

THE QUICK WRITING GUIDE

Writeology.

Discussion Writing

ARGUE WITH PRECISION · THINK WITH CLARITY

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TOEFL · WRITING · C1

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A

Understanding the Academic Discussion Prompt

What Does the Prompt Look Like?

The TOEFL Academic Writing Discussion task presents you with a short online course discussion board. The screen shows three pieces of text, each serving a specific role. Understanding each part is the first step to writing an effective response.

PART 1

The Professor's Question

The professor introduces a topic related to the course and poses a direct question to the class. This question is the most important element of the prompt. Your entire response must answer this question. The professor typically provides a brief context (2-3 sentences) and then asks for your opinion or analysis.

PART 2

Student Response A

A classmate (Student A) has already posted their response to the professor's question. Their response represents one viewpoint and includes a reason or brief explanation. You may agree with, disagree with, build upon, or contrast this student's ideas - but your response should go beyond simply repeating what they said.

PART 3

Student Response B

A second classmate (Student B) has posted a different or similar response. Like Student A, this response offers a perspective and some support. Engaging with one or both student responses - either to agree, disagree, or add nuance - strengthens your contribution to the discussion.

A Realistic Example of a Full Prompt

Your professor is teaching a class on Education and Technology. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Lee:

We have been exploring the relationship between technology and education this week. Many schools are now integrating artificial intelligence tools into the classroom to personalise learning for each student. Do you think this is a positive development for education? Why or why not? I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Marcus:

I believe AI in education is a very positive development. It allows teachers to identify struggling students early and tailor instruction to individual needs. A student who is falling behind in mathematics can receive targeted practice exercises, while advanced students are challenged appropriately. This kind of personalised learning was simply not possible at scale before AI.

Aisha:

I have mixed feelings about this. While AI can certainly help with personalisation, I worry that too much reliance on technology removes the human connection that is so important in education. Teaching is not just about delivering content - it is about mentoring, motivating, and understanding students as whole people. AI cannot replicate that.

Key Observation

Notice that the two students have expressed different opinions. Your job is NOT to simply pick one and agree with them. Instead, you should add something new - a fresh argument, an example, a nuance, or a counterpoint - that advances the conversation.

The professor's question is always your primary target. Read it carefully before reading the students' responses, then let their posts inform how you shape your contribution.

B What the Test Expects You to Do

Your Core Task

The Academic Writing Discussion task is simulating a real-world academic environment: an online discussion board used in a university course. Your goal is to write a post that contributes meaningfully to the ongoing conversation. ETS is assessing your ability to communicate in an academic setting, not simply to demonstrate knowledge of a topic.

Express a clear opinion

You must take a position on the question. Vague or neutral responses that avoid committing to a view will be penalised. Your opinion should be clearly stated, ideally early in your response.

Support your opinion with reasons

A bare opinion is not enough. You need to explain why you hold that view. This means providing reasons, explanations, examples, or evidence. At least one well-developed supporting argument is expected.

Contribute to the discussion

Your post should add something to what has already been said. This does not mean you must disagree with the students - you can agree and add new supporting reasons - but you should not simply copy or paraphrase their ideas.

Write at least 100 words

ETS requires a minimum of 100 words. Most strong responses are between 120 and 180 words. Going significantly over 200 words is generally unnecessary and may introduce more errors.

Complete the task within 10 minutes

You have exactly 10 minutes. This means you need to read quickly, plan briefly, write efficiently, and review at the end. Time management is crucial.

What You Are NOT Required to Do

You do NOT need to write a formal essay with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

You do NOT need to reference academic sources or cite research (this is a discussion post, not a paper).

You do NOT need to address both students' responses directly - though engaging with at least one of them is good practice.

You do NOT need to use sophisticated or rare vocabulary. Clear, accurate, and varied language is more important than obscure words.

You do NOT need to be neutral. Taking a clear position is expected and rewarded.

The Three Non-Negotiables

Non-Negotiable	What It Means in Practice
Relevance	Every sentence must relate to the professor's question. Off-topic content scores zero - even if it is well-written.
Development	You must explain and justify your view. Stating an opinion without any support will cap your score at 2-3.
Language accuracy	Frequent grammar or vocabulary errors that confuse the reader will significantly reduce your score, even if your ideas are good.

C What TOEFL Is Evaluating

The Four Dimensions of Assessment

ETS evaluates your Academic Writing Discussion response using four interconnected dimensions. Understanding what each dimension focuses on will help you target your preparation and avoid common mistakes that unnecessarily lower scores.

1

Completion and Relevance

Does your response answer the professor's question?

This is the most fundamental requirement. Your post must be on-topic and must directly address what the professor asked. A beautifully written response on a related but different topic will still receive a low score.

Are all key aspects of the question addressed?

Some questions ask for both an opinion and a reason, or ask you to compare two things. Make sure you cover all parts of what is asked.

Does your response make a genuine contribution?

ETS looks for posts that advance the discussion, not ones that merely repeat what the students said in different words.

2

Development and Support

How well are your ideas developed?

A strong response moves beyond a simple statement. It explains, elaborates, illustrates with an example, or anticipates a counterargument.

Is your support relevant and convincing?

Your reasons should logically connect to your opinion. Irrelevant or contradictory support weakens your score.

Is there enough depth?

Minimum-word responses that barely scratch the surface of the topic will be scored lower than responses that genuinely develop one or two ideas well.

3

Coherence and Organization

Is the response logically organized?

Even in a short post, there should be a logical flow - typically: position statement, explanation/support, optional reference to students or broader context.

Are ideas connected with appropriate language?

The use of transition words, discourse markers, and cohesive devices helps the reader follow your argument smoothly.

Is the response easy to read?

Choppy, disconnected sentences or a confusing structure will reduce your coherence score.

4

Language Use

Grammar accuracy

Frequent errors in subject-verb agreement, tense, articles, or prepositions signal lower language proficiency. Occasional minor errors are acceptable.

Vocabulary range and precision

Using a variety of accurate vocabulary - including collocations and topic-specific terms - demonstrates stronger English ability than repeating the same basic words.

Register and tone

Academic discussion posts require a semi-formal register. Avoid slang, text-message abbreviations, and overly casual expressions. Contractions are generally acceptable.

Important Balance

All four dimensions are evaluated together. A response with perfect grammar but no real development will score 3. A response with excellent ideas but constant grammar errors will also be capped. Aim for consistent performance across all four areas.

Of the four, "Completion and Relevance" is the most critical. You cannot compensate for being off-topic with great language.

D Scoring Criteria and Band Descriptors

The 0-6 Scoring Scale

Your Academic Writing Discussion response is scored on a scale of 0 to 6. This score contributes to your overall Writing section score. The table below provides the complete descriptor for each band level. Target a score of 5 or 6.

Score	Level	Performance Descriptor
6	Outstanding	The response fully and effectively addresses the task. Ideas are highly developed, coherent, and well-supported. Language use is precise, varied, and sophisticated, with only negligible errors. The response makes a significant and original contribution to the discussion.
5	Strong	The response clearly addresses the task with well-developed ideas and adequate support. Organization is clear and mostly coherent. Language is generally accurate and varied, with only minor errors that do not affect communication. The response contributes meaningfully to the discussion.
4	Adequate	The response addresses the task but development may be uneven or ideas only partially supported. Organization is generally clear. Some errors in grammar or vocabulary may occasionally affect clarity. The response contributes adequately to the discussion.
3	Limited	The response addresses the task only partially. Development is limited or unclear. Errors in grammar and vocabulary are noticeable and may sometimes impede understanding. The contribution to the discussion is limited or repetitive.
2	Weak	The response attempts the task with limited success. Development is poor. Frequent errors in grammar and vocabulary significantly impede communication. The contribution to the discussion is minimal or off-point.
1	Very Weak	The response shows very little ability to address the task. Pervasive language errors severely impede communication. The contribution to the discussion is negligible.
0	No Credit	No response, response written in another language, response is entirely off-topic, or only copies the prompt.

Distinguishing Between Score Levels

Understanding the key differences between adjacent score levels helps you focus on what matters most:

6	vs	5	A score of 6 requires not just accuracy but sophistication. The language should be varied and precise. Ideas should be developed with nuance. The contribution to the discussion should feel genuinely insightful, not formulaic. A score of 5 shows competence and clarity but may feel slightly mechanical or contain minor rough edges.
5	vs	4	The jump from 4 to 5 is primarily about the depth of development and consistency of language. A score of 4 response may state a position and give one reason, but the reason might be underdeveloped or the language inconsistently accurate. A score of 5 delivers its argument more completely and with greater linguistic control.
4	vs	3	A score of 3 response typically misses part of what was asked, has ideas that are hard to follow due to poor organisation or language errors, or makes only a superficial contribution. A score of 4 at least covers the main question and is generally comprehensible, even if imperfectly.
3	vs	2	At score 2, language errors become so frequent that the reader must work hard to understand the message. At score 3, the message is mostly clear despite errors. The difference is one of comprehensibility - can a reader follow what you mean?

Your Target

If you are aiming for a competitive TOEFL score, you need at least 5 on this task. The good news is that a score of 5 is achievable with consistent practice. It does not require perfect English - it requires clear communication, a developed argument, and generally accurate language.

A score of 6 requires you to go beyond the template. You need to show genuine intellectual engagement and linguistic sophistication. Study the score-6 qualities in the sample responses in Section I of this book.

E Proven Test-Taking Strategy

The 10-Minute Game Plan

With only 10 minutes for this task, every second counts. The following strategy has been designed to maximise your score within the time constraint. Practice this routine until it becomes automatic.

1 min

Read Strategically

- Read the professor's question FIRST and underline or note the key question being asked.
- Read Student A's response quickly - note their main point in one word.
- Read Student B's response quickly - note their main point in one word.
- Ask yourself: Do I agree with A, B, neither, or both? Where can I add something new?

