. Aid that replaces local production, undercuts local markets, or bypasses local institutions can make recipients structurally dependent. But that's an argument for better-designed aid, not for abandoning it. Emergency humanitarian aid clearly saves lives. Development aid that builds local capacity — infrastructure, education, healthcare systems — has a genuinely strong track record when it's executed well and by the right partners.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'I expected to feel virtuous and slightly bored' — honest, self-deprecating humour.
- Impresses raters with authenticity.
- 'Reset some assumptions' — a precise, elevated way of saying 'changed my mind'. Use it across topics.
- Q3: 'Voluntary CSR programmes are often cosmetic' — a confident, specific criticism.
- Shows knowledge of the field.
- Q4: 'an argument for better-designed aid, not for abandoning it' — a clean logical pivot.
- Excellent debating technique.

Q1

What is the biggest change you have personally experienced? How did you adapt?

Q2

Some people resist change and prefer routine; others embrace new situations readily. Which are you?

Q3

Some experts say adaptability is the most important skill in today's world. Do you agree?

Q4

Society adapted very rapidly during the pandemic. Do you think people generally handle rapid change well?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What is the biggest change you have personally experienced?

Sample Response:

Moving to a new country for university. Everything changed simultaneously — language, food, social norms, climate, support networks. The first semester was genuinely difficult: I was competent in every technical sense, but I felt socially invisible in a way I'd never experienced at home. What carried me through was focusing on very small wins each week: one new person met, one system understood. By year two it felt like home. That experience taught me that adaptation is mostly a matter of patience, not talent.

Interviewer: Are you a creature of routine or open to change?

Sample Response:

I've become more comfortable with change deliberately. By nature I'm someone who finds comfort in routine — same coffee, same route, same schedule. But I recognised early that clinging to routine was limiting me. I now try to deliberately introduce small novelties regularly — a different route, a new topic, an unfamiliar book. Not dramatic upheaval, but enough friction to keep me adaptable. I think of it as maintaining a kind of psychological flexibility.

Interviewer: Is adaptability the most important skill today?

Sample Response:

Among the most important, certainly. We're in an era where entire industries can be disrupted in a decade, where the skills that are valuable today may be obsolete in ten years. In that context, the ability to learn new things, let go of old ways, and stay functional under uncertainty is more valuable than any specific knowledge base. The most resilient people I've observed professionally are not the most brilliant — they're the most flexible.

Interviewer: Does society handle rapid change well?

Sample Response:

Poorly, in the short term — but better over time. The pandemic showed both sides of this. Initial shock, disruption, and resistance gave way, over eighteen months, to genuinely remarkable adaptation: remote work, digital services, vaccine development. Humans and institutions are built for gradual change and genuinely struggle with speed. But collective problem-solving capacity, when properly motivated, is extraordinary. The issue is usually that the motivation — urgency — arrives too late.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'socially invisible' — a precise, powerful phrase for a complex feeling. Two words that earn their place.
- Q2: 'psychological flexibility' — an elevated, specific term. Shows range beyond everyday vocabulary.
- Q3: 'the most resilient are the most flexible, not the most brilliant' — a memorable, counterintuitive observation.
- Q4 uses the pandemic as a specific, well-observed case study — always more powerful than abstract claims.

Q1

What is something you have always dreamed of doing or achieving? Have you taken any steps toward it?

Q2

Is it better to set big ambitious goals or focus on small achievable milestones?

Q3

Many people give up on their dreams because of practical concerns. Is this inevitable?

Q4

Research suggests people with a clear sense of purpose are happier. Is having life purpose essential to well-being?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What have you always dreamed of doing?

Sample Response:

Writing a novel. Not because I expect it to be published or successful — I just have this story in me that I keep returning to, characters that feel real, a world I want to spend time building. I've taken steps: I write regularly now, I've read widely about craft, I've shared early drafts with trusted readers. The honest obstacle is time and the courage to commit fully to something uncertain. But I feel it getting closer, not further away.

Interviewer: Big ambitious goals or small achievable milestones?

