

# What makes a good essay?

Read the essay topic and essay. Then study the comments on the side.

## Essay topic

"Birth rates are falling in developed countries. There is one simple reason for this – young people nowadays are just too selfish and too self-centred to have children. And this is particularly true of women". To what extent do you agree with this view? Support your argument with relevant readings and evidence.

## Sample essay

1 Countries in the developed world have seen a big shift in attitudes to population growth. Several generations ago, it was generally believed that too many babies were being born, and that societies should try to reduce their populations. Nowadays, however, the concern is the reverse – that birthrates are falling too low and that urgent action is needed to encourage people to have more children. But what are the causes of this trend? And how much are the attitudes and lifestyles of young people to blame? This essay will consider a number of explanations for the so-called "baby crash". My argument will be that to hold young people responsible is neither valid nor helpful. The best explanation, I believe, is to be found in the condition of increased economic insecurity faced by the young.

2 The birth rate has fallen dramatically in many parts of the world. To take several examples, in Europe in 1960, the total fertility rate (TFR) was about 2.6 births per female, but in 1996 it had fallen to 1.4 (Chesnais, 1998). In many Asian countries, similar declines have been experienced. Japan now has a birthrate of only about 1.3, and Hong Kong's has fallen to below 1.0 (Ichimura & Ogawa, 2000). A TFR of below 2.0 means that a country's population is not replaced, and thus there is a net population decline. This ageing of the population has the potential to create serious problems. Fewer children being born means that in the long term, a smaller proportion of the populace will be economically productive, whilst a larger proportion will be old and economically dependent – in the form of pension, health care and other social services. Most experts agree that these "greying" societies will not be able to escape serious social and economic decline in the future (Chesnais, 1998).

3 So what are the causes of this trend and what can be done to stop it? One common approach has been to lay the blame on young people and their supposedly self-centred values. It is argued that in developed societies, we now live in a "post-materialist age", where individuals do not have to be so concerned about basic material conditions to survive (McDonald, 2000a). Thus people, especially the young, have become more focussed on the values of self-realisation and the satisfaction of personal preferences, at the expense of traditional values like raising a family. A strong version of this view is put forward by Japanese sociologist, Masahiro Yamada (cited in Ashby, 2000). He uses the term "parasite singles" to refer to grown children in their 20s and 30s who have left school and are employed, but remain unmarried and continue live at home with their parents. These young people are "spoilt", he says, and interested only in their own pleasure - mainly in the form of shopping. According to Yamada, it is this focus on self, more than any other factor, that is responsible for Japan's languishing birth rate (Ashby, 2000). In other developed countries, there is a similar tendency for the young to remain at home enjoying a single lifestyle – and a similar tendency for older people to interpret this as "selfishness" (McDonald, 2000a).

### 1. Analysing the question

Notice what the question is asking students to do – in this case saying how much they agree with the 'view' in the topic. What do you think? Is this a reasonable explanation for the declining birthrate?

**Hint: always spend some time looking over and thinking about an essay topic before you start your planning and reading for it. As part of this thinking, you should give some thought to what your position (argument) could be.**

### 2. Introduction

Notice how in the introduction, this student writes:

- i) introduces the **topic** area in a general way (ie. declining birthrates)
- ii) introduces the main **issue** to be covered in the essay (ie. why this is happening).

**Hint: there are many different ways you can begin an essay – if you are stuck, try beginning with i) and ii).**

### 3. The argument

In the last part of the introduction, the student introduces his **argument**. Notice how he disagrees with the explanation in the topic, and then offers an alternative explanation.

**Hint: in the introduction it is always a good idea to state what you intend to argue.**

### 4. Claims + evidence

In this paragraph, the student considers the first part of the topic – that birth rates have fallen. This is presented as background information. Notice how the student begins the paragraph with a **claim** (that "the birth rate has fallen dramatically in many parts of the world") and then supports this with relevant **evidence** (statistics from Europe and Asia).

**Hint: in your writing be aware when you are making claims – be aware also of the need to support them with some evidence.**

### 5. The issue

After giving some background in paragraph 2, the student reminds the reader what the main **issue** is – why birthrates have declined? Notice also that the student has seen the issue as a 'problem' – and asks "What can be done about it?"

**Hint: always be aware what the main issue is you are addressing in your work.**

### 6. Summarising ideas

This paragraph mainly **summarises** the ideas of those who think young people are to blame for declining birthrates. Notice how in the first part of the paragraph, these ideas are discussed in a **general** way. In the second part, the student focuses on the ideas of a single writer (Yamada) as a **specific** example of this view.