1.5 min

Plan Your Response

- Decide on your position: agree / disagree / partial agreement.
- Choose ONE or TWO supporting points. More is not better in 10 minutes.
- Think of a brief example or explanation for each point.
- Decide if you will reference one of the students' posts (recommended but not required).
- Draft a quick opening sentence in your head.

7 min

Write Your Response

- Open with a clear position statement (1-2 sentences).
- Develop your first point with an explanation and/or example (2-3 sentences).
- If you have a second point, develop it briefly (1-2 sentences).
- Optionally: respond to one student's point to show you are contributing to the discussion.
- Close with a brief concluding statement (1 sentence).
- Aim for 120-160 words.

0.5 min

Review and Edit

- Quickly re-read your response.
- Fix any obvious grammar errors (especially subject-verb agreement, tense consistency).
- Check that you have answered the professor's question directly.
- Correct any misspellings you notice.

Response Templates and Opening Formulas

Having flexible templates for different question types saves precious planning time. The key is adapting these to the specific question rather than using them robotically.

When you **AGREE** with the professor's implied direction

I firmly believe that [position]. [Reason 1], which means that [explanation]. For instance, [brief example]. While [Student Name] rightly points out that [their point], I would add that [your additional point]. Ultimately, [brief closing statement].

When you **DISAGREE** or take the opposite view

Although [common view or student's view], I would argue that [your opposing position]. This is because [reason], as demonstrated by [example or explanation]. Furthermore, [second supporting point if available]. For these reasons, I believe that [restate your position].

When you take a **BALANCED / NUANCED** position

The question of [topic] is genuinely complex. While [Student A]'s point about [their idea] is valid, I think [your position] is ultimately more important. [Reason + explanation]. That said, [acknowledge the other side briefly]. On balance, therefore, [your conclusion].

When you want to **EXTEND** a student's idea

Building on [Student Name]'s observation that [their point], I would suggest that [your extended or related point]. This is particularly relevant because [reason/explanation]. [Optional example]. For this reason, I strongly support [position].

Power Openings: First-Sentence Starters

Your first sentence sets the tone and signals to the rater that you know what you are doing. Use one of these formulas:

Type		Formula / Example
Opinion-first		I firmly believe / I strongly argue / I am convinced that + [your position].
Framing opinion	+	The issue of [topic] is one that I feel strongly about, and I believe that [position].
Acknowledge counter	+	While it is true that [concession], I would argue that [your position].
Reference student	a	Building on [Name]'s point, I think that [your position or extension].
Question answer	+	[Rhetorical question]? In my view, [your direct answer].
Context position	+	[Brief context about the topic]. For this reason, I believe that [position].

F Step-by-Step Writing Guide

The Anatomy of a High-Scoring Response

A strong Academic Writing Discussion response has a clear internal structure, even though it is not a formal essay. Think of it as three functional zones, each serving a distinct purpose.

Zone 1: The Position Statement

Approximate length: 1-2 sentences

Clearly state your opinion in response to the professor's question. Be direct. Avoid hedging or being vague here. The rater needs to know immediately what you think.

- *I firmly believe that [position].*
- *In my view, [position] for several important reasons.*
- *I would argue that [position], and I think this matters because [brief reason].*

Zone 2: The Development

Approximate length: 3-5 sentences

This is the core of your response and where most of your score is earned. Develop your supporting argument with explanation, elaboration, and if possible, a concrete example. One well-developed point is better than three underdeveloped ones.

- *State your main reason: "This is primarily because..."*
- *Explain the mechanism or logic: "This means that..." / "As a result..."*
- *Add an example or evidence: "For instance..." / "Consider the case of..."*
- *Optional second point: "Furthermore..." / "Additionally..."*
- *Engage with student if relevant: "While [Name] suggests X, I think Y because..."*

Zone 3: The Conclusion

Approximate length: 1-2 sentences

Briefly close your response by restating your position or pointing towards a broader implication. Keep this short - do not introduce new arguments here.

- *For these reasons, I am confident that [position].*
- *Ultimately, [position], and this is why it deserves careful consideration.*
- *In conclusion, [position]. The evidence strongly supports this view.*

Sentence-Level Writing Techniques

Using a variety of sentence structures improves your language score. Practice these patterns:

Concession-argument

Pattern: Although / While + [concession], + [main argument].

Example: Although some argue that standardised testing is necessary, I believe it places unfair pressure on students.

Cause and effect

Pattern: [Cause / reason], which means that / which leads to + [effect].

Example: AI is increasingly capable of performing routine tasks, which means that workers in manual sectors face genuine displacement.

Conditional

Pattern: If + [condition], + [consequence]; this would / could [result].

Example: If governments invested more in renewable energy, we would see a dramatic reduction in carbon emissions within a generation.

Comparative

Pattern: [Option A] is [adjective] than [Option B] because / given that + [reason].

Example: Online education is far more accessible than traditional schooling, given that it removes geographical and financial barriers.

Hypothetical

Pattern: Consider a situation in which + [scenario]. In this case, + [your point].

Example: Consider a situation in which a student has a learning disability. In this case, personalised AI-driven instruction could be transformative.

Anticipating counterarguments

Pattern: Critics might argue that + [counterpoint]. However, + [your rebuttal].

Example: Critics might argue that raising the minimum wage causes unemployment. However, research from multiple countries suggests that moderate increases have little negative employment effect.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Mistake	How to Fix It
Simply agreeing with a student	Add a new reason, example, or nuance. Do not just restate their words.
Writing a long introduction	Get to your position in the first sentence. There is no time for lengthy warm-ups.
Using informal language	Avoid slang, abbreviations, and overly casual phrasing. Maintain a semi-formal tone.
Listing points without development	Choose one or two points and develop them. Three underdeveloped points score lower than one well-argued one.
Ignoring the professor's question	Always tie your argument back to what the professor actually asked.
Writing too much	Responses over 220 words often contain more errors and lose focus. Quality over quantity.
Starting every sentence with "I"	Vary your sentence openings. Use transitions, phrases, and different grammatical structures.
Using the same vocabulary repeatedly	Use synonyms and paraphrases. If you use "important" in sentence 1, use "significant" or "crucial" later.

G

Transition Devices and Academic Language Tools

Transition Words and Discourse Markers by Function

Transition words do more than connect sentences - they signal the logical relationship between ideas. Using them correctly and varying them demonstrates language competence. The following tables group transitions by their function in academic writing.

Adding Information

Transition	Function and Example
Furthermore	Adds a point of equal or greater importance: "...is effective. Furthermore, it is cost-efficient."
Moreover	Strengthens a previous point: "The policy reduces costs. Moreover, it improves outcomes."
In addition	Introduces a supplementary point: "In addition to the financial benefits, there are social advantages."
Additionally	Neutral addition: "The system is reliable. Additionally, it is easy to maintain."
What is more	Emphasises the additional point: "The solution is effective. What is more, it requires minimal resources."
Not only...but also	Highlights two related points together: "This approach is not only efficient but also equitable."
Beyond this	Introduces a further consideration: "Beyond this, there is the question of long-term sustainability."

Contrasting and Conceding

Transition	Function and Example
However	Introduces a contrasting point: "The idea has merit. However, implementation remains challenging."
Nevertheless	Concedes a point but maintains position: "The costs are high. Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh them."
On the other hand	Presents an alternative perspective: "On the other hand, some would argue that..."
In contrast	Highlights a difference: "In contrast to traditional methods, this approach..."
Despite this	Acknowledges a contrary fact but continues: "Despite this, the evidence supports..."

Although / While	Introduces a concession within a sentence: "Although this view has merit, I believe..."
Notwithstanding	Formal concession: "Notwithstanding the challenges involved, the proposal remains viable."
Even so	Maintains position after acknowledging a concession: "Even so, the advantages are clear."

Showing Cause and Effect

Transition	Function and Example
Therefore	Draws a conclusion: "The data is inconsistent. Therefore, further research is needed."
As a result	States the consequence: "Regulations were tightened. As a result, pollution levels fell."
Consequently	Formal cause-effect: "The budget was cut; consequently, services were reduced."
Hence	Formal: "The evidence is inconclusive; hence, a definitive answer is difficult."
Thus	Concise cause-effect: "Demand increased; thus, prices rose."
For this reason	Introduces the logical conclusion: "For this reason, I strongly support the proposal."
This leads to	Describes a chain of causation: "Prolonged stress leads to reduced productivity."
As a consequence	Consequence of a previous fact: "As a consequence of poor planning, the project failed."

Giving Examples

Transition	Function and Example
For instance	Introduces a specific example: "For instance, Finland has implemented this policy with success."
For example	General example marker: "For example, students in rural areas benefit the most."
To illustrate	Introduces a clarifying example: "To illustrate, consider a university student with a disability."
Such as	Lists specific types: "Skills such as critical thinking and communication are highly valued."
A case in point is	Introduces a strong, relevant example: "A case in point is the rapid adoption of electric vehicles."
To demonstrate	Introduces evidence: "To demonstrate, research from 2023 showed that..."
Specifically	Narrows to a particular aspect: "Specifically, the data shows a 30% reduction in costs."

Emphasising

Transition	Function and Example
Indeed	Strongly affirms a point: "Indeed, this is one of the most pressing challenges of our time."
In fact	Reinforces or surprises: "In fact, the opposite is true in many documented cases."
Notably	Highlights a significant point: "Notably, the countries with the highest investment also show..."
Crucially	Marks the most important point: "Crucially, the policy must be implemented consistently."
Above all	Identifies the most important element: "Above all, fairness must be the guiding principle."
It is worth noting that	Draws attention to a point: "It is worth noting that this trend has accelerated significantly."
Of particular importance	Formal emphasis: "Of particular importance is the role of education in this process."

