



TOEFL Writing Templates

Academic Discussion Task

By the experts at [Magoosh](#)

The TOEFL Academic Discussion task gives you **ten minutes**. That includes reading the professor's question, reading two student responses, deciding where you stand, writing your own contribution, and proofreading it. It goes fast. This guide gives you a **response skeleton** that works regardless of the topic, and **phrase menus organized by function** — separate options for stating your opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, supporting a claim, and transitioning between ideas. These phrases give you scaffolding, not a script — ETS rewards original language and real substance, so use them as a starting point, not a fill-in-the-blank formula.

Preparing for the Write an Email task too? We've got a [companion set of templates](#).

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How Templates Fit Into Your Discussion Strategy

If you've watched our Academic Discussion lessons, you already know the core strategy: take a clear side, agree with one student and disagree with the other, paraphrase their ideas in your own words, support every claim with explanations or examples, and aim for 120–130 words.

Templates don't change that strategy. They layer on top of it:

The lessons give you a game plan—which side to pick, how to engage with both students, why supporting detail matters, and how to keep your argument focused.

Templates give you ready-made language—phrases for opening your argument, citing a classmate, pushing back on a point, and tying your ideas together.

You need both. But the ideas always matter more than the phrasing. A response loaded with smooth-sounding phrases that sidesteps the professor's actual question won't score well. And a response packed with strong ideas but no connective tissue will leave the reader struggling to follow your logic.

What templates can do

- **Cut down your planning time.** Instead of staring at the screen trying to figure out how to phrase your agreement or disagreement, you'll have language ready to go.
- **Make your English sound more natural.** Expressions like "I agree with [Name]'s point that..." or "While [Name] raises a fair point, I believe..." hit the right register—academic enough for a class discussion, conversational enough to sound like a real person wrote them.
- **Give you built-in syntactic variety.** The ETS rubric rewards "effective use of a variety of syntactic structures and precise, idiomatic word choice." When you have multiple phrase options per function, you're less likely to fall into repetitive sentence patterns.

What templates cannot do

- **They can't think for you.** The explanations, examples, and details that make your argument convincing have to come from your own reasoning. A phrase bank can start a sentence; it can't finish the thought.
- **They can't manage your clock.** Knowing the perfect phrase for disagreement doesn't matter if you've burned five minutes reading and rereading the prompt.
- **They can't make you stand out.** If every test-taker opens with the same "While [Name] raises a fair point..." the scorer has seen that line hundreds of times. The rubric at Score 5 requires precise, idiomatic word choice—and "idiomatic" means language that sounds like you, not like a template.

Think of these menus as training wheels, not a permanent ride. The more you practice, the more you'll swap in your own phrasing. When that happens, the templates have done their job.

The Universal Response Skeleton

Every Academic Discussion response follows the same basic structure. Unlike the Write an Email task, there's no greeting, no sign-off, and no register to worry about. You're writing a discussion post, and the structure is purely functional.

Opening move

One sentence. State your opinion or align with a student. This is the first thing the reader sees. It should immediately signal which side you're on.

Agreement block

Two to three sentences. Reference one student by name, paraphrase their idea, and briefly explain why you agree. Then add a new supporting detail they didn't mention.

Disagreement block

Two to three sentences. Reference the other student by name, paraphrase their idea, and explain why you disagree. Provide a reason or counterexample.

Support and elaboration

Woven throughout. Explanations, examples, and details that deepen your argument. This is where most of your word count goes—and where the rubric's "well-elaborated" criterion lives.

Closing move

One sentence, optional. Restate your overall position or tie back to the professor's question. This is the "return to general" that keeps your response feeling complete rather than cut off.

Pro tip: You don't have to follow this exact order. Starting with agreement, starting with disagreement, or starting with your overall opinion all work. What matters is that your reader can follow your argument from start to finish. Pick an order that feels natural and practice it consistently.

Phrase Menu 1: Stating Your Opinion

Your response needs to make your position clear. Sometimes you'll state it at the very beginning (and that's often the best for clarity); sometimes it will emerge through your agreement and disagreement. Either way, having go-to phrases for declaring where you stand helps you get started quickly.

Notice that most of these phrases are simple. That's intentional. The rubric doesn't reward complicated opinion statements—it rewards the explanations and details that follow. Spend your complexity budget on supporting your claims, not on your thesis sentence.

