

Do you feel lucky?

Level: ● ●

IELTS focus

The Reading paper often contains questions in this format.

Preparation

Make one copy of the text per student. Copy and cut up one set of Question Cards for the class.

Method

- 1 Explain this format from the Reading paper: candidates have to select the correct answer from groups of four (e.g. B is correct; A, C and D are incorrect).
- 2 Brainstorm the class on ways in which the three wrong answers for each question can be made to seem possible. (For example: they are very close to the correct answer; they repeat words from the text; they are partly true and partly false; they are true in many people's opinions but not according to the text.)

To help get this point across, you may like to copy or project on OHP the following example onto the board:

The academic version of IELTS is an exam which

A helps candidates improve their English.

B tests candidates' ability to use and understand English in an academic setting.

C helps universities select the best students.

D tests candidates' knowledge of academic subjects.

- 3 Hand out copies of the Reading text. Get the class to read it quickly and to tell you the gist. With weaker classes, perhaps get students to discuss this in pairs first, then elicit suggestions.
- 4 Organise the class into 2, 4 or 8 teams and share out the Question Cards. The task is to add an extra incorrect answer, as directed on the question cards. (Explain that in the exam there are always four, not three, answers to choose from.) Visit the teams as they are writing, check that their extra possible answers are reasonably close to the exam format, and point out any language errors.

- 5 Team A reads out a question in full. The other teams refer to their copies of the text, select A, B or C and write down their choices. Listening to the options may be quite challenging for the other students – allow as much repetition as necessary. (If comprehension poses a serious difficulty, the options could be written on the board.) The answer is then revealed and each team who chose correctly can award themselves a point. Then Team B ask a question, and so on. The team with the highest final score wins.

Sample incorrect answers

If any team is really struggling to come up with ideas, perhaps make the following suggestions.

Card 1: are people who have been unlucky in their lives.

Card 2: They are unrealistically optimistic.

Card 3: They give you more energy.

Card 4: are logical about their risk-taking.

Card 5: experience some benefits from their way of thinking.

Card 6: are normal human behaviour.

Card 7: By getting them to talk about their problems.

Card 8: is good news for pessimists.

Follow-up activity: class discussion

Write the following statement on the board:

In this life, we make our own luck.

Invite opinions from the class.

IELTS skills

As well as practising reading and listening skills, this activity aims to get students to analyse a question format from the exam – a useful strategy for exam success.

Do you feel lucky?

Many years ago, I met a man who pronounced that he would 'die young'. He told me this as a bald fact, but on further probing it emerged that his prognosis was based solely on 'a feeling'. The man was a catastrophic thinker – someone for whom the worst-case scenario in any given situation would always seem the most likely outcome, regardless of statistical likelihood. In making an unrealistic assessment about his future health circumstances, 'Richard' (who, incidentally, is still alive) is typical. However, where he is unusual is in presuming the worst. Only a small proportion of people take this doom-laden approach. Most of us actually do the opposite.

Research has shown that more than 50 per cent of people believe they are less likely than others to be afflicted with cancer, tooth decay or a motoring accident. Psychologists describe this phenomenon as 'unrealistic optimism'.

Indeed, studies that require people to assess their risk of negative situations, such as unwanted pregnancy, or to rate skills such as driving ability, reveal that more than 70 per cent of them class their risk factors as low and their positive attributes as high. Put bluntly, this means that average people think they are better and luckier than average.

On the surface, this skew towards the glass-half-full approach to life can be a good thing – positive emotions trigger the release of endorphins that relax the cardiovascular system, and also the release of cytokines, which boost the immune system. Conversely, pessimistic thinking has been linked to the constriction of blood vessels, the suppression of the immune system and a poorer outcome in serious illness.

However, recent findings from the Royal Society of Medicine may at last give pessimists something to smile about. A paper by Australian psychologist Professor Ron Gold suggests unrealistic optimism may be causing people to ignore advice on the prevention of alcoholism, smoking and obesity. It's a contentious area – no scientific study has actually correlated the two – but many psychologists accept that there is a certain logic in the assumption that risk-taking behaviour may be triggered by unrealistic optimism. 'If you believe you're less at risk of something than the average person, then you're more likely to go ahead and do it,' says Professor Gold.

Catastrophic thinkers do not behave in this way. While most people distance themselves from

negative news reports about illness, for example, catastrophic thinkers identify closely – thinking: 'That's bound to happen to me.'

Clinical psychologist Linda Blair, of the University of Bath, believes that around 10 per cent of the population thinks in this way. 'These are people who have negative underlying beliefs,' she says. 'Their propensity to presume the worst may stem from an earlier traumatic experience or may simply be learnt from an anxious parent or other care giver.'

Unfortunately, whereas unrealistic optimists can find comfort in their improbable but idealistic interpretation of events, no psychologist has ever found any benefits in catastrophic thinking. However, the good news is that both unrealistic and catastrophic thinking are learnt behaviours and, as such, can be 'unlearnt'. Usually, a therapist will use cognitive behavioural therapy to get clients to use rational thought processes to examine how they can change their patterns of behaviour.

Seeing as both unrealistic optimism and catastrophic thinking involve a slightly warped view of how things really are, it is the therapist's job to put some realism into the situation. A catastrophic thinker who fears he will be knocked down by a truck the moment he ventures into the street may, from the comfort of the therapy room, be asked to imagine a disaster-free trip out; while the unrealistic optimist, who feels he is not at risk of an accident despite regularly driving a motorbike at high speed, would be asked to imagine a scenario in which he was responsible for a road crash. In short, in a bizarre twist of the norm, the optimist is being asked to consider the worst-case scenario and the pessimist the best (or, at any rate, an event free of negative consequences).

Dr Lynn Myers, health psychologist at University College London, says these methods work. She took a group of smokers who were unrealistically optimistic about their risk of getting lung cancer and heart disease, and asked them to imagine that they had a smoking-related illness. They were asked to write down what happened in the course of this illness – from its onset to its treatment. By the end of Myers's exercise, they had lost their unrealistic optimism.

Whether such findings will one day influence the way health promoters run their campaigns remains to be seen.

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Question Card 1

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**.
Add another incorrect answer.

Catastrophic thinkers

- A base their assessments solely on feelings
- B believe things that are not statistically likely.**
- C



Question Card 2

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**.
Add another incorrect answer.

How do the majority of people think?

- A They do not think seriously about the risks they take.
- B
- C They believe that they are less at risk than most.**



Question Card 3

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**.
Add another incorrect answer.

What are the beneficial results of positive emotions?

- A They can improve the health.**
- B
- C They can make people feel relaxed.



Question Card 4

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**.
Add another incorrect answer.

Unrealistic optimists

- A
- B are more likely to be alcoholics, smokers or obese.
- C may be more likely to take risks.**



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Question Card 5

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**. Add another incorrect answer.

According to Linda Blair, catastrophic thinkers

- A
- B view the world in a negative way.**
- C were probably brought up by anxious parents.



Question Card 6

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**. Add another incorrect answer.

Unrealistic and catastrophic ways of thinking

- A should be treated by therapists.
- B are the result of personal experience.**
- C



Question Card 7

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**. Add another incorrect answer.

How do therapists help unrealistic optimists and catastrophic thinkers?

- A By getting them to imagine the worst that could happen.
- B
- C By getting them to think in a more realistic way.**



Question Card 8

Below is a question about the text, and two possible answers. The correct answer is in **bold**. Add another incorrect answer.

The research describe in the article

- A
- B has already changed general medical thinking.
- C may change general medical thinking in the future.**