Concluding

Transition	Function and Example
In conclusion	Signals the end of an argument: "In conclusion, the evidence clearly supports this position."
Ultimately	Suggests the final, most important consideration: "Ultimately, the decision must prioritise human welfare."
Overall	Summarises broadly: "Overall, the benefits significantly outweigh the drawbacks."
To summarise	Recaps the argument: "To summarise, this approach is both practical and ethically sound."
For these reasons	Ties together multiple arguments: "For these reasons, I firmly support the proposed changes."
All things considered	Balanced conclusion: "All things considered, the advantages make this the preferable option."
In sum	Concise summary: "In sum, the data strongly favours a policy change."

Academic Stance Markers

Use these phrases to express your position with appropriate academic register:

Expressing opinion

- *I firmly believe that...*
- *I would argue that...*
- *It is my contention that...*
- *I am of the opinion that...*
- *From my perspective,...*
- *In my view,...*
- *I am convinced that...*
- *I hold the view that...*

Hedging appropriately

- *It could be argued that...*
- *There is reason to believe that...*
- *It seems likely that...*
- *Evidence suggests that...*
- *This appears to indicate that...*
- *One might argue that...*
- *It is possible that...*

Engaging with students

- *Building on [Name]'s point,...*
- *[Name] makes a valid point about...*
- *I share [Name]'s view that...*
- *While I understand [Name]'s concern,...*
- *I respectfully disagree with [Name]'s assertion that...*
- *Unlike [Name], I believe that...*
- *To extend [Name]'s argument,...*

Acknowledging complexity

- *The issue is admittedly complex,...*
- *Admittedly,...*
- *It is true that..., however,...*
- *There is some merit in the argument that...*
- *While both sides have valid points,...*

H

Essential Collocations by Topic

What Are Collocations and Why Do They Matter?

A collocation is a natural combination of words that native speakers use together. Using correct collocations makes your writing sound fluent and natural. Using wrong combinations (e.g., "make a mistake" vs. "do a mistake") signals lower language proficiency. The following lists are organised by common TOEFL discussion topics.

Education and Learning

Collocation	In Context
pursue higher education	pursue higher education at a prestigious university
acquire knowledge / skills	students acquire both knowledge and practical skills
foster critical thinking	universities should foster critical thinking in all disciplines
narrow the achievement gap	policies must do more to narrow the achievement gap
gain a competitive edge	students gain a competitive edge through bilingual education
promote lifelong learning	a good system promotes lifelong learning
improve academic performance	tutoring programmes improve academic performance significantly
deliver quality education	funding is essential to deliver quality education
broaden one's horizons	studying abroad helps students broaden their horizons
meet academic standards	all students deserve the support needed to meet academic standards
close the skills gap	industry partnerships help close the skills gap
engage in meaningful learning	technology can help students engage in more meaningful learning
receive a well-rounded education	children benefit from receiving a well-rounded education
conduct research	graduate students are expected to conduct independent research
take a multidisciplinary approach	solving complex problems requires a multidisciplinary approach

Technology and Innovation

Collocation	In Context
harness the power of technology	we must harness the power of technology responsibly
drive innovation	investment in research and development drives innovation
pose a significant threat	automation poses a significant threat to unskilled workers
disrupt traditional industries	digital platforms have disrupted traditional industries
bridge the digital divide	policy must actively bridge the digital divide
raise ethical concerns	facial recognition technology raises serious ethical concerns
accelerate technological progress	international collaboration accelerates technological progress
rely heavily on technology	modern economies rely heavily on technology infrastructure
deploy artificial intelligence	hospitals are beginning to deploy artificial intelligence in diagnosis
ensure data privacy	companies must do more to ensure data privacy
adopt new technologies	small businesses are slow to adopt new technologies
monitor online activity	governments increasingly seek to monitor online activity
enhance productivity	digital tools significantly enhance productivity in the workplace
face cybersecurity threats	critical infrastructure must be protected from cybersecurity threats
develop cutting-edge solutions	tech firms compete to develop cutting-edge solutions

Environment and Sustainability

Collocation	In Context
tackle climate change	world leaders must act urgently to tackle climate change
reduce carbon emissions	transitioning to renewables is the fastest way to reduce carbon emissions
adopt sustainable practices	businesses are under pressure to adopt sustainable practices
protect biodiversity	protecting biodiversity is essential to ecosystem stability
impose environmental regulations	governments must impose stricter environmental regulations
achieve net-zero emissions	most nations have pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050
deplete natural resources	overconsumption continues to deplete natural resources
promote renewable energy	incentives are needed to promote renewable energy adoption
address environmental degradation	a global framework is needed to address environmental degradation
raise environmental awareness	schools play a key role in raising environmental awareness
implement green policies	the government has committed to implementing green policies
mitigate the effects of climate change	urban planning can help mitigate the effects of climate change
place a heavy burden on the environment	industrial agriculture places a heavy burden on the environment
balance economic growth with sustainability	developing nations struggle to balance growth with sustainability
invest in clean energy	trillions of dollars need to be invested in clean energy infrastructure

Economy and Employment

Collocation	In Context
stimulate economic growth	tax incentives are designed to stimulate economic growth
create job opportunities	manufacturing investment creates job opportunities in deprived regions
reduce income inequality	progressive taxation is one tool used to reduce income inequality
boost productivity	flexible working arrangements can significantly boost productivity
face unemployment	young graduates increasingly face unemployment in saturated markets
raise the minimum wage	raising the minimum wage improves living standards for the lowest earners
generate revenue	tourism generates significant revenue for developing economies
address the wealth gap	meaningful reform is needed to address the wealth gap
attract foreign investment	stable governance helps countries attract foreign investment
enter the labour market	graduates face significant challenges when entering the labour market
achieve financial independence	financial literacy helps young people achieve financial independence
impose trade restrictions	imposing trade restrictions can harm long-term economic relationships
undergo economic restructuring	the region has undergone significant economic restructuring
close the pay gap	legislation alone is insufficient to close the pay gap
bear the financial cost	taxpayers should not be asked to bear the full financial cost

Society and Culture

Collocation	In Context
promote social cohesion	inclusive education policies promote social cohesion
address systemic inequality	real progress requires addressing deep-rooted systemic inequality
preserve cultural heritage	globalisation can both threaten and help preserve cultural heritage
foster a sense of community	urban design should aim to foster a stronger sense of community
challenge social norms	progressive movements have the power to challenge entrenched social norms
combat discrimination	legislation alone is not enough to fully combat discrimination
uphold human rights	democratic governments are obliged to uphold human rights
strengthen social bonds	community events strengthen social bonds and reduce isolation
integrate into society	refugees need targeted support to integrate into their new society
promote gender equality	workplace policies must do more to promote genuine gender equality
bridge cultural divides	education can play a vital role in bridging cultural divides
marginalise vulnerable groups	inadequate housing policies can marginalise vulnerable groups
erode social values	unchecked commercialisation risks eroding core social values
build social capital	volunteering programmes help build social capital in communities
tackle social exclusion	targeted interventions are needed to tackle social exclusion

Health and Medicine

Collocation	In Context
improve public health	investment in preventive care is the best way to improve public health
address mental health issues	schools need dedicated resources to address mental health issues
adopt a healthy lifestyle	campaigns encouraging people to adopt a healthy lifestyle have proven effective
strain healthcare systems	an ageing population places increasing strain on healthcare systems
conduct clinical trials	new drugs must undergo extensive clinical trials before approval
raise health awareness	social media has been used effectively to raise health awareness
tackle the obesity crisis	a multi-pronged approach is needed to tackle the obesity crisis
provide universal healthcare	many economists argue governments should provide universal healthcare
reduce health disparities	addressing poverty is essential to reduce persistent health disparities
prioritise preventive medicine	modern health systems must prioritise preventive medicine
suffer from chronic illness	millions of people suffer from chronic illnesses that could be prevented
allocate healthcare resources	deciding how to allocate healthcare resources is an ethical challenge
develop effective treatments	continued funding is needed to develop effective treatments for rare diseases
experience mental health struggles	one in four people will experience mental health struggles at some point
promote physical activity	urban planning should be designed to promote physical activity

Government and Policy

Collocation	In Context
implement effective policies	governments must implement effective policies to address inequality
pass legislation	it took years of advocacy to pass the landmark legislation
enforce regulations	agencies responsible for enforcing regulations are often underfunded
address policy failures	the commission was set up specifically to address past policy failures
allocate public funds	decisions about how to allocate public funds are inherently political
hold governments accountable	a free press is essential for holding governments accountable
tackle corruption	independent judiciaries are vital for tackling corruption effectively
reform the education system	successive governments have tried and failed to reform the education system
protect civil liberties	any security measure must be balanced against the need to protect civil liberties
conduct public consultations	major infrastructure projects should be preceded by thorough public consultations
draw up a national strategy	the committee was tasked with drawing up a comprehensive national strategy
reduce public spending	austerity measures to reduce public spending proved deeply controversial
set a legal precedent	the court's ruling is likely to set an important legal precedent
engage in diplomatic negotiations	both parties agreed to engage in diplomatic negotiations
bridge the partisan divide	the crisis provided a rare opportunity to bridge the partisan divide

Science and Research

Collocation	In Context
conduct a study / experiment	researchers conducted a double-blind study to test the hypothesis
draw conclusions from	it is premature to draw firm conclusions from such limited data
challenge existing theories	the findings challenge several long-standing existing theories
make a significant breakthrough	the team made a significant breakthrough in cancer immunotherapy
gather empirical evidence	policymakers must gather empirical evidence before acting
replicate research findings	the inability to replicate research findings undermines confidence in the results
publish peer-reviewed research	conclusions should be based on published peer-reviewed research
advance scientific knowledge	international collaboration is essential to advance scientific knowledge
raise ethical questions	genetic engineering inevitably raises profound ethical questions
fund scientific research	governments must continue to fund basic scientific research generously
adopt a scientific approach	decision-making in public health must adopt a rigorous scientific approach
bridge the gap between theory and practice	applied research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice
rely on anecdotal evidence	policy should never rely solely on anecdotal evidence
undergo clinical validation	every new medical device must undergo rigorous clinical validation
spark a debate	the publication of the findings sparked an immediate international debate

