

A QUICK GUIDE TO FORMAL WRITING IN ENGLISH

THE WHAT:

There are three major types of written assignments that can appear on the matura exam (poziom rozszerzony):

1. **A formal letter** — a type of written text which is meant to address an issue directly to another person.
2. **An article** — a type of written text (mostly journalistic) which presents the author's attitude towards a certain issue.
3. **An argumentative essay** — a type of written text (mostly academic) which argues something on the basis of the presented evidence.

THE HOW:

General information:

All specific forms of writing in English have their own formal requirements. That is why the most important thing to remember is that you need to give those texts a proper structure. The most basic structure for all the forms is the same. All formal writing in English should include:

1. **The introduction** — in which you briefly explain the topic and the purpose for writing.
2. **The body** — in which you comment on the issue in more detail, providing examples where appropriate.
3. **The conclusion** — in which you sum up what you have already said and offer your final thoughts.

The specifics will differ depending on the particular form of formal writing, but these three parts of the text are fundamental and should always be clearly marked with the appropriate use of paragraphs.

The formal letter:

The basic structure:

1. **Introduction** — in the first paragraph, you should state the reason for your writing.
2. **Body** — in the body of the letter (2-3 paragraphs), you should elaborate on your issue, further developing the subject.
3. **Conclusion** — in the last paragraph, you should sum up the subject and express a wish for an action to be taken to resolve the issue.

Most common types of formal letters:

1. Letter of complaint — in this type of letter, the sender expresses their dissatisfaction with an issue and asks for it to be resolved by the addressee.
 - Is always formal in style.
 - You should state the reason for your complaint in the first paragraph.
 - You can use mild or strong language, depending on the type of complaint and the attitude of the sender, but you should not resort to expletives or other types of abusive language.
 - Each complaint should be followed by a justification.
 - In the final paragraph, you can suggest a course of action to be taken by the addressee.
2. Letter of apology — in this type of letter, the sender expresses their regrets over something that happened because of them and offers to make amends.
 - Can be formal or informal.
 - You should state your reason for writing in the first paragraph (i.e. the way in which you caused offence).
 - You should enumerate the reasons for the inconvenience caused in the body of the letter.
 - In your concluding paragraph, you should express regret and offer to make further amends if necessary.

3. Letter of invitation — in this type of letter, the sender invites the addressee to take part in a specific event.
 - Can be formal or informal.
 - You should state your reason for writing in the first paragraph (i.e. the intent of the letter and the event to which you are inviting the addressee).
 - You should elaborate on the details of the invitation (date, time, venue, attire requirements, etc.) in the body of your letter.
 - In your concluding paragraph, you should restate how grateful you would be if the addressee accepted the invitation.
4. Letter of application — in this type of letter, the sender applies for a position (a job, an internship, etc.).
 - Is always formal in style.
 - You should state your reason for writing in the first paragraph (remember to be specific about the position you are applying for).
 - You should present your qualifications, previous experience and relevant skills in the body of your letter.
 - In your concluding paragraph, you should express your availability for further communication.

The article:

The basic structure:

1. **Headline** — in other words, the title of your article. It should be short and catchy, but at the same time informative. To achieve that, look for key words in your article to include in your headline. It should summarize the main point/piece information you want to convey, but do it in a way that will catch the reader's attention.
2. **Introduction** — your introduction should provide background information on the topic and signalize the angle from which you want to approach the subject.
3. **Main body** — this is where you develop your main points. Remember that your discussion of the topic should be detailed, and each point should be presented in its own paragraph.
4. **Conclusion** — your conclusion should offer a comprehensive summary of the topic, as well as your own opinion if applicable.

Most common types of articles:

1. Written to give information (news reports) — this type of article focuses on reporting the facts and should remain as impartial as possible.
2. Written to express opinion (argumentative articles) — this type of article focuses on both reporting facts and providing the author's opinion on the matter, and as such does not need to remain impartial. Such articles can contain elements of description, review, report, opinion piece, etc.

Notes on the journalistic style:

1. Use the present tense if possible.
2. Avoid prepositions and omit articles in your headlines.
3. Be clear and concise.
4. Avoid simplistic vocabulary (particularly adjectives).
5. Address the reader in the second person if applicable.

The argumentative essay:

The main function of an essay is to argue that something is true. It performs the basic function of convincing the reader to see and understand your point of view. There are different types of argumentative essays (for and against, opinion, solutions to problems, discursive), but they share a common basic structure and goal — to provoke thinking.

Types of argumentative essays:

1. For and against essay:
 - a. This type of argumentative essay considers the given issue from opposing sides, providing arguments for both opposing stances.
 - b. In the introduction, you state your general topic, but you do not give your opinion.
 - c. In the body, you provide arguments for both sides, along with further evidence/justification.

