HOW TO ACE THE WRITING TASKS
The guide to the writing tasks for the First Certificate

The writing part of the FCE consists of two texts; the first is an obligatory essay and the second is a choice of 3 texts. This document will explain all the types of text and how to pass them with AN A GRADE.

Explanation of all of the writing tasks

- Typical questions
- Evaluation scale

Examples of the types of texts that you need to practice with structural help

- essays
- A formal letter/email
- An informal letter/email
- An article
- A review
- A report

Key phrases for better writing

Key phrases to explain your opinion

Key phrases to justify your opinion

Connectors and linking phrases

Example questions for you to practice at home

- Two of these will be corrected by a Cambridge Examiner
What tasks does the writing part of the exam consist of?

There are 4 questions.

The 1\textsuperscript{st} task is obligatory. You must do question 1 and it is always an essay. The topics are varied but they are usually social issues, about the environment of the advantages/disadvantages of something.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} task is a choice; you can answer one question of 2, 3, 4. DO NOT ANSWER ALL OF THE QUESTIONS. The choices include: a letter (formal or informal), an email, a review, an article or a report. My suggestion is to focus on writing a formal or informal letter, a review and an article. The letter and the email are almost identical, so you cover both of them. The report is a little difficult because of the organisation and format.
Typical questions

1. **Should you do a plan?**

   Yes! You must make a plan to organise your writing. On the day of the exam, you will be stressed and feel pressure. A plan is your way of organising your text and your thoughts.

2. **What happens if I write more than 190 words?**

   Nothing... Well, almost nothing. In the past for every 5 words extra, they took away a point, however, now they do not. It is not good to go over 190 words because of time, but you can. I wouldn’t write more than 200 words because they will probably lower the mark they give you for content. They will determine some of it to be unnecessary.

3. **What counts as complex language in the exam?**

   You MUST use complex language at B2 level. You must use attention grabbing vocabulary and a variety of grammar structures. The passive voice, relative clauses, modal verbs, conditionals, reported speech and inversions all count as COMPLEX grammar forms and you must use them.
Evaluation Scale explained

The writing part of the exam lasts for 1 hour 20 minutes (80 minutes). In this time the candidates need to write two texts of 160-190 words. To say what grade you need to pass the writing part of the exam is not as easy as with the use of English and reading as the way it is assessed is fairly subjective and can be within a point of what another examiner would put. The assessment scale for the writing section of Cambridge is broken up into 4 sections:

- Content
- Communicative achievement
- Organisation
- Language

For the content part, Cambridge states “All content is relevant to the task. Target reader is fully informed”. This means, to get full marks for content the candidate must answer the question fully and not include irrelevant information.

For the communicative achievement part, Cambridge states “The candidate uses the conventions of the communicative task effectively to hold the target reader’s attention and communicate straightforward and complex ideas, as appropriate”. This means that the text is interesting enough to keep the reader’s attention and that the reader is informed of the ideas in the text with ease.
For organisation, Cambridge states “Text is well organised and coherent, using a variety of cohesive devices and organisational patterns to generally good effect”. To complete with this requirement the candidate needs to organise the text in the correct format (letter, essay, email, review or article etc.) The candidate also needs to use a variety of connectives (5-8 approximately). It is important to write the text in a logical way, it needs to be easy to read and understand.

For language refers to grammar and vocabulary usage, Cambridge states “Uses a range of vocabulary, including less common lexis, appropriately. Uses a range of simple and complex grammatical forms with control and flexibility. Occasional errors may be present but do not impede communication”. To pass this part of the assessment the candidate needs to use a range of vocabulary (they are not looking for strange and rarely used words, they want the correct word for the context), the grammar use needs to include both simple and complex (modals, conditionals, passive and relative clauses) forms with few errors.
How to write an essay for the FCE

An essay is the first part of the writing and it is obligatory. You need to answer the question with between 140-190 words. In the text you need to analyse a question using different points of view. It is a semi-formal text and should be impartial until the conclusion. What the examiner wants to see is a balanced argument that is both interesting and easy to read.

