

# Practice questions and sample responses: extended response to reading

## Key skills

You will need to show the following skills in extended response to reading tasks:

- Identify the main ideas in a task in order to select relevant information.
- Consider how to use information from the passage effectively.
- Create a role with a convincing voice, based on ideas in a text.
- Plan and execute a suitable structure.
- Write paragraphs that clearly convey a point of view.

## Your task

- 1 Read the following task, then write a response of 250–350 words.

Imagine that you are Richard Branson and you have been asked to speak about extreme sports at a local college. Make sure that you include:

- what happened that day
- what Branson learned about himself
- what he would say to students who are facing problems or in adversity.

Base your report on what you have read in the text, but be careful to use your own words.

**Begin:** 'I am delighted to have been invited here to share my experience with you...'



Richard Branson is a very successful businessman. He founded the Virgin Records music stores when he was 22 years old. Since then, the Virgin brand has grown to encompass many different types of business, including a record label, an airline and a mobile-phone company. Branson has also made several attempts at breaking world records in sailing and hot-air ballooning.

*In 1987, Branson attempted to cross the Atlantic by hot-air balloon with his partner, Per Lindstrand. In this extract, after a disastrous attempt to land, Per has leapt into the sea to save himself but Branson remains in the balloon.*

### Alone in the balloon

Whatever I did in the next ten minutes would lead to my death or survival. I was on my own. We had broken the record but I was almost certainly going to die. Per, with no survival suit, was either dead or trying to swim on. I had to get somebody to find him. I had to survive. I cleared my mind and concentrated on the options in front of me. I hadn't slept for over 24 hours and my mind felt fuzzy. I decided to take the balloon up high enough so I could parachute off the capsule. I blasted the burners and then found my notebook and scrawled across the open page, 'Joan, Holly, Sam, I love you.' I waited until the altimeter showed 8000 feet and then climbed outside.

I was alone in the cloud. I crouched by the railings and looked down. I was still wheeling through the possibilities. If I jumped, I would be likely to have only two minutes to live. If I managed to open my parachute, I would still end up in the sea, where I would probably drown. I felt for the parachute release tag, and wondered whether it was the right one. Perhaps due to my dyslexia, I have a mental block about which is right and which is left, especially with parachutes. The last time I had free-fallen I pulled the wrong release tag and jettisoned my parachute. At the time, I had several skydivers around me, so they activated my reserve parachute. But now I was by myself at 8000 feet. I slapped myself hard across the face to concentrate. There had to be a better way.

'Give yourself more time,' I said out loud. 'Come on.'

As I crouched on top of the capsule, I looked up at the vast balloon above me. The realisation dawned that I was standing beneath the world's largest parachute. If I could bring the balloon down, then perhaps I could jump off into the sea at the last moment before we crashed. I now knew I had enough fuel for another thirty minutes. It must be better to live for thirty minutes than jump off with my parachute and perhaps live for only two minutes.

'While I am alive I can still do something,' I said. 'Something must turn up.'

I climbed back inside and took off my parachute. I made up my mind. I would do anything for those extra minutes. I grabbed some chocolate, zipped it into my jacket pocket, and checked that my torch was still there.

Peering out of the capsule into the fog below me, I tried to work out when I should stop burning, when I should open the vent, and when I should leave the controls and climb out on top of the capsule for my final jump. I knew I had to judge the last burn exactly so that the balloon would hit the sea as slowly as possible. Despite losing all our fuel tanks, the balloon was still carrying a weight of around three tonnes.

As I came out through the bottom of the clouds, I saw the grey sea below me. I also saw an RAF helicopter. I gave a last burn to slow my descent, and then left the balloon to come down of its own accord. I grabbed a red rag and climbed out through the hatch. I squatted on top of the capsule and waved the rag at the helicopter pilot. He waved back rather casually, seemingly oblivious to my panic.