**Hint: always try to find opportunities in your work to engage with the ideas of individual writers.**

### Using "I" – first person pronouns

Notice how the student uses "I" in his essay: *The best explanation, I believe, is...* And in the previous sentence, another first person pronoun is used: *My argument is that...*

Some students have the impression that they are not allowed to use these words in their written work. But in fact they can often be found in academic writing. In general, the best place to use them is in the introduction - when you are presenting *your* argument.

But if you are concerned that it is not OK to use "I", you can use other expressions - which avoid self-reference, but which mean much the same thing eg. *This essay will argue that...* Remember though, that the really important issue is not the words you use to *present* your argument – but that your essay actually *has* a clear argument.

### Paragraphs

Try to keep your paragraphs a reasonable length. (Most paragraphs in this essay are around 7-8 sentences long.)

### Citation 1 (Chesnais, 1998)

Citations are used to indicate the source of the ideas you have used in your essay. Note that there are two main citation systems:

- i) the author-date system (also known as Harvard);
- ii) the footnote system (also known as Oxford).

In this essay, the author-date system has been used. (Always check which system is required in each of your subjects.)

### Citation 2 (Ichimura & Ogawa, 2000)

Citations can be set out in a number of ways. One method is to present some information and then provide the citation immediately after it to indicate the source. These are known as 'information-prominent' citations eg:

*Japan now has a birthrate of only about 1.3, and Hong Kong's has fallen to below 1.0 (Ichimura & Ogawa, 2000).*

Other formats are considered further on.

### Citation 3 Masahiro Yamada (cited in Ashby, 2000)

This citation means that the student is dealing with the ideas of Yamada, but actually read about them in Ashby's text. Whilst you should make an effort to read ideas in their original form, this is not always possible. In such cases, use the 'cited in' format.

### Reporting expressions

When you are summarising the ideas of a writer, you need to use reporting expressions like the ones used here:

*He [Yamada] uses the term ...  
According to Yamada, ...  
... he says ...etc.*

## Essay Commentary

### 7. Critiquing ideas

The previous paragraph was concerned with summarising some ideas. Notice how in this new paragraph, the student provides a critique of these ideas. (Recall the student's argument in the introduction: "...to hold young people responsible is neither valid nor helpful"). Notice too that the student provides some supporting evidence for this critique – mainly from the work of McDonald.

**Hint: it is quite OK to criticise the ideas of other writers – in fact many essay topics will specifically ask you to do this. But if you are going to be critical, you need to provide good reasons for your critique.**

### 8. Returning to the issue

Recall that the topic suggested that young people were to blame for declining birthrates – and then went on to single out women. In this paragraph, the student takes up this gender issue.

**Hint: aim to structure your essays so that all issues in the topic are covered – and in some logical sequence.**

### 9. Another example of critique

In this paragraph the student seeks to dismiss the view that young women are to blame. ("There are several problems with this argument"). Notice that the student then goes on to explain these problems ("For one..."; Another problem is that ...").

**Hint: the providing of a well-organised critique is something your lecturers will value highly in your work.**

### 10. Restating the argument

Recall the second part of the student's argument stated in the introduction: "The best explanation is to be found in the condition of increased economic insecurity faced by the young". The student now elaborates on this part of the argument.

**Hint: remember that the argument is the key to any essay you write. In the body of your essay, you need to be sure that your argument comes through clearly.**

4

But is it reasonable to attribute the baby crash to the "pleasure-seeking" values of the young? The problem with this view is that whenever young people are surveyed about their attitudes to family, not only do they say they want to have children, they also express preferences for family sizes that are, on average, above the replacement level (McDonald, 2000a). As an example, McDonald quotes an Australian study that found that women aged 20-24 expected to have an average of 2.33 children in their lifetime. Findings like this suggest that the values of the young are not at all incompatible with the idea of having a family. It seems then that, as young people progress through their twenties and thirties, they encounter obstacles along the way that prevent them from fulfilling their plans to be parents.

5

Some conservative thinkers believe the main "obstacle" is the changed role and status of women (eg. Norton, 2003). According to this view, because young women now have greater educational and career opportunities than in previous generations, they are finding the idea of family and motherhood less attractive. Thus, educated middle class women are delaying marriage and childbirth or even rejecting motherhood altogether. It is claimed that women's improved status – which may be a good thing in itself – has had the unfortunate consequence of threatening population stability.

6

But there are several problems with this argument. For one, the lowest TFRs in Europe are found in Spain and Italy (around 1.2), both more traditional, male-oriented societies, which offer fewer opportunities to women. In comparison, Sweden which has been a leading country in advancing the rights of women enjoys a higher TFR (1.6 in 1996) – even though it is still below replacement. Chesnais (1998: p. 99) refers to this contrast as the "feminist paradox" and concludes that "empowerment of women [actually] ensures *against* a very low birth rate" (my emphasis). Another problem with trying to link improved education levels for women to low birth rates is that fertility in developed countries seems to be declining across all education and class levels. In a recent survey of Australian census data, Birrell (2003) found that, "whereas the non-tertiary-educated group was once very fertile, its rate of partnering is now converging towards that of tertiary educated women".