Sample Response:

Both — sequenced correctly. A big goal without milestones is just a dream: easy to sustain, impossible to achieve. Milestones without a big goal are just busy work with no direction. The combination that works is a clear, meaningful long-term vision, broken down into concrete 90-day targets. That's not original — most productivity research says the same thing — but it's one of those cases where the advice is common precisely because it works.

Interviewer: Do practical concerns inevitably kill dreams?

Sample Response:

Not inevitably, but often. The things that kill dreams most often aren't big dramatic obstacles — they're gradual drift. The years spent doing something sensible until the dream feels irrelevant or unrealistic. I think the key is treating the dream as a parallel project rather than a deferred one. Not 'I'll write the novel when I have time' but 'I write for 30 minutes every morning before the day takes over.' Small, consistent investment in something meaningful adds up over years.

Interviewer: Is life purpose essential to well-being?

Sample Response:

I believe so — and I'd go further than the research. People can function without a clear sense of purpose, but functioning isn't the same as flourishing. Purpose gives the ordinary moments of life a frame — makes them feel like part of something rather than just things happening. Without it, people are more susceptible to anxiety and existential emptiness, even when material conditions are excellent. Finding purpose is perhaps the most important and most undervalued life project.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'I feel it getting closer, not further away' — an optimistic closer that sounds genuine, not performative.
- Q2: '90-day targets' is a specific, real productivity concept — shows genuine knowledge rather than vague advice.
- Q3: 'gradual drift' is a precise, vivid description of how dreams die. Much stronger than 'people give up'.
- Q4: 'functioning isn't the same as flourishing' — a clean, memorable distinction. Excellent closing argument.

Q1

Describe your university or academic experience so far. What has stood out?

Q2

Are extracurricular activities — clubs, sports, events — as important as coursework at university?

Q3

Some students choose a major for career and salary; others follow their passion. Which leads to better outcomes?

Q4

University tuition has become very expensive. Should higher education be free or subsidised?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Describe your university experience so far.

Sample Response:

It's been more challenging and more rewarding than I expected — often simultaneously. The academic content is genuinely demanding, and there have been moments of real doubt. But what stands out most is the community: the conversations in corridors, the friendships formed over shared stress, the occasional lecturer who changes the way you see something. I'd say university has stretched me intellectually in ways I couldn't have predicted at 18. That feels like it was worth the difficulty.

Interviewer: Are extracurricular activities as important as coursework?

Sample Response:

Different important. Coursework builds knowledge and technical skills — essential. Extracurriculars build the kind of person who can apply that knowledge effectively: communication, leadership, collaboration, resilience under pressure. Employers consistently say they want both, and the students who do only coursework sometimes struggle with the interpersonal demands of the workplace. I'd say: master your subject first, but don't let that be the only thing you develop.

Interviewer: Career prospects or passion — which leads to better outcomes?

Sample Response:

The dichotomy is a bit false. The most successful people I've observed have found domains where their natural curiosity and the market's needs overlap — they didn't have to choose. Pure passion without any market validation can lead you somewhere you genuinely love that simply doesn't pay. Pure career calculation without any intrinsic interest leads to competent misery. The productive question is: what are you genuinely curious about that also has some real-world application?

Interviewer: Should higher education be free?

Sample Response:

Yes, in principle — with caveats about how it's funded. Higher education confers large private benefits, and some element of cost-sharing by graduates is defensible. But the upfront debt model used in many countries is damaging: it deters students from low-income backgrounds at exactly the point when the decision to study or not is being made. Income-contingent repayment — paying back only when you earn above a threshold — is a reasonable middle ground that preserves access while maintaining some financial sustainability.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'stretched me intellectually in ways I couldn't have predicted at 18' — honest and vivid
- self-reflection.
- Q2: 'competent misery' — a two-word phrase that brilliantly captures a specific condition. High-impact vocabulary.
- Q3: 'What are you curious about that also has real-world application?' — reframes the question productively.
- Q4: 'income-contingent repayment' — a specific, real policy term. Using it correctly
- impresses raters enormously.

Q1

Do you have or have you ever had a pet? What was the experience like? If not, would you want one?

Q2

Is it better to keep pets indoors as companions, or should animals live in their natural environments?