A good essay contains the following parts:

**Introduction**

Introduce the topic and say what you are going to talk about and capture the interest of the reader with a question, a fact or an extreme opinion.

**1st paragraph**

The first point from the notes (you can mix points if they are related). This should be your main point, you must justify why it is the most important.

**2nd paragraph**

The 2nd point from the notes, you need to link it to the first. Explain why it is of secondary importance.

**3rd paragraph**

This is optional and can be linked to the second paragraphs. It explains the final point and links to the others.

**Conclusion**

A summary of what you have said in the main paragraphs and make your main point. It must be interesting and the reader should learn something from it.
What do they look for in a good essay?

As I have said before, an essay at B2 level should be semi'-formal. Try to avoid contractions (can’t), phrasal verbs (be into) and colloquial phrases (awesome). The text needs to be the exact format that they have asked for (an essay with separate paragraphs), it should be easy to read and INTERESTING. If it is boring, it will get a bad grade.
Examples of essay questions and answers

_In English class you have been debating the advantages and disadvantages of studying English abroad._

_Write an essay giving reasons for your opinions_

**Title:** Many students spend a lot of money to study English in an English speaking country, but is it worth it?

**Notes: write about**

1. **Costs**  
2. **Teaching methods**  
3. **Immersion technique**

Many students spend a lot of money to study English in an English speaking country, but is it worth it?

To get started it is important to understand that learning English is of the utmost importance for people in Spain. Education experts say that the demand for a high level of English is only going to increase so we all need to find the best way of learning this language.

Firstly, we need to look at the cost of learning a language. We study English at school from the age of 3 but the level of classes and teaching is generally quite poor so our parents invest a lot of money in private language schools to help us through our exams. This is a costly process but we need to think, is it the quickest way to learn? Wouldn’t it be better to go to an English speaking country?

Going abroad to study is a fantastic experience and we generally make a lot more progress than we would that if we stayed in our own country, but it is extremely expensive. Not all people can afford it and they need to try to get grants to be able to go. The advantages are obvious because we are surrounded by the language and we are forced to use it in real life situations. But it is important to find people to practice with who are willing to be patient and help us.

To summarise, it is a fantastic opportunity to go abroad to study but it is important to have a good teacher and to be focussed on learning or you could waste your time, and a lot of money.
In English class you have been discussing free time and how habits have changed nowadays from the past.

Write an essay giving reasons for your opinions

Is it easier to find opportunities to do what you enjoy in your free time than in the past?

Discuss the issues involved:

1. Work.
2. Facilities
3. Time available to the general population.

Can we use our free time better nowadays than in the past?

A lack of free time can be a cause of stress and therefore, health problems. On starting this essay, it is important to take into account the various factors that have changed our access to free time activities from that of past generations.

Firstly, we should mention that in general, people have never had so many opportunities to enjoy leisure activities as they do today. People generally had less time and money to do as they pleased as the standard of living was lower. But the way we work also has a negative influence as in this day and age there is far more pressure to succeed and we are discouraged from using our free time unproductively.

In spite of having a vast amount of facilities and money to our advantage we have more distractions that prevent us from doing what we enjoy. Due to the emergence of the internet and technological advances, it is all too easy for us to waste our spare time.

Given these points, I believe we have more time and money to do what we like in our free time that in the past but people do not necessarily use it in a better way.
In class you have had a group discussion about the education system in your country.

Write an essay giving reasons for your opinions

How could the education system be improved in your country?

Discuss:

1. Funding
2. Teaching methods
3. (your own idea)

How could the education system be improved in Spain?

Spain has one of the highest drop-out rates in high school in Europe so it is obvious that something is failing. To kick off this essay we are going to look at the current state of education and how to improve it.