7

We can summarise the discussion to this point as follows:

- i) Young people today, in spite of what's said about their values, still express a desire to have children. However, few end up having as many as they say they would like.
- ii) The improved education and career opportunities for women does not seem to be the decisive factor in reducing the number of children that a woman has.

These conclusions suggest that there must be something else involved. Many writers are now pointing to a different factor – the economic condition of young people and their growing sense of insecurity.

8

Peter McDonald (2000a) in his article 'Low fertility in Australia: Evidence, causes and policy responses' discusses some of the things that a couple will consider when they are thinking of having a child. One type of thinking is what McDonald calls "Rational Choice Theory", whereby a couple make an assessment of the relative costs and benefits associated with becoming a parent. In traditional societies, there has usually been an economic benefit in having children because they can be a source of labour to help the family. In developed societies, however, children now constitute an economic cost, and so, it is argued, the benefits are more of a psychological kind – for example, enjoying the status of being a parent, having baby who will be fun and will grow up to love you, having offspring who will carry on the family name etc. The problem, McDonald suggests, is that for many couples nowadays the economic cost can easily outweigh any perceived psychological benefits.

## Academic Style and Conventions

### "Scare quotes"

You use these to distance yourself from certain language. eg. when you are using an informal expression, or a term used by others that you don't necessarily agree with.

### Careful language (it seems that...)

In this paragraph, the student wants to reject the view in the topic – that young people's selfishness is to blame for the declining birthrate. Notice how he does this in a careful way, by using expressions like:

Findings like this **suggest** that ...

It **seems** then that ...

Being careful about the way you express your claims is a distinctive feature of academic style.

### "Quoting" 1

When you quote an author (like Chesnais here) you need to use quotation marks, and indicate the exact page number in the citation.

Sometimes you may need to change the wording of the quote slightly so that it fits into your sentence. If you need to add/change any words, use [ ]; if you need to delete words, use ... (Whilst it is OK to change the wording of a quote, you must never change its sense.)

### Italics – for emphasis

Use italics when you want to emphasise a word. (When you do this in a quote, you need to indicate that it is your emphasis.)

### Dot points

It's OK to use dot points in an essay (or numbered points here), but use them very sparingly.

### Citation 4 Peter McDonald (2000a) ... discusses

Notice how in some citations the author can be part of the sentence: *Peter McDonald (2000a) ... discusses some of the things* etc. This is known as an 'author-prominent' citation and is very common in academic writing. Notice the use of reporting verbs in this citation type ("discusses").

### Titles

Use 'inverted commas' for the title of an article  
Use *italics* for the title of a book

### More reporting expressions

Notice some of the other reporting expressions used in the student's summary of Peter McDonald's ideas:

... *what McDonald calls* ...

... *McDonald suggests* ...

... *McDonald points to* ...

... *which he thinks* ...

## Essay Commentary

### 11. Providing evidence for the argument

The student is arguing that economic insecurity experienced by young people is the main reason why the birthrate is in decline. Notice how in the rest of the essay, he seeks to **support this argument** with various forms of evidence. The student presents a range of evidence:

- i) several theories discussed by McDonald
- ii) some research by Birrell
- iii) comments by Genda
- iv) results of a US survey.

**Hint: it is important to have an argument in your essay. But it is equally important to provide support for what you are arguing. Your essays will be judged mainly on your ability to do these two things.**

### 12. Concluding

There are a number of things happening in the conclusion. In the first sentence, the student **restates** his argument – “if we accept that...”. He then goes on to discuss what could be done to deal with the problem. In broad terms this is a discussion of the **implications** of the students’ argument. Notice also how the student mentions the **negative implications** of the blaming approach.

**Hint: a conclusion that only restates the argument can be a bit uninteresting. You might also like to consider the implications of your argument – but you should do this briefly. Think: “I have argued for this position – so what might follow on from this”.**

### 13. Structuring the essay

You may have noticed that this essay is quite tightly structured. Its paragraph structure can be set out thus:

- |     |     |                                   |
|-----|-----|-----------------------------------|
| Par | 1.  | Introduction                      |
|     | 2.  | Background to issue               |
|     | 3.  | Explanation point 1 - summary     |
|     | 4.  | student’s critique                |
|     | 5.  | Explanation point 2 -summary      |
|     | 6.  | student’s critique                |
|     | 7.  | Student’s alternative explanation |
|     | 8.  | - Evidence 1                      |
|     | 9.  | - Evidence 2                      |
|     | 10. | - Evidence 3                      |
|     | 11. | Conclusion                        |

**Hint: always try to map out a structure for your essay. Do this before you do too much writing.**

9

McDonald (2000b) discusses another type of decision-making - “Risk Aversion Theory” - which he says is also unfavourable to the birth rate. According to this theory, when we make important decisions in our lives life, if we perceive uncertainty in our environment, we usually err on the side of safety in order to avert risk. McDonald points to a rise in economic uncertainty which he thinks has steered a lot of young people away from life-changing decisions like marriage and parenthood:

Jobs are no longer lifetime jobs. There is a strong economic cycle of booms and busts. Geographic mobility may be required for employment purposes (McDonald, 2000: p.15).