Media and Communication

Collocation	In Context
spread misinformation	social media platforms have been used to spread dangerous misinformation
hold to account	a free press is the public's most important tool for holding power to account
shape public opinion	the media has an enormous capacity to shape public opinion on key issues
exercise freedom of the press	democracies must protect the right to exercise freedom of the press
consume media critically	schools should teach students to consume media critically
amplify marginalised voices	digital platforms can amplify marginalised voices that traditional media ignores
combat fake news	media literacy programmes are essential to combat the spread of fake news
maintain editorial independence	public broadcasters must maintain editorial independence from political pressure
challenge the dominant narrative	investigative journalists play a vital role in challenging the dominant narrative
raise public awareness	documentaries have proven highly effective at raising public awareness of climate issues
engage a wider audience	social media allows researchers to engage a much wider audience than academic journals
distort the truth	sensationalist reporting distorts the truth and erodes public trust
regulate media ownership	concentration of ownership requires stronger regulation to regulate media ownership
foster informed citizenship	quality journalism is indispensable for fostering informed citizenship
breach journalistic ethics	publishing unverified allegations constitutes a clear breach of journalistic ethics

Urban Development and Housing

Collocation	In Context
tackle the housing crisis	multiple cities are struggling to tackle an acute housing crisis
drive up property prices	speculative investment continues to drive up property prices in major cities
improve urban infrastructure	sustained investment is needed to improve ageing urban infrastructure
promote sustainable development	planning authorities must promote sustainable development in all new projects
address homelessness	a comprehensive strategy is required to address the growing problem of homelessness
revitalise deprived areas	targeted funding has been used to revitalise several deprived urban areas
ease the burden on public transport	cycle lanes and pedestrian zones ease the burden on public transport
build affordable housing	local authorities are under pressure to build more genuinely affordable housing
reduce urban sprawl	mixed-use zoning policies can help reduce harmful urban sprawl
increase population density	vertical construction is one strategy to increase population density sustainably
attract private investment	infrastructure development is crucial to attract private investment to the region
displace local communities	large-scale gentrification can displace local communities from their neighbourhoods
improve quality of life	access to green space dramatically improves urban quality of life
meet planning regulations	all new developments must fully meet current planning regulations
regenerate inner-city areas	the government pledged to regenerate neglected inner-city areas within a decade

Ethics and Philosophy

Collocation	In Context
raise moral concerns	the use of autonomous weapons raises serious moral concerns
weigh the costs and benefits	policymakers must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of any intervention
violate human dignity	any policy that violates fundamental human dignity is ethically indefensible
uphold ethical standards	professionals in all fields are obliged to uphold rigorous ethical standards
take a principled stance	the organisation took a principled stance on the use of child labour
resolve ethical dilemmas	there is rarely a formula for resolving complex ethical dilemmas
conflict with personal values	mandatory vaccination policies may conflict with deeply held personal values
act in good conscience	individuals must ultimately act in good conscience even when laws are silent
justify the means	the question is whether the desired outcomes can ever justify the means
bear moral responsibility	corporations that knowingly cause environmental harm bear clear moral responsibility
respect individual autonomy	any paternalistic policy must be carefully balanced against respect for individual autonomy
serve the common good	leaders are elected to serve the common good, not private interests
draw an ethical line	society must draw an ethical line at using genetic technology to enhance intelligence
challenge moral assumptions	philosophical inquiry helps us challenge our deepest moral assumptions
promote social justice	redistribution policies are justified on the grounds of promoting social justice

I

Discussion Samples with Score Analysis

Each sample below presents a complete TOEFL Academic Writing Discussion prompt in the exact format used in the exam. A model response targeting a score of at least 5/6 is provided, followed by a detailed explanation of why the response achieves that score. Study both the response and the analysis carefully.

How to Use These Samples

Before reading the model response, try to write your own answer in 10 minutes.

Compare your response to the model: Where did you develop ideas well? Where was the model stronger?

Read the score analysis and identify the specific features that earned the high score.

Rewrite your own response incorporating what you have learned, then check it again.

Your professor is teaching a class on Education – Remote Learning. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Hayes:

This week we have been examining how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped education globally. Many schools shifted to remote learning and some continue to use hybrid models today. In your opinion, should universities make online learning a permanent and significant part of their programmes? Please share your view and explain your reasoning.

Daniel:

I think online learning should definitely be a permanent feature. It gives students flexibility to study at their own pace and removes barriers like commuting. Many students hold part-time jobs and remote options make education far more accessible.

Sophia:

I disagree. University is about more than just content delivery. The social experience, campus life, group discussions, and face-to-face mentorship are irreplaceable. Moving everything online would hollow out the university experience.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I firmly believe that online learning should become a permanent, if carefully balanced, component of university programmes. Daniel is right that flexibility and accessibility are major advantages — a working parent or a student with a disability, for instance, may simply be unable to attend every lecture in person. Denying these students the option of remote learning effectively denies them access to education itself. That said, I share Sophia's concern about losing the richness of campus interaction. The solution, however, is not to reject online learning but to design a thoughtful hybrid model: core seminars and collaborative projects remain in-person, while recorded lectures and supplementary materials are available online. Several leading universities have already demonstrated that this balance is achievable. Ultimately, the goal of higher education is to maximise learning for the widest possible range of students, and a well-designed hybrid model serves that goal better than an exclusively in-person approach.

Score Analysis

This response earns a 5 for several clear reasons. Completion: it directly answers the professor's question about whether online learning should be permanent, and takes a clear, nuanced position. Development: the response develops the accessibility argument with a concrete example (working parent, student with disability) and anticipates a counterargument, offering a constructive solution (hybrid model). Coherence: the argument flows logically from position to evidence to solution to conclusion. Language: vocabulary is varied and accurate ("hollowed out the university experience" is paraphrased rather than copied; "thoughtful hybrid model," "maximise learning"). The response engages meaningfully with both students. The reason it does not reach a 6 is that the "hybrid model" point, while valid, is not fully explored — a score-6 response would add more specificity or intellectual depth here.

Sample 2

Technology – Social Media and Mental Health

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Technology – Social Media and Mental Health. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Okafor:

We have been exploring the relationship between social media use and psychological wellbeing this week. Studies show that heavy social media use correlates with higher rates of anxiety and depression among young people, yet these platforms also offer community and connection. Should governments regulate social media to protect mental health? Explain your position.

Ethan:

Yes, absolutely. Platforms are designed to be addictive and they profit from keeping users engaged as long as possible, regardless of the harm caused. Governments need to step in with age restrictions and time limits, just as they regulate alcohol and tobacco.

Fatima:

I am not sure government regulation is the right answer. The internet is global and very hard to regulate effectively. I think the better approach is digital literacy education — teaching young people to use social media responsibly rather than trying to control what they can access.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

I strongly support government regulation of social media, though I believe the most effective approach combines regulation with the education Fatima advocates. The core problem is a fundamental power imbalance: billion-dollar corporations employ teams of psychologists and engineers specifically to maximise the time users — including children — spend on their platforms, while individuals are left to navigate these systems alone. Expecting young people to simply "use social media responsibly" without any structural safeguards is, in my view, unrealistic and unfair. Ethan's comparison to alcohol regulation is apt: we do not rely solely on education to keep alcohol away from minors — we impose legal age limits and enforce them. Similarly, mandatory design standards limiting algorithmic amplification of harmful content would protect users without censoring speech. Education should complement, not replace, such regulation.

Score Analysis

This is a score-6 response. Completion: it answers the question directly and comprehensively, taking a clear position while acknowledging complexity. Development: the "power imbalance" argument is original and genuinely advances the discussion beyond what the students said. The analogy to alcohol regulation is insightful and well-used. The response addresses Fatima's point constructively rather than dismissively. Coherence: the argument builds logically and purposefully from problem identification to proposed solution. Language: vocabulary is sophisticated and precise — "fundamental power imbalance," "algorithmic amplification," "structural safeguards," "complement rather than replace." Sentences are varied in structure. There are no notable errors. The response adds genuine intellectual value to the conversation, which is the hallmark of a score-6 post.

Sample 3

Environment – Individual vs. Corporate Responsibility

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Environment – Individual vs. Corporate Responsibility. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Chen:

Our readings this week addressed the question of who bears primary responsibility for addressing climate change. Some argue that individual lifestyle choices — diet, transport, consumption — are the key, while others argue that systemic corporate and governmental action is what truly matters. In your view, where should the primary focus be, and why?

Isabella:

I think individuals need to take responsibility. If everyone made small changes — eating less meat, driving less, buying less — the collective impact would be enormous. We cannot always wait for governments and corporations to act.

Lucas:

With respect, I think the focus on individual behaviour is actually harmful. It was largely a PR campaign by fossil fuel companies in the 1990s that shifted blame onto consumers. The top 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions. Real change requires systemic policy, not personal guilt.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

Lucas raises a point that is often overlooked: the concept of individual carbon footprints was actively promoted by the fossil fuel industry to divert attention from corporate accountability, and this historical context matters. I would argue, therefore, that the primary focus must be systemic — governments must impose carbon pricing, enforce emissions standards, and accelerate the transition to renewable energy. These structural changes have exponentially greater impact than the combined effect of individual choices. That said, I do not dismiss individual action entirely: consumer behaviour shapes markets, and widespread public concern creates the political pressure needed to drive legislative change. The two are not mutually exclusive. However, when resources and political attention are limited, systemic reform must take priority. Framing this as a personal moral failing, rather than a collective governance challenge, risks paralysing individuals with guilt while the largest emitters continue unchecked.

Score Analysis

Score 6. Completion: the question asks where primary focus should be — the response answers this decisively (systemic reform) while acknowledging the role of individuals, showing sophisticated understanding of the debate. Development: the response makes an original and substantive point about the history of the "individual footprint" concept, which adds genuine depth. The argument is supported with the "exponentially greater impact" claim and developed with the idea that individual action fuels political will. Coherence: the argument is tightly structured, with clear logical progression. Language: the vocabulary is varied and precise: "divert attention from corporate accountability," "exponentially greater impact," "collective governance challenge," "paralysing individuals with guilt." This response demonstrates exactly the kind of intellectual contribution that distinguishes a score-6 post.