On the one hand, Spain has just experience an extreme economic recession, therefore funding has been cut and this of course has lead to a lack of resources. Teachers will have had a bad time trying to maintain standards due to this fact. A simple increase of investment in education could help to make things better for both teachers and students.

On the other hand, teaching methods in Spain are said to be among the worst in the world. There needs to be an extreme change in the training process for teachers, especially to assimilate the recent emergence of bilingualism. Good teacher come out of a well-formed training system.

In brief, Changes need to be made at both government and grass roots levels to ensure that future generations have a bright future. Starting with funding teacher training so that teachers can change the face of the education system.
Example of a formal email/letter

In class you have been asked to write a formal letter. You need to write an application letter for a language course.

You have seen the following advertisement in a language magazine:

Ready to learn a language once and for all?

We are looking for language enthusiasts who are between 18-24 and want to try out our innovative new method. This is an online platform called www.appf.edu.es.

If you can already speak a bit of English and you want to reach full fluency and competence in English, then this is the course for you. Send a letter of application to Marc Huckle at Imperial Street, Albacete or an email to marc.h@appf.edu.es

Please explain why you would be a good candidate and what experience you already have with language learning. We look forward to hearing from you.
Useful phrases for a **formal letter:**

**Beginning:**

With regards to the letter/email on...

With reference to your letter/email...

After having received your letter/email...

I received your address from ... and would like ...

Thank you very much for your letter/email on...

I have been given your contact details by... and I would like to...

In reply to your letter/email of...

**Ending:**

I hope to hear from you soon...

If you require any further information, feel free to contact me

Should you require anything else, do not hesitate in contacting me

Regards

Yours faithfully

Yours sincerely

(signature)
Dear Mr Huckle,

With reference to your advertisement that caught my eye the other day as I was reading a language magazine ‘Expert English’, I would like to formally present my application to your course.

I am a 25 year old student who has been learning English for over 10 years, but I must admit that I have never found a method that has convinced me. I am stuck in the intermediate plateau and would thus like to finally become fluent.

Although I am a little older than the candidates that you have requested I feel I would be a great candidate as I already have a fairly good base level and I am really eager to carry on learning. I am a very tenacious person and I will persist until I reach the level required. I am also very good at following instructions so that will not be a problem.

If you require any further information, feel free to contact me

Yours sincerely

Thomas Shelby
Example of an informal email/a letter

You have received this email from an English speaking friend (Marc)

From: Marc

Subject: Backpacking in Spain

Some friends of mine are going backpacking next month around Spain. They would like to learn about Spanish culture and its history.

Where should they begin the trip? What’s the easiest way to get around? Where should they stay as they are on a tight budget?

Speak to you soon, Marc

Format of an email/ a letter:

The format of a letter and an email are very similar. DO NOT INCLUDE THE ADDRESS. You need to know if it is formal or informal. If it is informal you CAN use contractions, in the formal you CAN’T. all the points should be put into separate paragraphs with one line between each one.

Beginning:

Thank for the letter you have received.

Middle:

A separate paragraph for each of the points/questions

Ending:

Say goodbye with one of the phrases
Dear Marc,

This trip sounds amazing and I’m sure that your friends will have a great time. I have a few ideas for things to do.

The way I see it, the best place to begin the trip would be in Barcelona as the flights are cheap from where you live. Barcelona is like no other city, the culture there is amazing, and it has a great history and a great vibe. But if I were your friends, I’d brush up on my Catalan!

From there I would travel down the coast by bus to Valencia, Alicante and Murcia. The coast is beautiful and there are some amazing little villages along the coast. Valencia has great food and some cool museums. From Murcia it is easy to get a train to Andalusia, it is essential to visit Granada, Seville and Cordoba. The mix of Arabic and Christian culture is not to be missed. The best place to finish would be Madrid, Spain’s Capital.

Regarding accommodation, the best option would be to stay in youth hostels, they normally only cost between €10 and €15 per night.