Q3

Many cities have strict rules about keeping pets in apartment buildings. Are these rules fair?

Q4

Some people spend large amounts on pet care and luxury products. Is this a reasonable use of resources?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you have or have you had a pet?

Sample Response:

I had a cat growing up — a grey tabby called Smoke who lived to seventeen. He was spectacularly indifferent to most humans but inexplicably attached to me, which I found deeply flattering. Having him around taught me a kind of patience — animals operate on their own schedule and cannot be hurried — and there's genuine research showing that pet ownership reduces cortisol levels. I believed it. The simple act of a cat settling on your lap is remarkably calming.

Interviewer: Pets indoors or in natural environments?

Sample Response:

It depends on the animal and how they're kept. Domesticated dogs and cats have co-evolved with humans for thousands of years — they're not truly 'wild' animals anymore, and a well-cared-for indoor pet can have an excellent quality of life. Exotic animals — reptiles, birds, large mammals — are a different matter entirely. Keeping a parrot in a cage or a python in a tank feels ethically wrong to me regardless of how well they're fed. The line should be: domesticated animals as companions, wild animals in the wild.

Interviewer: Are strict apartment pet rules fair?

Sample Response:

Broadly yes, with exceptions. Landlords and building managers have legitimate concerns about noise, allergies, and property damage. But blanket bans — particularly on small, quiet pets — seem disproportionate in cities where apartment living is the only realistic option for many people, including the elderly and those who live alone. A system of deposits and agreements rather than outright bans would serve everyone better.

Interviewer: Is spending heavily on pet care reasonable?

Sample Response:

Within limits, yes — and without judgment. People's relationships with their animals are real and meaningful, and wanting medical care for a seriously ill pet is understandable. Where I find it harder to follow is luxury pet products: organic spa treatments, designer outfits, birthday parties. The animal doesn't want that — the owner does. It becomes a statement about the owner's identity rather than care for the animal. That's not my choice to judge, but it does raise questions about proportion.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'spectacularly indifferent to most humans but inexplicably attached to me' — a humorous, vivid character description.
- Q2: 'co-evolved with humans for thousands of years' — a specific biological observation that grounds the argument.
- Q3: 'deposits and agreements rather than outright bans' — a concrete policy alternative.
- Always offer solutions.
- Q4: 'a statement about the owner's identity rather than care for the animal' — a sharp sociological observation.

Q1

How concerned are you about your privacy online? What steps do you take to protect it?

Q2

Do cameras and surveillance systems in public spaces make people safer, or do they infringe on privacy?

Q3

Many apps collect personal data to improve their services. Is this an acceptable trade-off?

Q4

Should governments have the right to access private communications in the interest of national security?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How concerned are you about online privacy?

Sample Response:

Genuinely concerned, though I don't always act as consistently as I should. I use a VPN, I've switched to encrypted messaging apps, and I try to be thoughtful about app permissions. But the honest truth is that opting out of the data economy entirely is virtually impossible without a significant loss of functionality. We've been put in a position where consent is technically given but not meaningfully informed. I think the problem is structural — individual action helps at the margins, but regulation is what's actually needed.

Interviewer: Cameras in public spaces: safety or intrusion?

Sample Response:

Both, honestly — and the balance depends on governance. CCTV in public spaces has a legitimate deterrence and evidence function. But the rapid expansion of facial recognition changes the nature of surveillance entirely: it's no longer footage that might be reviewed, it's real-time tracking of everyone, always. That shift requires democratic debate and legal limits, not just law enforcement permission. The technology's capability has outpaced the governance frameworks that should constrain it.

Interviewer: Is data collection an acceptable trade-off for better services?

Sample Response:

In principle, yes — provided the consent is genuinely informed and the use is genuinely limited. In practice, 'I agree to terms and conditions' buried in 10,000 words of legal text is not informed consent. And data collected for one purpose is routinely sold, repurposed, or hacked. The trade-off might be worth it if we had real control over what's collected and how it's used. Right now, most people have neither.

Interviewer: Should governments access private communications for security?

