



Learning tips

You have memorised lists of vocabulary. You've practised your writing. You've followed the format of sample essays. You've even picked a topic you're familiar with. Then why aren't you getting the grade you deserve in your DSE *Writing* paper?

Unfortunately, almost *everyone* has done those things to prepare for the HKDSE exam, so you need to find a way to get ahead of the pack. Many students make the same mistakes, but there are a few key areas that can make all the difference to your grade.

Take a look at these four common mistakes that people make in the exam. If you can avoid doing these things, you'll really stand out and get the grade you deserve.

Mistake 1: Using stock phrases or overly complicated vocabulary

It's tempting to use stock phrases (i.e. frequently used phrases recommended by tutors or other students) and the fancy vocabulary you've worked so hard to memorise, especially when you don't have a particularly strong base in English to begin with. However, consciously using vocabulary that's beyond your level frequently results in unnatural English. Examiners require vocabulary that is 'well-chosen and used appropriately to express subtleties of meaning'. Believe it or not, the eagle-eyed markers can see exactly what you're doing when you jam in vocabulary that you're not comfortable with.

Here are some stock phrases to avoid, according to the DSE markers' reports:

- future pillars of society
- burn the midnight oil
- a myriad of
- in a nutshell
- make both ends meet
- a hot topic
- last, but not least
- it is crystal clear that
- every coin has two sides
- tip of the iceberg

Mistake 2: Overlooking the importance of sentence structure

While many students rely heavily on vocabulary lists to boost their grades, they often overlook another key area that can make a big difference – sentence structure. Using a variety of well-structured sentences will enrich your writing and add emphasis to your points. In fact, the DSE English Paper 2 marking scheme specifically states that your essay should include an 'unlimited range of accurate sentence structures, with an excellent grasp of more complex structures'. Surprisingly few students are able to do this. Sentence variety is often what separates good from great grades.

Mistake 3: Omitting links between paragraphs

Do you often feel that your writing is fragmented, as if each paragraph is taken from a different piece of writing? That's a common problem for DSE candidates. It's caused by students memorising the standard structure of a paragraph and mechanically filling the framework with information suitable for the topic. This might be enough to get you a Level 3, or even a Level 4 if you are lucky, but nothing more than that. An essay isn't a list of small arguments. Rather, it should be a development of arguments that build upon and complement each other. To establish links between paragraphs so that your essay can become more integrated, you will have to find the common ground or differences between your arguments and try to bring the ideas together.

Mistake 4: Creating run-on sentences

You may also have heard this called a comma splice – it's when two separate sentences are incorrectly joined together by a comma. This isn't a grammatical problem in Chinese, and many students carry on the habit into English. Here is an example.

The government should not implement this policy, it's not feasible.

You should separate the two clauses with a full stop:

The government should not implement this policy. It's not feasible.

Or you can link the two clauses with a conjunction:

The government should not implement this policy, as it's not feasible.