Let me know what you think and I look forward to speaking to you in the near future.

Marc
Example of an article

You see this post on an English language website

The most useful bit of language learning advice

What is the best way to learn a language? Where did you learn about it? Who taught it to you?

Write an article about these questions. The best articles will be published on the site.

Structure of an article:

Beginning:
Engage the reader and make them want to read more, you can begin with a question

Middle:
State your main points and relate them to personal experiences and opinions

Ending:
Summarize your main points but make an overall point to make the reader think they have learned something from reading the article
Useful language:

Involving the reader

- Have you ever thought about...?
- How would you feel if ...?
- What would you think of...?
- Are you one of those people who ...
- If the answer is ..., you should....
- What do you reckon to ...?
- What would life be like if...
- Just think for a moment...
- Just imagine...

The most useful bit of language learning advice

The most useful bit of advice I have ever received was from an online course. I had been studying English for years but with no success, I wasn´t motivated to learn and I found it difficult. As it was so challenging for me; I started to give up until one day I came across this advice. Start with what you enjoy. But how can we make sure that we enjoy the language learning process?

The best way to learn a language is to relate it to yourself and your life. You need to think about what topics you are most likely to use and begin with those. If you study about something that doesn’t capture your attention, it is difficult to learn. As I read recently on the course, “to learn something well, you need to enjoy it”. This is very true with languages. The creator of the course has hit the nail on the head because not I use English every day. I try to think in English and I read in English all the time.

All in all, I reckon that languages are important to open your mind and be able to travel with ease. I’d recommend this course to everyone and I’m glad I found it.
Example of a review

You have seen this advertisement in a local magazine

Movie reviews wanted

Have you ever seen a movie that really surprised you?

Write a film review and talk about who the main character was? Why the movie surprised you?

And your opinion of the movie

The best reviews will be published in the magazine

Structure of a review:

Beginning:
Start by stating which film you will review and why; it is a good idea to include a question

Middle:
Describe the film in brief, the plot and the characters, using interesting vocabulary

Ending:
To conclude, say who you would recommend the film to and why
The departed: film review

Do you want to see an amazing movie about cops in the USA with an added twist? Well, the departed is a must see. It has an amazing cast with the likes of Jack Nicolson, Matt Damon and Leonardo di Caprio. It is hard to say who the main character is because there are various stories that run simultaneously throughout the movie.

The movie is surprising because (spoiler alert!) almost all of the main character die. In the movie there are undercover police officer infiltrated into the mafia and also many corrupt police officers on the payroll. Jack Nicolson is a mafia boss and he has an undercover policeman has one of his employees but he also has Matt Damon feeding him information from inside the police department. The movie is tense and will keep you on the edge of your seat until the end.

The movie would be suitable for anyone over the age of 18 due to its violent nature and it is a great movie to have a look into the crime world in Boston, USA. I would recommend it to everyone!
Writing a report

A report is almost always written for someone superior (your boss, a teacher or a manager). It should be formal and very informative. Do not include unnecessary information.

Structure of the text:

A report should be concise and easy to understand. You must include a title, headings and also make sure that you answer the points in the question.

Useful phrases:

Making recommendations

- It would be a good idea to...
- Would it not be better to...
- Why do we not...
- What about...?
- How about...?
- Should we not...?
- Let us consider...
- Why not...?

Our university has just released the new version of its official website. Write a report in response to your classmates’ opinion of the site. Talk about the usage of the site, the information provided and the news section. Also make suggestions about how it could be improved.
Report on the University Website

In this report I will discuss and analyse my classmates’ opinions of the website and make some suggestions for improvements.

The usage

The site is really easy to use and all the students seem to be pleased with it. They were particularly happy with the links between sections and the fact that it was easy to find contact details for the adequate person in each teaching department.

The information

The information was of a good standard and very informative. People seemed impressed with how up to date it all was.

News section

The news section was very good and perfect for university students, just the type of thing that they like to talk about. If I have time, I will read it every day to find out about other student and new events.