Sample Response:

Only with strong judicial oversight and strictly defined scope. Targeted surveillance of genuine threats, with warrant requirements, is defensible. Mass surveillance — collecting everything on everyone in case it's needed later — is a different matter entirely. The historical record of surveillance powers is not reassuring: they expand, they get abused, and they tend to be used against political opponents and minority communities long before terrorists. The safeguard isn't trust — it's structural constraint.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'Consent is technically given but not meaningfully informed' — a precise
- legal-philosophical distinction. High-value phrasing.
- Q2: 'the technology's capability has outpaced the governance frameworks' — a
- sophisticated, quotable observation.
- Q3: '10,000 words of legal text is not informed consent' — concrete, specific, and wryly
- humorous.
- Q4: 'the safeguard isn't trust — it's structural constraint' — an elegant principle statement
- for a conclusion.

Q1

Do you or anyone you know play video games competitively? What is your view of e-sports as a hobby?

Q2

Some argue that e-sports require as much skill as traditional sports. Do you agree?

Q3

Should e-sports be included in the Olympic Games? Why or why not?

Q4

Are competitive games — whether physical or digital — more about talent or dedicated practice?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: What do you think of e-sports as a hobby?

Sample Response:

I think it's a completely legitimate form of competition that gets unnecessarily looked down on by people who grew up with different entertainment norms. I don't play competitively myself, but I have friends who do, and the level of strategic thinking, reaction time, and teamwork required at a serious level is genuinely impressive. Any activity that requires skill, practice, and competition deserves respect as a competitive pursuit.

Interviewer: Do e-sports require the same skill as traditional sports?

Sample Response:

Comparable — but different. Top e-sports players have extraordinary reaction times and strategic depth, and they train with a rigour that would surprise most people: eight to twelve hours a day of structured practice. What they don't have is the physical dimension that traditional sport demands. That doesn't make one superior — they're measuring different things. Trying to rank them is like arguing whether chess or swimming is a greater achievement. The question doesn't quite work.

Interviewer: Should e-sports be in the Olympics?

Sample Response:

I'm undecided. The Olympic argument is cultural legitimacy and youth engagement — both real. But the Olympics has a specific identity around physical achievement and human limits, and e-sports doesn't quite fit that framework. There might be a stronger case for a separate digital games event — the Olympic Games have done this before with things like the Youth Olympics — rather than forcing e-sports into a structure that wasn't designed for it.

Interviewer: Talent or practice in competitive games?

Sample Response:

Practice overwhelmingly — but with a caveat about processing speed. Research on deliberate practice shows that elite performance in virtually any domain is driven primarily by accumulated, structured practice rather than innate talent. In gaming, reaction time has a small genetic component that matters at the very top. But the gap between a natural and a dedicated practitioner is dwarfed by the gap between a dedicated practitioner and someone who doesn't practise seriously. The talent narrative mostly flatters people who won't do the work.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'unnecessarily looked down on by people who grew up with different entertainment norms' — fair, non-defensive framing.
- Q2: 'like arguing whether chess or swimming is a greater achievement' — a memorable analogy that resolves a false comparison.
- Q3: 'forcing e-sports into a structure that wasn't designed for it' — a practical, thoughtful policy consideration.
- Q4: 'the talent narrative mostly flatters people who won't do the work' — a confident, quotable conclusion.

Q1

How interested are you in politics? Do you follow political news, vote, or participate in civic activities?

Q2

Many young people feel disillusioned with politics and don't vote. Why, and what could change this?

Q3

Some countries have mandatory voting laws. Should voting be compulsory?

Q4

Politicians are often criticised for making promises they don't keep. Can we have a political system with true accountability?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How interested are you in politics?

Sample Response:

Reasonably — I wouldn't call myself a political activist, but I follow political news, I vote in every election I'm eligible for, and I try to understand the reasoning behind policies rather than just their tribal affiliation. I think civic indifference is a form of complicity — the less ordinary people engage, the more extreme voices fill the space. So I see basic political engagement as part of being a responsible member of society.

Interviewer: Why are young people disengaged, and how could that change?