Sample 4

Society – Universal Basic Income

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Society – Universal Basic Income. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Williams:

This week we examined Universal Basic Income (UBI) — a policy in which all citizens receive a regular, unconditional cash payment from the government regardless of employment status. Pilot programmes have been trialled in Finland, Kenya, and parts of the United States. Do you think UBI is a sound policy for addressing poverty and inequality? Why or why not?

Amara:

I think UBI is a great idea. It would give people the freedom to pursue meaningful work, care for family members, or retrain for new careers without fear of destitution. The Finnish pilot showed real improvements in wellbeing and mental health.

James:

I am sceptical. The main problem is cost — paying every citizen a meaningful amount would require enormous tax increases. And I worry that people might simply stop working if they have a guaranteed income, which would hurt the economy overall.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

I am cautiously supportive of UBI, provided it is implemented thoughtfully. Amara correctly identifies one of its most compelling advantages: it provides a genuine safety net that enables people to take risks — starting a business, retraining, or caring for an elderly parent — without facing destitution. In an era of growing automation, this kind of flexibility is becoming increasingly important. James raises legitimate concerns about cost and work incentives, but the evidence from pilot programmes is more encouraging than critics suggest. The Finnish experiment found no significant reduction in employment among recipients, while reporting substantial improvements in wellbeing and trust in institutions. This suggests that the fear of widespread workforce withdrawal may be overstated. The funding challenge is real, but solutions exist — a modest UBI could be financed through consolidating existing welfare programmes and introducing a modest wealth tax. Ultimately, the question is not whether we can afford UBI, but whether we can afford to leave growing numbers of people behind as economies continue to automate.

Score Analysis

Score 6. The response demonstrates all four dimensions at the highest level. Completion: it answers the question directly and engages substantively with both students. Development: it uses specific evidence (Finnish experiment), anticipates and rebuts counterarguments (work incentives), and offers a concrete funding solution. The closing rhetorical reframing ("not whether we can afford UBI, but...") elevates the response intellectually. Coherence: the structure is exemplary — support, counterpoint engagement, evidence, solution, conclusion. Language: vocabulary is rich: "cautiously supportive," "genuine safety net," "workforce withdrawal may be overstated," "growing numbers of people behind." No errors. A model score-6 response.

Sample 5

Economy – Raising the Minimum Wage

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Economy – Raising the Minimum Wage. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Martinez:

This week's readings debated the economic effects of minimum wage laws. Proponents argue they reduce poverty and inequality, while critics warn they can lead to unemployment as businesses cut jobs to offset higher labour costs. Should governments raise the minimum wage significantly? Justify your answer.

Kevin:

Yes, definitely. If someone works full-time, they should be able to afford basic living costs. The current minimum wage in many countries is simply not a living wage. Raising it is a matter of basic dignity.

Priya:

I understand the sentiment, but the economics are more complicated. Small businesses operate on very thin margins. If they are forced to pay significantly higher wages, many will automate, reduce hours, or close entirely, which hurts the very workers the policy is trying to help.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I believe governments should raise the minimum wage, but the size and pace of the increase matters enormously. Kevin's point about dignity is compelling — a society in which full-time work does not cover basic living costs is failing its workers. Research from economists at the University of California, Berkeley, found that moderate minimum wage increases in the United States had minimal negative employment effects, largely because higher wages reduce staff turnover and boost consumer spending among low-income earners. However, Priya's concern about small businesses is valid. A poorly designed, sudden, and large increase could genuinely harm the businesses least equipped to absorb higher costs. The solution is a phased, region-sensitive approach: larger cities with higher costs of living can absorb faster increases than rural areas. Several US states have successfully implemented this tiered model. For these reasons, the question should not be whether to raise the minimum wage, but how to do so responsibly.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: the question is answered clearly and both students are engaged with meaningfully. Development: the response cites specific research and provides a concrete policy solution (phased, region-sensitive approach). The mechanisms — staff turnover, consumer spending — are explained. Coherence: well-structured with clear logical progression. Language: generally accurate and varied. The reason this is a 5 rather than a 6 is that while the policy solution is mentioned, it is not as fully developed or as intellectually original as the score-6 examples. The opening also relies on a fairly standard pattern. A score-6 response would add a sharper insight or a more distinctive framing of the problem.

Sample 6

Health – Universal Healthcare

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Health – Universal Healthcare. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Nguyen:

A recurring debate in health policy concerns whether governments should provide universal healthcare — covering all citizens regardless of ability to pay — or whether market-based healthcare systems better serve populations through competition and choice. What is your position on this debate, and what evidence supports your view?

Sarah:

Universal healthcare is clearly the right approach. No one should have to choose between paying rent and receiving medical treatment. Countries with universal systems like Canada and the UK consistently rank highly for health outcomes and equity.

Tom:

I think market-based systems drive innovation and efficiency. When hospitals compete for patients, they have incentives to improve quality and reduce waiting times. The US healthcare system, despite its problems, leads the world in medical research and cutting-edge treatments.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

I firmly support universal healthcare as the foundation of any equitable health system. The fundamental problem with purely market-based healthcare is that medical need does not follow ability to pay. When someone has a heart attack or is diagnosed with cancer, they cannot shop around for the best price — they need immediate treatment. Structuring healthcare as a market transaction in this context leads predictably to the exploitation of vulnerable people. Tom's point about innovation is valid, but this argument conflates two separate issues: research investment and care delivery. A country can maintain a universal care system while also funding world-class medical research through targeted grants and public-private partnerships — as Germany and Switzerland demonstrate. Universal coverage does not eliminate innovation; it eliminates the cruelty of rationing care by wealth. For this reason, I believe universal healthcare is not merely a policy option but a moral requirement for any society that values human dignity.

Score Analysis

Score 6. Completion: strong, direct position with clear reasoning. Development: the "heart attack" example is vivid and intellectually sharp — it explains why healthcare differs fundamentally from other markets, which is a genuine contribution to the debate. The response also directly and fairly addresses Tom's innovation argument by separating research from care delivery, a sophisticated move. Coherence: the argument flows from principle to problem to counterargument to conclusion. Language: precise and varied — "conflates two separate issues," "rationing care by wealth," "moral requirement." The final sentence is rhetorically powerful without being melodramatic. No errors.

Sample 7

Technology – Artificial Intelligence in the Workplace

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Technology – Artificial Intelligence in the Workplace. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Kim:

Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used to automate tasks previously performed by human workers — from data analysis and customer service to legal research and medical diagnosis. Do you think the widespread adoption of AI in the workplace is, on balance, positive or negative for society? Explain your view.

Ben:

I think it is mostly positive. AI takes over repetitive, dangerous, or tedious jobs and frees humans to focus on creative, interpersonal, and strategic work. The industrial revolution also displaced workers initially but ultimately created far more jobs and prosperity.

Mia:

I am not so optimistic. The industrial revolution mostly replaced physical labour and created new kinds of jobs. But AI threatens cognitive work — lawyers, accountants, radiologists. The new jobs it creates may not compensate in number or quality for those it destroys.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

Mia makes a point that I find genuinely compelling: the disruption caused by AI is categorically different from previous waves of automation because it targets cognitive and professional skills that previously seemed immune to technological displacement. For this reason, while I agree with Ben that AI carries enormous potential for social good — accelerating medical diagnoses, reducing dangerous manual work — I believe the transition poses serious risks that require proactive policy responses. Without deliberate intervention, AI is likely to concentrate gains among technology owners and highly skilled workers while displacing middle-skilled workers who lack the resources to retrain. This would deepen, rather than reduce, economic inequality. The appropriate response is not to resist AI adoption but to invest heavily in retraining programmes, expand access to education in AI-adjacent skills, and consider mechanisms like robot taxes to fund this transition. On balance, therefore, AI is positive only if societies choose to manage its effects wisely — and currently, many are not.

Score Analysis

Score 6. The phrase "categorically different" immediately signals analytical depth — the response is not simply repeating the students' points but reframing the debate. Development: the response identifies a specific mechanism of harm (concentration of gains, displacement of middle-skilled workers), which demonstrates genuine understanding of the economics. The concrete policy proposals (retraining, robot taxes) add further depth. Coherence: the argument moves from acknowledgement of Mia's point → qualified agreement with Ben → identification of the risk → proposed solution → conditional conclusion. This is sophisticated and clear. Language: "immune to technological displacement," "concentrate gains," "proactive policy responses" — precise and academic. No errors.

Sample 8

Society – Capital Punishment

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Society – Capital Punishment. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Adeyemi:

This week we studied criminal justice reform, including ongoing debates about capital punishment. Supporters argue it deters serious crime and provides justice for victims, while opponents point to wrongful executions, racial disparities, and moral objections. Do you believe capital punishment should be abolished? Why or why not?

Carlos:

I believe it should be abolished. The risk of executing an innocent person is simply too high. Since 1973, over 185 people in the US have been exonerated from death row. No justice system is infallible, and an irreversible punishment is incompatible with an imperfect system.

Elena:

I think the debate is more nuanced. For the most heinous crimes — mass murder, genocide — I believe some form of ultimate punishment is justified. The focus should be on improving the system to reduce errors, not on eliminating the option entirely.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I support the abolition of capital punishment, and I think Carlos's argument about irreversibility is the most decisive one. Even granting Elena's point that some crimes may seem to warrant the ultimate sanction, the practical reality is that no justice system is infallible. The exoneration statistics Carlos cites are not anomalies — they reflect structural flaws: inadequate legal representation for the poor, racial bias in sentencing, and the inherent fallibility of eyewitness testimony and forensic science. If the punishment were a prison sentence, these flaws could be partially corrected — the wrongfully convicted can be released and compensated. Death, however, cannot be undone. Furthermore, there is robust evidence that capital punishment does not deter crime more effectively than life imprisonment, which removes the strongest practical argument for its retention. The moral case for maintaining a punishment that is both unreliable in application and no more effective as a deterrent is, in my view, impossible to sustain.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: clear position, directly engages both students' arguments. Development: the response goes beyond Carlos's initial point by explaining the structural reasons for wrongful convictions, which adds genuine depth. The deterrence argument is addressed. Coherence: well-structured, logical progression. Language: precise and academic — "decisive," "inherent fallibility," "robust evidence," "moral case...impossible to sustain." Minor reason for not reaching 6: while the deterrence point is raised, it is stated rather than fully developed with evidence. A score-6 response would integrate a specific study or data point and perhaps add a more distinctive final insight.