How to improve it

All in all, there has been a request for more information about extra curricular activities and also where students can find discounts around the city. It would be a good idea to include a specific section for the latter.

To sum up, I’d say the new site has been a hit and that everyone will be making good use of it in the future.
## Key phrases for better writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STARTING:</th>
<th>CONCLUSION:</th>
<th>CONTRAST:</th>
<th>TIME:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To get started</td>
<td>as can be seen</td>
<td>although this may be true</td>
<td>Firstly, secondly, thirdly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On starting this essay</td>
<td>in the final analysis</td>
<td>in contrast</td>
<td>in due time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstly</td>
<td>all things considered</td>
<td>different from</td>
<td>as long as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To begin with</td>
<td>as shown above</td>
<td>of course ..., but</td>
<td>as soon as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the first place</td>
<td>in the long run</td>
<td>on the other hand</td>
<td>at the moment</td>
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<tr>
<td>until now</td>
<td>given these points</td>
<td>on the contrary</td>
<td>in good time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the first point I’d like to make is</td>
<td>as has been noted</td>
<td>at the same time</td>
<td>in the meantime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it is time to</td>
<td>in a word</td>
<td>in spite of</td>
<td>in a moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to start by</td>
<td>for the most part</td>
<td>even so / though</td>
<td>whenever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To start with</td>
<td>after all</td>
<td>be that as it may</td>
<td>now that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To introduce the topic</td>
<td>in fact</td>
<td>then again</td>
<td>instantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To kick off this essay</td>
<td>in summary</td>
<td>above all</td>
<td>without delay</td>
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<tr>
<td>The first thing to mention is</td>
<td>in conclusion</td>
<td>in reality</td>
<td>all of a sudden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a starting point</td>
<td>in short</td>
<td>after all</td>
<td>at the present time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the first part</td>
<td>in brief</td>
<td>although</td>
<td>from time to time</td>
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<tr>
<td>On the one hand</td>
<td>in essence</td>
<td>instead</td>
<td>sooner or later</td>
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<td></td>
<td>to summarize</td>
<td>whereas</td>
<td>at the same time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>on balance</td>
<td>conversely</td>
<td>up to the present time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>altogether</td>
<td>otherwise</td>
<td>at this instant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>overall</td>
<td>however</td>
<td>first, second</td>
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<td></td>
<td>by and large</td>
<td>rather</td>
<td>in time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to sum up</td>
<td>nevertheless</td>
<td>prior to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>on the whole</td>
<td>nonetheless</td>
<td>straightaway</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in any event</td>
<td>regardless</td>
<td>by the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>taking all of this into account</td>
<td>as if / though</td>
<td>in this day and age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key phrases for expressing your opinion:

- In my opinion, ...
- In my eyes, ...
- To my mind, ...
- As far as I am concerned, ...
- Speaking personally, ...
- From my point of view, ...
- As for me / As to me, ...
- My view / opinion / belief / impression / conviction is that ...
- I hold the view that ...
- I would say that ...
- It seems to me that ...
- I am of the opinion that ...
- My impression is that ...
- I am under the impression that ...
- It is my impression that ...
- I have the feeling that ...
- My own feeling on the subject is that ...
- I have no doubt that ...
- I am sure / I am certain that ...
- I think / consider / find / feel / believe / suppose / presume / assume/reckon that ...
- I hold the opinion that ...
- I dare say that ...
- I guess that ...
- I bet that ....
- I gather that ...
- It goes without saying that ...
- In my point of view
- From where I am standing
- I hold a strong opinion on/about
- I have reason to believe
- It’s a matter of opinion, but...
- I have the suspicion that
- I share your opinion on
- It seems obvious to me that
To express general opinions, a great thing to do is to use “the impersonal passive”:

- It is thought that
- It is generally believed that
- It is said that
- It is widely known that
- It is often stated that

You can also make reference to the general public:

- Most people think that
- The majority of people believe
- People say that
- Everyone thinks that
- Everybody believes that
Key phrases for justifying your opinion:

These phrases are flexible and can be adapted to the context.