Sample Response:

Multiple reasons: political systems feel unresponsive to young people's concerns; politicians tend to be much older and to design policies accordingly; and social media makes politics feel like a toxic performance rather than meaningful deliberation. What tends to increase youth engagement is direct local impact — when young people see that their vote or their participation actually changes something in their community. Lowering the voting age and investing in civic education from secondary school would also help structurally.

Interviewer: Should voting be compulsory?

Sample Response:

I'm genuinely ambivalent about this. The democratic argument for it is strong: governments elected by 35% of eligible voters lack genuine popular legitimacy. The freedom argument is also real: the right not to vote is part of political freedom. What I'd advocate for instead is making voting significantly easier — postal voting, digital voting, automatic registration — so that low turnout reflects genuine disengagement rather than logistical barriers. Compulsion should be the last resort, not the first.

Interviewer: Can politicians ever be truly accountable?

Sample Response:

Partially, and the conditions for it are known: a free press with investigative resources, an independent judiciary, strong freedom of information laws, and a politically educated public. No system achieves perfect accountability, but the gap between the best- and worst-performing democracies is enormous — suggesting the conditions genuinely matter. The most honest answer is: politicians are accountable to the degree that citizens demand it.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'Civic indifference is a form of complicity' — a strong, memorable moral claim. Use with confidence.
- Q2: 'a toxic performance rather than meaningful deliberation' — precise description of political social media dynamics.
- Q3: 'logistical barriers' vs 'genuine disengagement' — an important distinction that elevates the analysis.
- Q4: 'politicians are accountable to the degree that citizens demand it' — a powerful democratic principle as a closer.

Q1

Do you feel safe in the neighbourhood where you live? What factors contribute to that feeling?

Q2

Some countries have very strict punishments for crime. Is punishment or rehabilitation more effective?

Q3

Cybercrime — hacking, scams, identity theft — is growing rapidly. How concerned are you personally?

Q4

Should cities install more CCTV cameras to reduce crime, even if it limits privacy?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?

Sample Response:

Generally yes. It's a fairly quiet residential area and serious crime is rare. What I'm more conscious of is lower-level things: bike theft is common, and I'm more careful about my phone and bag in busy areas than I was a few years ago. I think safety is also partly a function of community — knowing your neighbours, having eyes on the street. That social fabric matters as much as police presence, in my experience.

Interviewer: Punishment or rehabilitation — which is more effective?

Sample Response:

Rehabilitation, by a large margin — if the goal is reducing crime rather than satisfying retributive impulses. The countries with the lowest reoffending rates — the Nordic states — invest heavily in education, mental health support, and reintegration for prisoners. Their approach treats crime as a social failure to be corrected, not a moral transgression to be punished. The results speak for themselves: far lower crime rates and reoffending than punitive systems produce.

Interviewer: How concerned are you about cybercrime?**Sample Response:**

Fairly concerned — not paranoid, but cautious. I've tightened my passwords, enabled two-factor authentication everywhere, and I'm sceptical about clicking links in unexpected emails. The threat that concerns me most isn't targeted hacking — it's the industrial-scale phishing operations that catch people through volume rather than sophistication. Older people are particularly vulnerable, and I don't think societies are doing nearly enough to protect them.

Interviewer: More CCTV to reduce crime versus privacy?**Sample Response:**

Targeted CCTV with clear governance — yes. Blanket surveillance — no. There's good evidence that well-placed cameras in high-crime areas have genuine deterrence effects. But the expansion to facial recognition, predictive policing algorithms, and real-time tracking of movement crosses a line that a democratic society should be very reluctant to cross. The question isn't whether cameras work — it's what kind of society we're building when every movement is recorded.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'eyes on the street' is a reference to Jane Jacobs's urban planning theory — shows cultural and intellectual awareness.
- Q2: 'satisfying retributive impulses' — a precise, confident phrase for why punitive systems persist despite poor outcomes.
- Q3: 'industrial-scale phishing' — a specific, accurate description that shows genuine knowledge of cybersecurity.
- Q4: 'what kind of society we're building' — a philosophical frame that elevates a policy question to its real stakes.

Q1

In what ways has globalisation affected your personal life? What do you eat, wear, or listen to differently?