Sample 9

Education – Standardised Testing

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Education – Standardised Testing. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Singh:

Standardised tests such as national university entrance exams are used in many countries as the primary basis for university admission decisions. Critics argue that these tests favour students from wealthy backgrounds who can afford test preparation, while supporters say they provide an objective and fair measure. Should universities rely less on standardised tests in their admissions processes? Share your view and reasoning.

Nadia:

Yes, absolutely. Students from wealthy families can spend thousands of dollars on tutoring and test prep, giving them a huge advantage over equally intelligent students who cannot afford this. Standardised tests measure privilege as much as ability.

Omar:

I disagree. Without standardised tests, admissions would rely even more heavily on grades, extracurriculars, and essays — all of which are also affected by socioeconomic privilege. At least test scores are the same for everyone on the same day. We need fairer tests, not no tests.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

Both Nadia and Omar identify real problems, but I believe the evidence tips in favour of reducing — not necessarily eliminating — reliance on standardised tests. Nadia is correct that test scores correlate strongly with family income, and this correlation reflects preparation advantage, not solely innate ability. However, Omar's concern about the alternatives is also legitimate. When the University of California system went test-optional during the pandemic, research suggested that the change did not dramatically increase socioeconomic diversity, partly because other admissions criteria are themselves socioeconomically skewed. The real solution, therefore, lies not in choosing between tests and holistic review, but in improving both: redesigning tests to be less coachable, providing free preparation resources to all students, and weighting contextualised factors — a student's performance relative to their school average, for instance — more heavily. A single standardised score should never be the primary determinant of a student's future, but thoughtfully used, it can be one valuable piece of evidence.

Score Analysis

Score 6. This response is notable for its intellectual maturity — it refuses to accept a binary and instead synthesises both positions into a more nuanced third view. Completion: the question is answered (reduce, not eliminate reliance) with a clear position. Development: the University of California example is specific and relevant, and the proposed solutions are concrete and original. The "contextualised factors" suggestion shows genuine policy thinking. Coherence: the structure is clear — acknowledge both, identify the real solution, propose reforms. Language: "correlate strongly with family income," "holistic review," "socioeconomically skewed," "less coachable." All accurate and appropriately academic.

Sample 10

Environment – Plastic Bans

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Environment – Plastic Bans. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Johansson:

Several countries and cities have implemented bans on single-use plastics such as bags, straws, and bottles. Supporters argue these bans are essential for reducing ocean pollution and environmental damage, while critics say they are ineffective without addressing broader waste management issues and may harm low-income consumers. Are single-use plastic bans an effective environmental policy? Explain your view.

Grace:

Single-use plastic bans are a positive step but not sufficient on their own. Plastic pollution is a systemic problem and banning straws while container ships burn bunker fuel is treating a symptom, not a cause. We need comprehensive waste management reform.

Ivan:

I think the bans are valuable precisely because they are visible and tangible. They change consumer habits, raise environmental awareness, and signal that governments are taking action. Sometimes small, visible changes build momentum for bigger reforms.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I find myself persuaded by both arguments, and I think they are actually compatible. Ivan is right that visible, tangible policies have an important role: they shift social norms, generate public support for environmental action, and demonstrate that behaviour change is possible at scale. The dramatic reduction in plastic bag use following small-charge schemes in the UK and Ireland illustrates this vividly. However, Grace's warning against complacency is equally important. Single-use plastic bans risk becoming what environmental scientists call "green theatre" — visible action that satisfies the public's demand for something to be done without addressing the structural drivers of pollution: inadequate recycling infrastructure, fast fashion, and industrial waste. For plastic bans to be genuinely effective, they must be accompanied by investment in waste management, extended producer responsibility legislation, and global agreements on industrial emissions. Implemented in isolation, they are a start; implemented as part of a comprehensive strategy, they can be genuinely transformative.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: the question is answered — yes, bans can be effective, but only as part of a broader strategy. Clear position. Development: the UK/Ireland example is relevant and specific. The "green theatre" concept is a genuinely interesting and accurate term from environmental science. The policy proposals (extended producer responsibility, global agreements) show substantive knowledge. Coherence: clear structure. Language: mostly accurate and varied. The response does not quite reach 6 because the second half of the argument (structural drivers) is listed rather than developed. A score-6 response would pick one structural issue and explain it in more depth, rather than listing three briefly.

Sample 11

Government – Freedom of Speech

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Government – Freedom of Speech. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Bauer:

Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of democratic societies, yet many argue that certain forms of speech — hate speech, disinformation, incitement to violence — cause real harm and should be restricted. Should democracies place legal limits on freedom of speech? Explain your reasoning.

Alice:

I believe freedom of speech should be as absolute as possible. Once you start deciding which speech is acceptable, you set a dangerous precedent that can easily be abused by those in power to silence legitimate dissent. History is full of examples where speech restrictions were used against the very groups they were meant to protect.

Rafael:

That is a principled position but it ignores real harm. Hate speech causes psychological damage, contributes to discrimination, and in extreme cases incites violence. Germany and most European democracies have hate speech laws and they are not authoritarian states. The question is where to draw the line, not whether any lines exist.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

Rafael's final point — "where to draw the line, not whether any lines exist" — captures the debate precisely. I agree with him that some restrictions on speech are necessary and compatible with genuine democracy. The key distinction, which Alice's argument underestimates, is between restricting ideas and restricting harmful acts of communication. Incitement to violence, targeted harassment, and coordinated disinformation are not primarily about the exchange of ideas — they are about causing harm. Just as we restrict the freedom to shout "fire" in a crowded theatre, we can restrict speech that is deliberately designed to endanger or dehumanise others. Alice's concern about misuse of such laws is legitimate and important. This is why strong procedural safeguards — independent judicial oversight, clear and narrow legal definitions, and robust appeals processes — must accompany any speech restrictions. The risk of abuse is an argument for careful design, not for legal paralysis.

Score Analysis

Score 6. Opening by citing a student's specific phrase is a sophisticated move that immediately shows engagement. Development: the "ideas vs. harmful acts" distinction is the core of the argument and is a philosophically well-established position, presented clearly and originally. The "fire in a theatre" analogy is classic and well-applied. Coherence: the structure is elegant — frame the debate, state position, develop key distinction, address counterargument, draw conclusion. Language: "captured the debate precisely," "dehumanise others," "procedural safeguards," "legal paralysis" — varied, precise, academic. No errors. The final sentence is particularly strong as a closing move.

Sample 12

Economy – Globalisation

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Economy – Globalisation. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Osei:

Globalisation — the increasing interconnection of economies through trade, investment, and migration — has been both celebrated and criticised. Proponents argue it has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, while critics point to job losses in developed nations, exploitation of workers in developing countries, and cultural homogenisation. On balance, has globalisation been a positive force? Justify your position.

Wei:

Definitely positive. Globalisation has driven economic growth in China, India, Vietnam, and across Southeast Asia. Hundreds of millions of people who were in poverty thirty years ago now have access to healthcare, education, and consumer goods. This is an enormous human achievement.

Julia:

But at what cost? Factory workers in developing countries often work in appalling conditions for very low wages. In developed countries, communities built around manufacturing have been devastated. Globalisation has concentrated wealth at the top while hollowing out the middle.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I believe globalisation has been, on balance, a positive force — but only in the aggregate, and the aggregate hides profound injustices that should not be minimised. Wei's point about poverty reduction is supported by robust data: the share of the world's population living in extreme poverty fell from over 35% in 1990 to under 10% by 2015, a period that coincides with globalisation's acceleration. This is a genuine human achievement. However, Julia is right that the distribution of these gains has been deeply unequal. The problem is not globalisation itself but the failure of domestic policy to manage its distributional consequences. Countries that invested the gains from trade openness in education, retraining, and social insurance — South Korea, for instance — managed the transition far better than those that did not. The lesson is that globalisation requires an active state, not a passive one. Retreating into protectionism would sacrifice the gains without addressing the underlying inequalities.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Excellent use of specific data (poverty reduction statistics). The South Korea example is well-chosen and relevant. The "aggregate hides injustices" framing is intellectually honest. Coherence: strong. Language: varied and accurate. The reason for 5 rather than 6 is that the final observation — "globalisation requires an active state" — is stated but not fully developed. What specific policies should an active state pursue? A score-6 response would give at least one concrete example of what this looks like in practice, beyond just naming South Korea.

Sample 13

Health – Screen Time and Children

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Health – Screen Time and Children. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Tanaka:

Research on the effects of screen time on children is increasingly a topic of debate among psychologists and educators. Some studies link heavy screen use to attention difficulties, sleep disruption, and reduced social skills, while others find few significant negative effects when the content is educational and the usage is supervised. Should governments introduce legal limits on children's screen time? Give your view and reasoning.

Lily:

I think government limits are necessary. Parents are overwhelmed and tech companies design products specifically to maximise engagement, including among children. Leaving this entirely to individual families puts too much pressure on parents and too much power in the hands of corporations.