40 I peered over the edge and saw the sea coming up. I shuffled round the capsule trying to work out where the wind was coming from. It was difficult to be sure since it seemed to be gusting from all directions. I finally chose the upwind side and looked down. I was fifty feet away, the height of a house, and the sea was rushing up to hit me. I checked my life jacket and held on to the railing. Without my weight, I hoped the balloon would rise up again rather than crashing on top of me. I waited until I was just above the sea before pulling my life-jacket ripcord and hurling

45 myself away from the capsule.

The sea was icy. I spun deep into it and felt my scalp freeze with the water. Then the life jacket bobbed me straight back up to the surface. It was heaven: I was alive. I turned and watched the balloon. Without my weight, it quietly soared back up through the cloud like a magnificent

50 alien spaceship, vanishing from sight.

*From Losing my Virginity by Richard Branson*



## Exploring responses

Now read this example response to the task.

### Response 1

I am delighted to have been invited here today to share my experience with you. The experience I had was very exciting but very dangerous and I almost died.

What happened was that I was attempting a record-breaking balloon flight but my balloon ran out of fuel. I was over the sea and it was foggy – I knew I was going to crash eventually. At first, I didn't know what to do as my mind felt all fuzzy. I wrote letters to my children and wife as I thought it was the end. Finally, I came up with a plan to survive. I let all the fuel out of the balloon and used it as a giant parachute, then just before it hit the sea I jumped out. I was wearing a life-jacket and the sea was icy but I was alive!

I learned a lot about myself. One thing I learned was that my dyslexia made things difficult for me: I could not distinguish between right and left and this meant I didn't know how to open the parachute. But I was clever too because I realised there was another way to survive. I worked out I could use the balloon as a parachute to survive – and that is what I did. I also kept calm and realised that panicking doesn't solve anything.

So, if you are facing problems or things that frighten you, then I would say that you can definitely overcome them. There are lots of things you can do: for example, dyslexia didn't hold me back. You can use your intelligence and keep calm and work out answers to your problems. That is what I did and it saved my life. Thank you for listening to me.

vocabulary is repetitive  
does not really say why the audience ought to listen

uses Branson's exact words and doesn't even explain why he felt like this

### Feedback

This response makes an attempt to take details from the text and integrate them into the speech. Unfortunately, the style is inconsistent and the content lacks structure and the sense of audience is missing. Vocabulary is mostly lifted from the original text, although there is some attempt at original ideas, if rather clumsily expressed.

- 2 Identify three further things in this response that could be improved. Use the 'Excellent progress points' on page 214 to help you.

Now read this second sample response.

## Response 2

concisely paraphrases information from later in text to sum up predicament

I am delighted to have been invited here today to share my experience with you. What happened had a profound impact on me, and taught me incredibly valuable lessons.

In essence, I was attempting a record-breaking balloon flight but had got into terrible difficulty over a freezing cold sea and was running out of fuel. Can you imagine that? Faced with probable death, I wrote 'goodbye' notes for my family; I couldn't think clearly and all the options seemed to lead to my inevitable destruction, but finally I cleared my mind and worked out a way to get through it. Using the balloon as a parachute, I plunged into the sea but without harming myself. I survived!

The experience taught me that I could work out solutions to problems through cool thinking: that panicking doesn't help. Equally important, it told me that I loved life and that I would do anything to survive and see my family. It showed me that even though I had problems such as dyslexia I could overcome them through lateral thinking.

This, then, is my message to you. Whether the challenges you face are big or small, don't fixate on your weaknesses. You are more capable than you think! Keep a cool head and consider all the options – somewhere inside you is the answer you seek.

engages audience by using powerful adjectives 'profound' and 'valuable' and adverb 'incredibly'  
use of second person creates direct contact with audience

### Feedback

This is an excellent response. It instantly engages the audience and keeps their interest by describing the incident in dramatic detail. It used powerful language such as strong adjectives and rhetorical questions. The speech develops logically, clearly covering all three of the bullet points in the task.