Q2

Has globalisation made the world a more equal or more unequal place?

Q3

Many local businesses and cultural traditions are being replaced by global brands. Should we try to protect them?

Q4

Some argue we are now 'global citizens' with responsibilities to the whole world. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How has globalisation affected your personal life?

Sample Response:

Profoundly — and in mostly invisible ways. The phone in my pocket was designed in America, assembled in China, runs software from dozens of countries, and connects me to people and content from everywhere simultaneously. My diet is international without me thinking about it. Even the music and films I consume are a mix of languages and traditions. Globalisation is the water I swim in, which is why its effects are so easy to overlook.

Interviewer: Has globalisation made the world more or less equal?

Sample Response:

More unequal within countries, somewhat less unequal between them. The big story is that hundreds of millions of people in East and South Asia have been lifted from poverty by integration into the global economy. The darker story is that within wealthy countries, the gains have concentrated at the top while manufacturing communities were hollowed out. Whether that's a net improvement depends on how you weigh those different groups — and that's a genuinely contested ethical question.

Interviewer: Should we try to protect local businesses and traditions from globalisation?

Sample Response:

Selectively, yes. Not through protectionism that creates inefficiency and raises prices, but through cultural investment: funding local arts, supporting independent businesses through procurement policy, protecting languages. Some things have genuine community value that market prices don't capture. A high street of only global chains is depressing and impoverishing in ways that GDP statistics miss entirely.

Interviewer: Are we global citizens with global responsibilities?

Sample Response:

I feel it more than I act on it, which is probably honest for most people. The concept is real: our consumption patterns affect workers in distant countries, our emissions affect people in low-lying nations, our political choices affect global institutions. Whether that creates enforceable obligations or just moral considerations is a harder question. But I do think the idea of pure national sovereignty — 'not our problem' — is increasingly untenable in an interconnected world.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'Globalisation is the water I swim in' — a David Foster Wallace reference used naturally. Culturally sophisticated.
- Q2: 'more unequal within, less unequal between' — a precise two-part summary of a complex debate. Highly effective.
- Q3: 'A high street of only global chains is depressing in ways GDP statistics miss' — concrete, memorable image.
- Q4: 'I feel it more than I act on it' — an honest admission that immediately sounds genuine. Authenticity is rewarded.

Q1

Have you ever experienced or witnessed gender inequality — at school, work, or in daily life?

Q2

Are men and women treated equally in your country's workforce? What still needs to change?

Q3

Should positive discrimination — giving preferential treatment to underrepresented groups — be used to achieve equality?

Q4

Gender roles have changed dramatically over the past century. Do traditional gender roles serve any positive purpose?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you experienced or witnessed gender inequality?

Sample Response:

Yes — in the workplace during an internship. There was a team where the female members contributed significantly to the strategy but were consistently spoken over in meetings, their ideas attributed to male colleagues who restated them more loudly. None of it was deliberate in a visible way — it was pattern, not malice. That's what makes gender inequality in professional contexts so persistent: it often lives in habits and assumptions rather than in explicit rules.

Interviewer: Are men and women treated equally in the workforce? What needs to change?

Sample Response:

Not yet. The pay gap has narrowed but persists, particularly at senior levels. Caregiving responsibilities — still disproportionately carried by women — continue to constrain career progression in ways that individual ambition alone can't overcome. What needs to change is structural: parental leave policies that genuinely encourage men to take time off, flexible work as a default rather than a concession, and pay transparency that makes discrimination visible.

Interviewer: Should positive discrimination be used to achieve equality?

Sample Response:

Targeted and temporary measures, yes. The argument against positive discrimination — that it's unfair to individuals — has merit in the abstract. But we don't live in the abstract. Systems that appear neutral have built-in advantages for certain groups. Corrective action is sometimes necessary to break patterns that perpetuate themselves. The key conditions are: targeted at specific barriers, measured against outcomes, and designed to be unnecessary once structural equality exists.

Interviewer: Do traditional gender roles serve any positive purpose?