Michael:

Government limits are too blunt an instrument. They cannot account for how different children use screens differently. An hour playing a violent video game is not the same as an hour learning to code. The focus should be on parental education and corporate accountability, not legal restrictions.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I am sympathetic to both positions, but I ultimately agree with Michael that legal limits on screen time would be an overly blunt and difficult-to-enforce instrument. The research on screen time is far more nuanced than the headlines suggest: the type of content, the social context of use, and the age of the child all affect outcomes significantly. A blanket time limit treats all screen use as equivalent, which oversimplifies a complex issue. That said, I share Lily's concern that leaving everything to parents ignores the structural problem: the business model of major tech platforms is explicitly designed to maximise engagement, and children are particularly vulnerable to these techniques. I would therefore support regulations targeting the platforms themselves — restricting algorithmic recommendation systems for users under 16, requiring default time limits on children's accounts, and banning manipulative design features like autoplay and infinite scroll for younger users. This approach targets the source of the problem rather than attempting to police every household.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: clear position with nuanced engagement. Development: the distinction between types of screen use is a relevant and valid point. The platform-targeted regulations (algorithmic restriction, autoplay bans) are specific and well-reasoned. Coherence: good structure. Language: accurate and varied. Not quite a 6 because the nuanced research point is asserted but not supported with any specific study or evidence — a score-6 response would briefly cite or reference the research it is drawing on.

Sample 14

Society – Ageing Population

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Society – Ageing Population. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Vasquez:

Many developed countries are experiencing rapidly ageing populations, which puts increasing pressure on pension systems, healthcare infrastructure, and the working-age population. Some economists suggest immigration is the most effective solution, while others advocate raising the retirement age or increasing birth rates. What do you think is the most effective policy response to an ageing population? Explain your answer.

Hannah:

I think immigration is clearly the best solution. It brings in working-age people who pay taxes immediately, addresses labour shortages in key sectors, and does not require waiting twenty years for a new generation to reach adulthood. It is the fastest and most practical response.

Samuel:

Immigration is part of the solution, but it is politically controversial and does not address the underlying demographic trend. Raising the retirement age reflects the reality that people are living longer and healthier lives. Sustainable pension systems must be redesigned for a longer lifespan.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I believe the most effective policy response to an ageing population is a combination of approaches, but if I must prioritise one, I agree with Hannah that well-managed immigration offers the most immediate and scalable relief. Samuel is correct that raising the retirement age reflects demographic reality — people aged 65 today are, on average, healthier than at any point in history, and pension systems designed for shorter lifespans need updating. However, this policy disproportionately affects people in physically demanding occupations, who often cannot work into their late 60s regardless of official retirement ages. Immigration, by contrast, can be targeted precisely at the sectors and skill levels facing the greatest shortages. Canada's points-based system demonstrates that structured immigration policy can sustainably manage demographic pressures. Political resistance to immigration is real, but it is a challenge to be managed, not a reason to abandon the most effective tool. Pension reform and pro-natalist policies should complement, not replace, this approach.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: the question asks for the most effective policy response — the answer is given clearly. Both students are engaged with substantively. Development: the point about physically demanding work is a strong and original insight that challenges the retirement age argument fairly. The Canada example is specific. Language: "disproportionately affects," "precisely targeted," "sustainable," "pro-natalist" — academic and varied. Not a 6 because the Canada example is mentioned but not developed — what specifically did Canada do that worked?

Sample 15

Technology – Privacy vs. Security

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Technology – Privacy vs. Security. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Fernandez:

Governments argue that mass surveillance programmes — monitoring of communications, tracking of movements, facial recognition in public spaces — are necessary to combat terrorism and serious crime. Critics argue these programmes represent a fundamental violation of privacy rights. How should democratic societies balance security and privacy? Share your view.

Leo:

Security must come first. The primary duty of government is to protect its citizens, and if surveillance helps prevent terrorist attacks that kill hundreds of people, the trade-off is justified. Most law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear from government monitoring.

Nina:

I strongly disagree. "Nothing to hide, nothing to fear" is a dangerous argument. History shows that surveillance powers, once established, are frequently abused — used against political dissidents, journalists, and marginalised communities. Privacy is a precondition for a free society.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

Nina's historical argument is, to my mind, the decisive one. The claim that mass surveillance is justified because innocent people have nothing to fear rests on two assumptions that do not hold up: that governments are always well-intentioned, and that the definition of "innocent" remains stable over time. History provides abundant evidence against both assumptions — from the FBI's surveillance of civil rights leaders to contemporary examples of democratic governments monitoring journalists and political opponents. Beyond the historical argument, there is a powerful practical one: the intelligence agencies that have access to the most comprehensive surveillance data — the US NSA, the UK GCHQ — have not demonstrated that mass collection significantly outperforms targeted, warrant-based surveillance in preventing attacks. Leo's concern about security is legitimate, but the solution is targeted, judicially-supervised intelligence work, not blanket monitoring. A society that sacrifices privacy for security is likely to end up with neither.

Score Analysis

Score 6. The response immediately engages with a specific student's argument, then develops it further with two distinct critiques: the historical argument and the practical argument. Development: citing specific agencies (NSA, GCHQ) and specific historical examples (FBI/civil rights leaders) adds concrete credibility. The two-assumptions critique of Leo's position is analytically sharp. Coherence: the structure is tight: cite Nina, develop argument, add practical critique, address Leo, conclude. Language: "abundant evidence," "stable over time," "targeted, judicially-supervised intelligence work" — all precise and academic. The final sentence is a powerful and memorable conclusion.

Your professor is teaching a class on Education – Gap Year. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Reeves:

Taking a gap year — a year off between secondary school and university, typically spent travelling, volunteering, or working — has become increasingly common among young people in many countries. Some argue it builds maturity, self-reliance, and perspective; others worry it delays career development and can be costly. Do you think taking a gap year is generally beneficial? Explain your reasoning.

Zoe:

I think gap years are wonderful. I took one myself and it completely changed my perspective. I worked in a rural school in Nepal and it gave me clarity about what I wanted to study and why. I came back far more motivated than many of my peers who had gone straight to university.

Ryan:

The problem is that gap years are really only accessible to wealthy students. Travelling or volunteering abroad costs money. Most students cannot afford to take a year off without earning — they would use it working to save for tuition, which has a very different developmental effect.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

Ryan raises a crucial point that is often overlooked in enthusiastic discussions of gap years: the gap year as it is typically celebrated in mainstream discourse is a fundamentally privileged experience. When advocates speak of volunteering in developing countries or travelling through Southeast Asia, they are describing activities that require both time and significant financial resources. For students who need to work to fund their education, the gap year looks entirely different. This does not mean gap years are inherently bad — Zoe's experience illustrates their genuine developmental value. But I would argue that the benefits are not intrinsic to taking time off; they are intrinsic to having a purposeful, challenging, and reflective experience. That experience can also be structured within university through gap semesters, co-op programmes, and work placements. Universities and governments should focus on making these structured alternatives available to all students, rather than celebrating a gap year culture that primarily serves the already-advantaged.

Score Analysis

Score 5. This response demonstrates intellectual confidence — it is willing to reframe the entire question. Development: the core argument (benefits are not intrinsic to gap years but to purposeful experience) is original and well-developed. The policy recommendation (gap semesters, co-op programmes) is constructive. Language: "fundamentally privileged experience," "intrinsic to," "already-advantaged" — precise and academic. Not quite a 6 because the central argument could be developed further with evidence — for example, research on the outcomes of co-op programmes or structured work placements. The response states the argument without empirical support.

Your professor is teaching a class on Society – Nuclear Energy. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Ahmed:

As countries seek to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, nuclear energy has re-emerged as a serious option. Proponents argue it provides reliable, low-carbon electricity at scale; opponents point to risks of accidents, radioactive waste disposal, and nuclear proliferation. Should countries invest in expanding nuclear energy capacity as part of their transition away from fossil fuels? Share your position.

Sophie:

Yes, I think nuclear energy should be part of the solution. Solar and wind are intermittent — they only produce power when the sun shines or the wind blows. Nuclear provides reliable baseload power twenty-four hours a day, and modern reactors are far safer than the designs behind Chernobyl or Fukushima.

David:

The risks are too great. Even a single catastrophic accident can render a region uninhabitable for decades. And we still have no long-term solution to nuclear waste — materials that remain dangerously radioactive for thousands of years. We should focus on scaling up renewables and improving battery storage instead.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I support expanding nuclear energy capacity, though I recognise the concerns David raises are serious and should not be dismissed. Sophie's intermittency argument is technically sound: at present, battery storage technology is not yet sufficient to make renewables-only grids reliable across large geographic areas with variable weather, and the climate crisis is too urgent to wait for that technology to mature. Nuclear energy, with modern reactor designs that include passive safety systems requiring no human intervention in emergencies, represents a significantly lower accident risk than the Cold War-era designs David references. The waste problem is real, but it is also manageable in scale — all the high-level nuclear waste ever produced globally would, if consolidated, fill a relatively small volume compared to the ongoing atmospheric emissions from fossil fuel combustion. The true risk comparison is between the certain, ongoing harm of climate change and the uncertain, manageable risk of nuclear expansion. Given that framing, I believe the latter is the more rational choice.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: clear position, both students addressed. Development: the battery storage argument is technical and accurate. The waste volume comparison is a concrete and original reframing of the debate. The "certain harm vs. uncertain risk" framing in the conclusion is strong. Language: "passive safety systems," "high-level nuclear waste," "atmospheric emissions," "rational choice" — precise and appropriate. Not a 6 because the passive safety systems point is asserted without any specific explanation — what makes modern reactors safer? A score-6 response would briefly elaborate.

Sample 18

Economy – Remote Work

5/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Economy – Remote Work. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Lindberg:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many knowledge workers to work from home, and many organisations have since adopted permanent or hybrid remote work policies. Proponents argue remote work improves work-life balance and productivity; critics worry about its effects on company culture, collaboration, and the career development of younger workers. Should employers have the right to require employees to work from the office? Explain your position.

Anna:

Employers should have the right to require office work, but they should use it judiciously. In-person collaboration is genuinely more effective for creative and strategic work. Companies that allow fully remote work often report fragmented cultures and difficulties integrating new employees.