To begin, you can use these basic (B1) phrases to justify an opinion in English:

- because...
- the reason is...
- the reason I believe that is...
- the facts suggest...
- the evidence shows...
- taking into account what I have seen...

You can justify your opinion more effectively by being more specific. Try some intermediate (B2) phrases like these:

- The first reason I believe this is...
- The main reason I feel this way is...
- There are several reasons I believe this. The first is...

When you are not completely certain, you can try one of these more advanced (C1) English phrases:

- I don't have any special reason for believing this. It just seems right to me that...
- I could be wrong as I have no special reason for believing this. I just feel this is right as...
- I'm not sure why I feel this way but I have reason to believe...

When you ARE certain, try one of these phrases:

- There is a lot of evidence to support my point of view. For example...
- There are many facts in favour of my opinion. One such fact is...
- From my own personal experience, I am lead to believe...
Connectors:

Each one Works in a different way and needs to be practised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADDING INFORMATION</th>
<th>CONTRAST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And, also, as well, in addition, besides, above all</td>
<td>However, but, although, on the other hand,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>despite, in spite of, even though, though,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>whereas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIVING EXAMPLES</td>
<td>SIMILARITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Such as, for example, like, for instance, as follows:</td>
<td>Similarly, equally, likewise, in the same way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REINFORCEMENT</td>
<td>RESULT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also, furthermore, moreover, above all, not only... but also</td>
<td>So, therefore, as a result, because of this,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consequently, thus, hence, in that case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDUCTION</td>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherwise, in other words, then, in that case</td>
<td>In conclusion, to sum up, in brief, therefore, to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>summarise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEQUENCE</td>
<td>STATING THE OBVIOUS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstly, secondly, thirdly, lastly, next, after, to</td>
<td>Obviously, clearly, naturally, of course,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start with, to finish,</td>
<td>surely, after all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Linking:

“Linking” refers to the way the writer relates their ideas together. It is essential to be able to form an argument and have a balanced piece of writing.

As I have said before...
With respect to the point on...
Regarding...
Like I have said...
In relation to...
Taking into account...
Two of the answers will be corrected by a Cambridge/Trinity/EOI examiner, who will also offer advice on how to improve. Your answers should be 140-190 words long. You MUST do the essay and then choose one of the other options.

Example essay question (part 1):

Should famous sports stars earn more money than people in other professions, such as doctors, teachers or nurses?

- Time spent at work
- Training needed
- (your own idea)

Advice:

Title – The Candidate needs to include a title in the essay, article and review. You can use the question from the task or set your own title so that the reader knows the tone of the answer.

Organisation – You must write in the correct format. There is a need to write paragraphs. The introduction needs to capture interest and also explain how you will answer the question. The main content needs to be both interesting and informative and there is a need for a concise and useful conclusion.

A balanced answer – when writing an essay, it is better to remain impartial throughout the essay. You need to form a balanced argument and cover all of the points of view. Only include a personal opinion in the conclusion and then justify it.
Example questions (part 2):

Email

You have seen an advertisement in the newspaper:

Students needed for social experiment

Birmingham City University is offering the opportunity to earn a little extra cash by participating in a series of social experiments. If you are ages 18-35 and are very open-minded, why not give it a go?

- say why you would be a good candidate
- discuss your availability

Send applications to marc.h@appf.edu.es

Article

We invite our readers at www.intercambioidiomasonline.com to give their opinions on:

Recycling in our local area

- Discuss the problem of rubbish and waste
- What can be done to encourage people to recycle?
Review

Apple has just released the iPhone 8:

Write a review about it and who you would recommend it to.

Report

The local authority in your city has just built a new cinema. Write a report about it and suggest how improvements could be made.