Birrell (2003) focuses on increased economic uncertainty for men. Referring to the situation in Australia, he discusses men’s reluctance to form families in terms of perceived costs and risks:

Many men are poor – in 2001, 42 per cent of men aged 25-44 earned less than \$32,000 a year. Only two-thirds of men in this age group were in full-time work. Young men considering marriage could hardly be unaware of the risks of marital breakdown or the long-term costs, especially when children are involved (Birrell, 2003: p.12).

And Yuji Genda (2000) in Japan, responding to Yamada’s analysis of “parasite singles”, argues that the failure of young Japanese to leave home and start families is not due to self-indulgence, but is an understandable response to increasingly difficult economic circumstances. Genda (2000) notes that it is the young who have had to bear the brunt of the decade long restructuring of the Japanese economy, with youth unemployment hovering around 10% and a marked reduction in secure full-time jobs for the young.

10

Young people around the world seem to have an increasing perception of economic uncertainty and contemplate something their parents would have found impossible - a decline in living standards over their lifetime. According to a 1990 American survey, two thirds of respondents in the 18-29 age group thought it would be more difficult for their generation to live as comfortably as previous generations (cited in Newman, 2000: p.505). Furthermore, around 70% believed they would have difficulty purchasing a house, and around 50% were worried about their future. Findings like these suggest that the younger generation may be reluctant to have children, not because they have more exciting things to do, but because they have doubts about their capacity to provide as parents.

11

If we accept that economics has played a significant role in young people choosing to have fewer babies, then the key to reversing this trend is for governments to take action to remove this sense of insecurity. A number of policy approaches have been suggested. Some writers have focussed on the need for better welfare provisions for families – like paid parental leave, family allowances, access to child care, etc (Chesnaï, 1998). Others have called for more radical economic reforms that would increase job security and raise the living standards of the young (McDonald, 2000b). It is hard to know what remedies are needed. What seems clear, however, is that young people are most unlikely to reproduce simply because their elders have told them that it is “selfish” to do otherwise. Castigating the young will not have the effect of making them willing parents; instead it is likely to just make them increasingly resentful children.

## Academic Style and Conventions

### Indenting of paragraphs

It’s very important to make it clear to your reader when one paragraph ends and a new one begins. In this paragraph (#9), there is some potential for confusion. Notice how the student has used indenting to make this clear.

### “Quoting” 2 – longer quotes

Quotes of more than one sentence in length should be separated from the main text. Notice how these are indented and are in a slightly smaller font. Again you should indicate the page number.

### 14. Editing

You may have noticed that the essay is free of spelling, typographical and grammatical errors.

**Hint: always read your work very carefully before you submit it. Avoid doing your editing on the screen. Always print out and edit from a hard copy.**

References

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- Ichimura, S. & N. Ogawa (2000). Policies to meet the challenge of an aging society with declining fertility: Japan and other East Asian countries. Paper presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, USA.  
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- Norton, A. (2003). Student debt: A HECS on fertility? *Issue Analysis No 3*. Melbourne: Centre for Independent Studies.
- Newman, D. (2000). *Sociology: Exploring the architecture of everyday life*. California: Pine Forge.

15. References

Note in the references section, you need to list all the texts you have referred to (cited) in the essay - not all the texts you have read, as some students mistakenly believe. Notice that the sample essay refers to a total of nine texts. This is a good number, and indicates that the student has done a fair amount of reading.

Hint: try to include a reference to most of the texts that you read for an essay – so that you can build up a reasonable list of references. Of course, all references have to be relevant to your argument.

List of references

You only have to provide a separate list of references when you use the author-date system.

Note:

- Entries should be set out in alphabetical order.
- Each entry should generally be set out in the following order and format:

**Author family name, Initial. (date). Title. Place: Publisher.**

Web references

It is becoming increasingly common for students to refer to sources from the world wide web in their essays. In addition to providing author and title of site, you need to include:

- the URL for the site
- when you accessed the site.

Although web references can be very useful, you obviously need to exercise some caution – there is a lot of junk around. Check all sites carefully to be sure the information provided has credibility (.edu and .org sites are generally the more reliable).