Chris:

I disagree. Employees who can work from home effectively should not be forced into expensive, time-consuming commutes that reduce their quality of life. If a worker consistently delivers high-quality work remotely, requiring them to come to an office is about control, not productivity.

Model Response | Score: 5/6

I believe employers should retain the right to set location requirements, but that this right should be exercised transparently, with genuine justification, and balanced against employees' demonstrated performance and personal circumstances. Anna's point about in-person collaboration has empirical support — research at Stanford found that serendipitous interactions in office environments generate more creative ideas than structured video calls. However, Chris is right that mandating office attendance for roles where remote work demonstrably works is not a defensible exercise of employer authority. The solution lies in a principled middle ground: employers should be able to require specific types of work — client-facing meetings, onboarding sessions, collaborative design sprints — to occur in person, while routine individual work can remain flexible. Blanket return-to-office mandates, applied uniformly regardless of role or individual performance, strike me as both counterproductive and disrespectful of a workforce that has demonstrated its ability to deliver.

Score Analysis

Score 5. Completion: nuanced position with clear reasoning. Development: citing Stanford research adds credibility. The "principled middle ground" proposal (role-specific requirements) is concrete and reasonable. Language: "serendipitous interactions," "defensible exercise of employer authority," "collaborative design sprints" — precise and varied. Not a 6 because the Stanford finding is mentioned but not explained (what did they find, exactly?), and the response does not fully develop the practical implementation of the proposed middle ground.

Sample 19

Culture – Preserving Endangered Languages

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Culture – Preserving Endangered Languages. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Mbeki:

Approximately half of the world's 7,000 languages are expected to disappear by the end of this century as speakers shift to dominant global languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish. Some argue governments should actively fund and promote endangered languages through education and media; others argue this is an inefficient use of public resources and that language shift is a natural process. Should governments actively work to preserve endangered languages? Share your view.

Maya:

Yes, absolutely. Language is not just a communication tool — it embodies the history, knowledge, and worldview of a people. When a language dies, we lose irreplaceable cultural and intellectual heritage. Governments have a duty to protect this.

Noah:

I understand the sentiment, but can it really be ethical to spend public money on preserving a language that speakers themselves are choosing to abandon? Language shift happens because people make rational choices about what helps them and their children economically. Is it right to try to reverse that?

Model Response | Score: 6/6

I support government efforts to preserve endangered languages, but I think the policy design matters as much as the intent, which is where Noah's concern deserves a careful answer. He is right that many people shift languages for rational economic reasons, and any preservation policy that imposes language use against people's economic interests would be both ineffective and paternalistic. However, there is a crucial difference between compulsion and enablement. Funding bilingual education, supporting media in minority languages, and creating opportunities for communities to transmit their language to younger generations does not force anyone to speak a language they do not want — it ensures that people who do want to maintain their language heritage have the resources to do so. Maya's point about irreplaceable knowledge is also empirically supported: linguists have documented that endangered languages often encode unique knowledge about local ecosystems, medicinal plants, and navigation techniques that exists nowhere else. This is not merely sentimental; it represents a genuine intellectual loss. Government support for language preservation is, therefore, both culturally and pragmatically justified.

Score Analysis

Score 6. This is an excellent response that distinguishes itself on multiple dimensions. Development: the "compulsion vs. enablement" distinction is the intellectual centerpiece and it is original, precise, and directly addresses Noah's concern. The specific knowledge (ecosystems, medicinal plants, navigation) makes Maya's argument concrete rather than sentimental. Completion: both students are engaged with fairly and thoroughly. Language: "paternalistic," "enablement," "empirically supported," "pragmatically justified" — sophisticated and accurate. Coherence: outstanding — each paragraph serves a clear purpose, and the argument builds to a confident and well-supported conclusion.

Sample 20

Society – Animal Rights

6/6

Your professor is teaching a class on Society – Animal Rights. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Petrova:

The animal rights movement argues that animals, as sentient beings capable of experiencing pain and suffering, deserve legal protection and moral consideration beyond what current laws provide. Others argue that while animal welfare is important, the interests of humans must take priority in cases of conflict. How should modern societies balance human interests and animal welfare? Share your position.

Emma:

I believe animals deserve far stronger legal protection than they currently receive. The scientific evidence that many animals — great apes, cetaceans, elephants — experience complex emotions including grief, joy, and social bonds is now overwhelming. Treating sentient creatures as property is morally inconsistent with the values most of us claim to hold.

Jack:

I respect that view, but I think there are practical limits. Animal agriculture feeds billions of people. Medical research using animals has led to vaccines and treatments that have saved millions of lives. We cannot simply prioritise animal welfare over basic human needs without enormous consequences.

Model Response | Score: 6/6

I believe Emma and Jack are arguing past each other in a way that reveals a false dichotomy at the heart of this debate. The choice is not between protecting animals and meeting human needs — it is between necessary and unnecessary suffering. Jack's examples — feeding people, medical research — are genuine cases where human needs may, reluctantly, justify causing animal harm. But these cases are a small fraction of the actual harm humans cause to animals: factory farming practices that cause extreme suffering primarily to reduce costs rather than feed the hungry, or cosmetic testing on animals for products that are entirely non-essential. Emma's argument is most compelling applied to these unnecessary cases. A morally coherent position would protect animals from all unnecessary suffering while acknowledging that some human uses of animals — in medicine, in contexts where plant-based nutrition is unavailable — can be justified when conducted with strict welfare standards. The current legal framework in most countries falls far short of this standard, and reform is long overdue.

Score Analysis

Score 6. The opening move — identifying a false dichotomy — is intellectually sophisticated and immediately distinguishes this response from a simple agree/disagree pattern. Development: the "necessary vs. unnecessary suffering" framework is original and provides a principled basis for both agreeing and disagreeing with each student. The contrast between factory farming (unnecessary) and medical research (potentially justified) is concrete and accurate. Coherence: exceptionally well-structured. Language: "false dichotomy," "morally coherent position," "reluctantly justify," "falls far short" — precise, varied, and confident. No errors. This response would be a model answer for the highest level of this task.

J

Practice Discussions

The following 40 questions are presented in the exact format of the TOEFL 2026 Academic Writing Discussion task. For each question, read the professor's prompt and both student responses carefully, then write your own response within 10 minutes. Aim for a minimum of 100 words and target the strategies and language in this book.

Practice Tips

Use a timer set to 10 minutes for every practice attempt.

After writing, score your own response using the 0-6 rubric in Section D.

Keep a vocabulary notebook: each time you use a new collocation from Section H, mark it off.

After every 5 questions, review Section E to ensure your strategy is still on track.

Focus on different topics each session to build broad vocabulary and idea banks.

Your professor is teaching a class on Right to be Forgotten. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Castro:

The "right to be forgotten" — the legal right for individuals to request that search engines remove links to information about them — is recognised in the EU but debated globally. Supporters argue it allows people to move past mistakes and live free from their digital history; critics argue it enables people to suppress legitimate public interest information and conflicts with press freedom. Do you think people should have a legal right to have information about themselves removed from the internet? Explain your view.

Elise:

Yes, everyone deserves a second chance. A mistake made at 19 should not follow someone for decades. The internet has an infinite memory, and this creates disproportionate and permanent punishment for ordinary human failures.

Adrian:

This is essentially a right to rewrite history. Politicians with corruption convictions, executives who defrauded clients, individuals with violent histories — should all of these people be allowed to scrub their records from public search? The public interest in accurate information must take precedence.

Your professor is teaching a class on Drug Decriminalisation. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Voss:

Portugal decriminalised the personal use of all drugs in 2001, treating drug use as a public health issue rather than a criminal one. Several other countries are considering similar reforms. Supporters argue decriminalisation reduces mass incarceration, allows public health resources to be directed at treatment, and reduces stigma; critics argue it sends the wrong message, may increase use, and does not address drug trafficking. Should governments decriminalise the personal use of drugs? Explain your view.

Nadia:

Decriminalisation is clearly the right approach. Criminalising people for personal drug use destroys lives — families, careers, futures — without reducing drug use. Portugal's model has demonstrably reduced HIV infections, overdose deaths, and drug-related crime. The evidence is compelling.

Josh:

I worry that decriminalisation sends a permissive message, particularly to young people. And while the Portugal model has some successes, its applicability to larger, more diverse countries is not clear. Rehabilitation resources can be expanded without abandoning criminal deterrence entirely.

Your professor is teaching a class on Gig Economy. Read the following discussion prompt and the students' responses. Write a post responding to the professor's question. In your response, you should express and support your personal opinion and make a contribution to the discussion. An effective response will contain at least 100 words.

Professor Shaw:

The "gig economy" — in which workers are engaged as independent contractors through platforms like Uber, Deliveroo, and Upwork rather than as permanent employees — has grown rapidly. Proponents argue it provides flexibility and opportunity for workers; critics argue it strips workers of job security, benefits, and legal protections, effectively creating a precarious new underclass. Should gig economy workers receive the same legal protections as traditional employees? Explain your view.

Layla:

Absolutely. "Flexibility" is often a euphemism for "no rights." Many gig workers are economically dependent on a single platform but receive none of the protections of employment — no sick pay, no pension, no minimum hours. They are employees in everything but name.

Finn:

Many gig workers genuinely prefer the flexibility. Freelancers who choose their own hours and juggle multiple clients are not exploited workers — they are running micro-businesses. Imposing employee status on all gig workers would destroy the model that many of them value.

Good luck with your preparation!

This book covers all aspects of the TOEFL iBT 2026 Academic Writing Discussion task. Return to each section as your skills develop — especially the collocations in Section H and the worked samples in Section I.

Remember: a score of 5 or 6 is within reach for any dedicated candidate. The difference is not talent — it is strategy, vocabulary, and consistent practice.

What raters reward
A clear, direct answer to the professor's question
At least one well-developed supporting point with explanation or example
Varied vocabulary and sentence structure
A genuine contribution to the discussion — something beyond what the students said



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