Sample Response:

Some do, historically — they provided clear social scripts that reduced decision fatigue and maintained social cohesion in contexts where flexibility wasn't possible. But most traditional gender roles were also deeply restrictive, particularly for women, and that restriction carried a cost that those who benefited from the arrangement rarely had to pay. The question isn't whether they served some historical purpose — they clearly did. It's whether those purposes justify continuing them when the context has fundamentally changed.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'pattern, not malice' — a precise, important distinction that shows genuine understanding of systemic inequality.
- Q2: 'caregiving responsibilities still disproportionately carried by women' — specific, data-grounded observation.
- Q3: 'We don't live in the abstract' — a brilliant rhetorical move. Acknowledges the theory, then grounds the debate.
- Q4: 'those who benefited from the arrangement rarely had to pay the cost' — a historically accurate and sharp point.

Q1

Have you ever worked or studied remotely? What were the advantages and disadvantages?

Q2

Do you think working from home makes people more or less productive? Why?

Q3

Some companies are now requiring employees to return to the office full-time. Is this fair?

Q4

Will the future of work be fully remote, hybrid, or return to office? Explain your view.

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you worked or studied remotely?

Sample Response:

Yes — the last two years of my degree were hybrid, with most lectures online. The advantages were real: no commute, flexible scheduling, the ability to rewatch recordings. The disadvantages were also real: the casual conversations that happen naturally on campus — the ones that spark ideas or build relationships — largely disappeared. I missed the serendipity of physical proximity more than I expected. It made me realise how much of learning and collaboration happens in the informal margins of structured time.

Interviewer: Remote work: more or less productive?

Sample Response:

It varies so much by person and by role that any generalisation is suspect. The evidence overall is mixed — some studies show productivity gains from remote work, others show concentration and collaboration suffer. My own experience was: better for focused independent work, worse for anything collaborative or creative. That maps onto what most research suggests: remote works well for solo execution; it struggles to replicate the creative collision of people in the same room.

Interviewer: Is requiring full office attendance fair?

Sample Response:

It depends on what the job actually requires. For roles that are genuinely collaborative and place-dependent, requiring presence is reasonable. For roles where remote work demonstrably produces the same outcomes, a blanket return-to-office mandate feels more like managerial preference than operational necessity. The most defensible policy is role-specific: ask whether in-person presence is necessary for this work, not whether management feels more comfortable seeing people at desks.

Interviewer: What will the future of work look like — remote, hybrid, or office?

Sample Response:

Hybrid, almost certainly — but with wide variation by sector and role. The pandemic showed that remote work is possible at scale; it didn't show it was always preferable. Most organisations that are honest about the evidence will land on structured hybrid: certain days or activities in person, others remote. The fully remote model will persist in sectors where talent is scarce and global, and the full return-to-office model will persist wherever management equates presence with productivity.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'The serendipity of physical proximity' — an elevated, precise phrase for what remote work loses.
- Q2: 'creative collision of people in the same room' — a vivid, original metaphor.
- Risk-taking in metaphor pays off.
- Q3: 'managerial preference rather than operational necessity' — a precise distinction that shows analytical maturity.
- Q4: 'the pandemic showed remote work is possible; it didn't show it was always preferable' — clean logical distinction.

Q1

Have you personally used any AI tools — ChatGPT, image generators, voice assistants? What for?

Q2

Do you trust AI to make important decisions — in healthcare, law, or finance? Why or why not?

Q3

Should AI systems be required to clearly identify themselves as non-human in all interactions?

Q4

Is the rapid development of AI exciting, concerning, or both? Explain your personal view.

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: Have you used AI tools personally?

Sample Response:

Regularly. I use AI assistants for drafting, brainstorming, and summarising long documents. I've also used image generation tools out of curiosity. What strikes me is how quickly it went from feeling like a novelty to feeling indispensable — like the shift from finding information by going to a library to just searching online. The speed of that integration into daily intellectual work is genuinely historic, and I think most of us haven't fully processed what it means yet.

Interviewer: Do you trust AI for important decisions?

Sample Response:

As a decision-support tool — yes. As the final decision-maker — not yet, and maybe never fully. AI systems can process patterns and probabilities at scale that humans cannot. But they can also fail catastrophically in novel situations, and they reflect the biases of their training data in ways that aren't always visible. The appropriate model is: AI generates options and surfaces information; a human with full accountability makes the final call. Removing the human from consequential loops removes the accountability, which is dangerous.