- d. In the conclusion, you can present your own stance (i.e. provide your final thesis) or choose a more balanced approach to the issue.
2. Opinion essay:
 - a. This type of argumentative essay invites the author to present their own opinion on a given topic. In this type of argumentative essay, thesis statement is of crucial importance, since it is the core of your entire argument.
 - b. In the introduction, you state your general topic and present your thesis statement.
 - c. In the body, you provide arguments to support your thesis statement, along with further evidence/justification. You may also include a paragraph in which you consider an opposing stance, also with evidence/justification.
 - d. In the conclusion, you sum up your argumentation and restate your thesis, as well as provide further insights.
 3. Essay providing solutions to problems:
 - a. This type of argumentative essay invites the author to present their solutions to a particular issue, with the expected results.
 - b. In the introduction, you state the problem which you are going to tackle in your essay (you can also include the reasons why the issue has become such a problem).
 - c. In the body, in separate paragraphs, you present your solutions, along with the expected results or consequences.
 - d. In the conclusion, you provide the summary of your opinion.
 4. Discursive essay:
 - a. This type of argumentative essay invites the author — and by extension also the reader — to consider a particular issue from multiple directions and points of view.
 - b. In the introduction, you state the topic and give a general overview of the issue.
 - c. In the body, you consider various aspects of the discussed issue, along with the corresponding opposing arguments.
 - d. In the conclusion, you summarize the topic and give your opinion.

The basic structure:

1. Introduction — in the introduction to an argumentative essay, you need to present the topic to be discussed, but most importantly, you need to present your thesis statement if applicable.

2. Body — in the body of an argumentative essay, you need to provide evidence (examples), which will support your central claim (i.e. your thesis).
3. Conclusion — in the conclusion to an argumentative essay, you need to sum up your argument and present any further thoughts prompted by your analysis.

The thesis:

The thesis is the core of your argument, the central claim that you make about a particular issue. It needs to be clearly and firmly stated in the introduction to your essay. Remember that a well-formulated thesis is crucial to the structure of the entire essay — your arguments in the body of the essay as well as the evidence you present need to directly correspond to and support your thesis.

A good thesis should not be obvious; it should consider the issue from multiple angles in order to find something to argue. In order to formulate your thesis, you first need to ask yourself a question about the issue you are supposed to discuss, or one particular aspect of it. If your question can be answered simply *yes* or *no*, then your thesis needs to be revised, because you are not making a strong enough argument.

For example:

Question: *Is pollution harmful to the environment?*

Thesis: *Pollution is harmful to the environment.*

In these examples, both the question and the resulting thesis are far too simple and obvious. Everyone knows already that pollution is harmful to the environment. You don't need to explain that.

How to fix that? Think about a particular aspect of the problem of pollution that you can focus on — a concrete idea that is more specific than the above example. If, then, we wanted to make the thesis statement more complex, we could argue:

Question: *Does everyone contribute to the Earth's pollution in equal amount?*

Thesis: *Even though all pollution is harmful to the environment, the current emphasis on individual accountability absolves giant corporations of guilt despite their overwhelming contribution to the state of the planet.*

As you can see, the second example is much more specific — it discusses a selected aspect of a larger issue, but it does so in a lot more depth.

Paragraph structure:

In order to clearly support the central claim/topic of your essay, your paragraphs also need to have a structure. Just like all the parts of your essay (introduction, body, conclusion) should logically form a coherent whole, so should your paragraphs. What in formal writing is called paragraph cohesion is extremely important to the overall clarity of your entire argument.

To achieve that cohesion, remember that all the sentences in any given paragraph should clearly follow from one another and have a logical link. What is meant by this is a clear relationship between two sentences. For example, one sentence can provide further explanation for the ideas presented in the preceding sentence, but it can also provide contrast or comparison as well as present a result or a reason. Those logical links should exist between all the consecutive sentences in your paragraph.

The most important way to ensure paragraph cohesion, however, is to make sure that each of your paragraphs has a topic sentence. A topic sentence is the first sentence of a given paragraph, which summarizes the main point of the entire paragraph. For example:

There are many arguments in favor of banning cars from city centers. In the first place, it would help to reduce pollution. This means that the city center would be a healthier place to live and work in. Furthermore, it would be easier for pedestrians to walk around the center without having to cross busy roads.

In this example, the sentence in bold is the topic sentence. It presents the central point of the paragraph (the advantages of banning cars in city centers), and is followed with further examples (evidence) which logically connect to and support the topic sentence (1. reduction in pollution → the center becomes healthier to live and work in; 2. more safety for pedestrians).

In short:

- The topic sentence should identify the main idea and point of the paragraph. To choose an appropriate topic sentence, read the paragraph and think about its main idea and point.
- The supporting details in the paragraph (the sentences other than the topic sentence) will develop or explain the topic sentence. Read all the supporting details in the paragraph and think about the ideas they discuss.
- The topic sentence should not be too general or too specific. When considering the options, look for a topic sentence that is general enough to show the paragraph's main

idea instead of just one of its details. The answer should be specific enough that the reader understands the main idea of the paragraph.

To sum up:

Writing an argumentative essay is all about understanding its structure, and understanding that all parts of the essay — from the clauses that form sentences, through the sentences that form paragraphs, to the paragraphs that form the essay — need to be connected. The types of essays may differ, but the underlying principle of cohesion remains the same. Once you familiarize yourself with the basic rules of formal writing, no essay will be too intimidating to tackle.

Now get writing, and good luck :)

Further exercises:

Write an essay on one of the following topics:

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being your own boss.
2. Teenagers should access the Internet only under strict adult supervision. Do you agree?
3. Discuss the ways to improve the learning of foreign languages.
4. The role of marriage in today's society.