PHRASE	BEST FOR
In my opinion, [position].	Universal—direct and clear
I strongly believe that [position].	When you have a confident stance
From my perspective, [position].	Slightly formal—good for nuanced topics
I think [Name] is right that [paraphrase], and I would take it even further.	When your opinion builds on a student's point
While both sides have merit, I believe [position].	When you want to acknowledge complexity before committing
Based on my own experience, I would argue that [position].	When you plan to use a personal example

Phrase Menu 2: Agreeing with a Student

One of the strongest moves you can make in this task is to explicitly agree with one of the students and then build on their point. This does two things at once: it contributes to the discussion (which the task requires), and it gives you a launching pad for your own supporting details.

Citing and paraphrasing

PHRASE	BEST FOR
I agree with [Name]’s point that [paraphrase].	Universal—clean and direct
[Name] makes a strong argument when [he/she] says that [paraphrase].	Slightly more formal, acknowledges their reasoning
I share [Name]’s view that [paraphrase].	Concise—when you want to move quickly to your own support
[Name]’s perspective resonates with me, especially [his/her] point about [specific detail].	When you want to highlight one specific part of their argument
Like [Name], I believe that [paraphrase in your own words].	Casual, conversational

Building on their point

PHRASE	BEST FOR
In addition to what [Name] mentioned, I would add that...	Extending their argument with a new reason
To build on [Name]’s point,...	Concise transition into new detail
[Name] touched on [idea], and I think this is especially true when you consider...	Deepening their point with a specific example
What [Name] describes is something I have seen firsthand.	Launching into a personal example

Pro tip: When you agree with a student, don’t just say “I agree” and move on. That earns you nothing. The value is in what comes after—the new detail, example, or explanation you add to strengthen the shared position. Think of agreement as a springboard, not a destination.

Phrase Menu 3: Disagreeing with a Student

Disagreement is where many students struggle. The instinct is either to be too blunt (“I disagree with [Name] because they are wrong”) or too soft (avoiding disagreement altogether). The sweet spot is respectful but clear: acknowledge what they said, then explain why you see it differently.

Acknowledging before countering

PHRASE	BEST FOR
While [Name] raises a fair point about [paraphrase], I believe...	Universal—polite concession before your counter
I understand [Name]’s argument that [paraphrase], but I think...	Empathetic—shows you read their post carefully
[Name] makes an interesting observation about [topic]. However,...	Neutral—acknowledges without fully endorsing
Although [Name]’s perspective is understandable, I would argue that...	Slightly formal—good for complex topics
I respectfully disagree with [Name]’s claim that [paraphrase].	Direct but polite—when you have a clear counter

Explaining why you disagree

PHRASE	BEST FOR
The issue with this view is that...	Direct, analytical
What this argument overlooks is...	Pointing out a gap in their reasoning
In practice, however,...	Contrasting theory with real-world reality
This may be true in some cases, but...	Partial concession—acknowledges limits of your own counter
From a different angle,...	Reframing the issue

Pro tip: You don’t need to prove the other student wrong. You just need to explain why you see the issue differently. A phrase like “What this argument overlooks is...” is stronger than “This is wrong because...” —it sounds analytical rather than combative, and it positions you as a thinker, not a critic.

Phrase Menu 4: Supporting Your Claims

This is where the points are. The ETS rubric at Score 5 specifically calls for “relevant and well-elaborated explanations, exemplifications, and/or details.” Every opinion you state—whether it’s your main position, your agreement, or your disagreement—needs to be followed by a “why.” The phrases below help you launch into that “why.”

Introducing an explanation

PHRASE	BEST FOR
The reason I feel this way is that...	Universal—clear, direct
This is because...	Simple, efficient
One important factor to consider is...	When introducing a new angle
This matters because...	Connecting your point to a larger significance

Introducing an example

PHRASE	BEST FOR
For example,...	Universal—always works
For instance, in my own experience,...	When using a personal (invented) anecdote
A good illustration of this is...	Slightly formal—good for academic topics
Consider the case of...	Analytical, inviting the reader to think
To give a specific example,...	When you want to signal that you’re about to get concrete

Adding detail or elaboration

PHRASE	BEST FOR
In other words,...	Restating a complex idea more clearly
What I mean by this is...	Clarifying after a dense sentence
This is particularly important because...	Deepening a point already made
Not only [X], but also [Y].	Adding a second supporting reason efficiently

Pro tip: The lessons teach you to invent realistic details—and this is the phrase menu that helps you actually deliver them. If your opinion is that collective action matters more than personal responsibility for climate change, the support might be: “For instance, in my own city, a government policy banning single-use plastics led to a 40% reduction in waste within two years—something no individual effort could have achieved.” That example is invented, but it’s specific and plausible. That’s exactly what the rubric rewards.

Phrase Menu 5: Transitions and Flow

A strong response doesn't just list ideas—it connects them. Transitions are the glue between your agreement, disagreement, and supporting details. They signal to the reader (and the scorer) that your argument has a logical flow.