Interviewer: Should AI identify itself as non-human?

Sample Response:

Absolutely, yes — and I'm surprised this is still a debate. Informed consent is a basic principle in any interaction: people have a right to know who — or what — they're talking to, particularly when they're sharing personal information or seeking advice. The commercial incentive to make AI seem human is real, but it doesn't override that principle. Transparency here isn't just ethical; it's foundational to maintaining trust in AI systems long-term.

Interviewer: Is rapid AI development exciting, concerning, or both?

Sample Response:

Both — and I'd be suspicious of anyone who answers confidently either way. The potential benefits are genuinely extraordinary: accelerating medical research, making education more accessible, solving problems at scales humans alone cannot. The risks are also real and not hypothetical: bias amplification, job displacement, concentration of power in a small number of companies, and longer-term alignment questions that serious researchers take seriously. The right response is engaged vigilance — not panic, not uncritical enthusiasm.

What to Learn From This Response

- 'Like the shift from library to search engine' — a specific, well-chosen historical analogy for AI adoption.
- Q2: 'Removing the human from consequential loops removes the accountability' — precise, original phrasing.
- Q3: 'I'm surprised this is still a debate' — confident, assertive opener. Shows clear personal stance immediately.
- Q4: 'engaged vigilance — not panic, not uncritical enthusiasm' — an elegant three-part conclusion. Memorable.

Q1

How do you generally take care of your mental health? What strategies help you the most?

Q2

Do you think there is still a stigma around mental health in your culture? Has this changed in recent years?

Q3

Should employers be required to provide mental health support and resources to their employees?

Q4

Some argue that social media is one of the biggest contributors to anxiety among young people. Do you agree?

Sample Responses — Band 5-6

Interviewer: How do you take care of your mental health?

Sample Response:

A combination of things. Exercise is probably the most reliable tool I have — even a 20-minute walk can shift my mood measurably. I also try to journal regularly, which helps me notice patterns in my thinking before they become problems. And I've learned to be much more protective of sleep — chronic tiredness is the single quickest way to degrade my mental state. It sounds unglamorous, but the basics — movement, sleep, social connection — outperform most other interventions.

Interviewer: Is there still stigma around mental health in your culture?

Sample Response:

Less than there was, but yes — it's still there, particularly in certain generations and communities. The public conversation has opened up enormously, which matters. But there's still a gap between talking about mental health in the abstract and actually supporting someone in your immediate circle who's struggling. People are better at sharing posts about mental health awareness than they are at sitting with someone who is genuinely not okay. Progress is real, but it's uneven.

Interviewer: Should employers provide mental health support?

Sample Response:

Yes, and increasingly it's in their direct self-interest to do so. Untreated mental health problems cost businesses enormously through absenteeism, reduced productivity, and turnover. Early intervention — accessible therapy, manageable workloads, a culture where people can say they're struggling without professional consequences — is far cheaper than replacing someone who burns out. The argument used to be altruistic; now it's also economic. Both are compelling.

Interviewer: Is social media one of the biggest contributors to anxiety among young people?

Sample Response:

A significant contributor — though I'd resist 'the biggest'. Social comparison has always caused anxiety; social media makes it constant, quantified, and inescapable. The specific mechanisms are well-documented: upward social comparison, cyberbullying, sleep disruption from phone use at night, and the anxiety of maintaining a curated online identity. These effects are real and serious. But economic insecurity, climate anxiety, and housing unaffordability also drive anxiety in young people — and those aren't caused by Instagram.

What to Learn From This Response

- Q1: 'the basics outperform most other interventions' — a confident, evidence-based claim that sounds authoritative.
- Q2: 'better at sharing posts than sitting with someone who's genuinely not okay' — a sharp, specific observation.
- Q3: 'The argument used to be altruistic; now it's also economic' — a structural shift in framing. Highly effective.
- Q4: 'constant, quantified, and inescapable' — a three-part description that is precise, rhythmic, and memorable.

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