Moving from agreement to disagreement (or vice versa)

TRANSITIONS

- That said,
- On the other hand,
- However, I see things differently when it comes to [Name]'s argument.
- While I agree with [Name], I take a different view on [Name]'s point.
- At the same time,

Moving from opinion to support

TRANSITIONS

- The reason for this is straightforward.
- Let me explain why.
- Here is what I mean.
- To illustrate,
- This is evident when you consider

Returning to your main argument

TRANSITIONS

- Ultimately,
- For these reasons,
- This is why I believe
- All of this points to the same conclusion:
- In the end,

Pro tip: You don't need a transition before every sentence. One or two well-placed transitions per response is enough. Overusing them—"Furthermore... Moreover... Additionally..."—makes your writing sound like a list, not a discussion. Use transitions where the reader needs a signal that you're changing direction or wrapping up.

Putting It All Together: A Worked Example

Time to see all five phrase menus working together in a single response. Here's the prompt:

Dr. Okafor (Economics)

We've been discussing the rise of the gig economy, where workers take on short-term, flexible jobs through platforms like ride-sharing and delivery apps rather than holding traditional full-time positions. Some economists argue that the gig economy provides workers with valuable independence and flexibility. Others contend that it exploits workers by denying them benefits and job security. What is your perspective on this issue?

Lena: I think the gig economy gives workers a lot of freedom. People can choose when and how much they work, which is especially helpful for students, parents, or anyone who needs a flexible schedule. Not everyone wants a traditional nine-to-five job, and these platforms offer a genuine alternative.

Jordan: I believe the gig economy takes advantage of workers. Most gig workers don't receive health insurance, paid time off, or retirement benefits. Companies label them as independent contractors to avoid responsibilities that traditional employers have. The flexibility sounds appealing, but it often comes at the cost of financial stability.

Here's what a response might look like:

In my opinion, the gig economy is unfair to workers.

Menu 1: Stating opinion

I understand Lena's argument that the gig economy offers valuable flexibility, *but I think* the costs outweigh the benefits. *In practice, however*, that flexibility often means unpredictable income. Many gig workers cannot plan their finances because their hours and earnings change from week to week.

Menu 3: Acknowledging before countering; Menu 3: Explaining why you disagree

I agree with Jordan's point that companies use the "independent contractor" label to avoid providing basic benefits. *To build on Jordan's point*, this creates a situation where workers take on all the risk while companies keep most of the profit. *For instance, in my own experience*, a friend of mine drove for a delivery app for over a year and never received any health coverage or paid time off.

Menu 2: Citing and paraphrasing; Menu 2: Building on their point; Menu 4: Introducing an example

This is why I believe the gig economy, as it currently operates, needs stronger worker protections.

Menu 5: Returning to main argument

A few things to notice:

- Every *pink phrase* came from the menus in this guide, but the specific details (unpredictable income, the friend who drove for a delivery app) are all invented. That's the content part—and it's what makes the response convincing.
- **Both students are referenced by name**, and their ideas are paraphrased rather than copied.

- **Every claim is backed up.** The agreement with Jordan doesn't just say "I agree"—it adds a new point (workers absorb all the risk) and a concrete example (the friend who drove for a delivery app).
- **The total length is about 140 words**—comfortably within the target range.
- **The order here is disagreement, then agreement, then closing.** Flipping that—leading with agreement—would work just as well.

That's the relationship between templates and content in action. The phrases handle the structural heavy lifting so you can focus on what you actually want to say.

Try it yourself: Magoosh's [free TOEFL practice test](#) includes the Academic Discussion task with AI-powered feedback—so you can practice with a real prompt and see how your response scores.

How to Practice with These Templates

Owning a phrase menu and knowing how to use it are different things. The workflow below is designed to move you from “looking up phrases” to “writing automatically”—in about fifteen practice responses.

Step 1: Read the prompt and choose your side

Before you start writing, read the professor’s question and both student responses. Decide which side you agree with. The lessons teach you to choose whichever side is easier to explain—not necessarily the one you truly believe. Sometimes you won’t have a strong preference, and that’s fine. Just pick the side you have more ideas about or can get started on more quickly. This decision takes about 30 seconds and determines everything that follows.

Step 2: Write with the menus open

For your first few practice responses, keep this guide open beside you. After choosing your side, deliberately select one phrase from each menu—one for your opening, one for agreement, one for disagreement, one for launching into support. The key word is select: scan the options and pick the best fit, rather than grabbing the first one you see every time.

Step 3: Write the same prompt with different phrases

Go back to the same prompt and write a second response—but swap out every phrase you used the first time. If draft one opened with “I agree with [Name]’s point that...”, draft two might open with “[Name] makes a strong argument when...” Same ideas, different structural language. This is what moves you from memorizing phrases to understanding the patterns behind them.

Step 4: Write without looking

Now close this guide and write a third response from memory. Don’t worry about matching the menus exactly—just write. You’ll notice that a lot of the phrasing comes out naturally, and some of it will be your own variation on what you practiced. That’s exactly what you’re aiming for.

Three drafts per prompt is the full cycle: guided, then flexible, then independent. After a few rounds, the structural language stops feeling borrowed and starts feeling like yours.

Pro tip: Repeat this three-draft cycle on at least five different prompts—that’s fifteen responses total. By the end, you won’t be thinking about which phrase to use. You’ll just be writing.

What Templates Cannot Do (And What to Do Instead)

Templates can't supply your content

A phrase like “For instance, in my own experience...” is a launchpad—but the example that follows it has to be plausible, specific, and relevant to the argument you’re making. That ability to generate convincing support on the fly is a skill you build through practice, not something you can download from a phrase bank.

Templates can't teach timing

Ten minutes is tight, and no amount of phrase memorization changes that. You still need to practice the full sequence under real time pressure: one to two minutes reading and choosing your side, six to seven minutes writing, and one to two minutes proofreading. Templates can speed up the writing phase, but they can't tell you when to stop reading and start typing.

Over-reliance makes your writing sound average

If thousands of test-takers all open their disagreement with “While [Name] raises a fair point, I believe...”, those responses all blur together. The ETS rubric at the highest level rewards “precise, idiomatic word choice”—and idiomatic means it sounds like something you would write, not something everyone writes. The real value of these menus is in learning the patterns—how concessions work, how examples are introduced, how transitions signal direction. Once you’ve internalized the patterns, create your own phrases.

A preset phrase may not match the topic

The Academic Discussion task has a fairly consistent register—informal-academic. You’re writing a discussion post, not a formal essay and not a text message. But topic complexity varies. A prompt about economic policy may call for more analytical language (“What this argument overlooks is...”), while a prompt about daily habits might work better with conversational phrasing (“In my own experience...”). Read the prompt and adjust.

What to do instead of memorizing

- **Read real academic discussions.** University discussion boards, comment sections on longform articles, and opinion forums show you how fluent English speakers actually agree, disagree, and build arguments. Pay attention to how they phrase things and steal what sounds good.
- **Start your own phrase collection.** As you practice, jot down any phrasing—from this guide or elsewhere—that feels comfortable in your voice. Over time, that personal list becomes your go-to resource, and this guide fades into the background. That’s the progression you want.
- **Prioritize your ideas over your openings.** On test day, your mental energy is better spent figuring out what to argue than how to start the sentence. If you’ve put in the practice reps, the structural language will take care of itself.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I memorize all of these phrases?

No—and trying to would probably slow you down. Pick two or three favorites from each menu, practice with those until they feel automatic, and then experiment with others. A small, flexible toolkit beats a memorized dictionary every time.

Do I have to agree with one student and disagree with the other?

Not technically. The instructions say to “express and support your opinion” and “make a contribution to the discussion.” You could agree with both students, or take a position neither mentioned. But agreeing with one and disagreeing with the other gives you the simplest, most reliable structure. It guarantees you reference both students, take a clear side, and have enough to say—all within ten minutes.

What if I genuinely see both sides of the argument?

Choose whichever side is easier to explain and stick with it. The rubric rewards clarity, not nuance. A focused, well-supported argument for one side will score higher than a muddled attempt to address both. You can briefly acknowledge the other side’s validity—“While [Name] raises a fair point...”—before committing to your position.

How long should my response be?

At least 100 words (the stated minimum), but aim for 120–130 words. That gives you enough room to state your opinion, reference both students, and provide supporting detail without running into time pressure. Going significantly over 130 words isn’t necessary and risks eating into your proofreading time.

Will using templates get me a 5?

They can move you in the right direction, but they’re one piece of a larger picture. A Score 5 response needs well-elaborated explanations, syntactic variety, precise word choice, and near-perfect accuracy—all at once. Templates cover the structural language. The depth of thinking, the range of expression, and the accuracy come from sustained practice.

Is the Academic Discussion task always a two-sided debate?

Almost always. Of the official ETS examples we’ve reviewed, the vast majority present a binary situation—two students take opposing sides, and you respond. There are occasional variations where the question asks a yes/no question with room for nuance, but there are no “propose a solution from scratch” variants. The phrase menus in this guide are calibrated for the debate format, which is what you should expect on test day.

Ready to practice? Start with a [free TOEFL practice test](#) that includes all three writing tasks—Build a Sentence, Write an Email, and Academic Discussion.

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