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Guide to the IELTS Exam

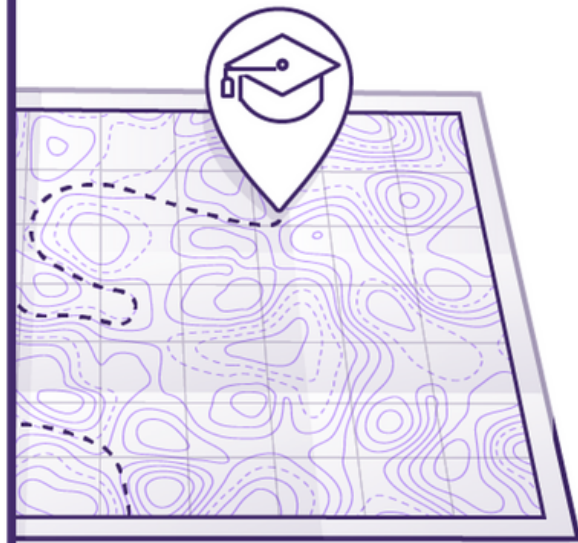


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1: Introduction

Welcome, Magooshers!

This Complete Guide is meant to serve as a roadmap that provides a comprehensive overview of the IELTS exam. In it, you will find crucial information on the structure of the test and its question types, plus important strategies and tips that will help you do the best you can on test day.

The information in this eBook is a synthesis of some of the best content on the [Magoosh IELTS Blog](https://ielts.magoosh.com)—all of which was created by our IELTS (and some of our TOEFL) experts. No matter where you are in your studies, if you're preparing for the IELTS exam, this eBook is for you!



1.1 The Magoosh Team

Who is Magoosh?

Magoosh is a group of passionate educators in Berkeley, CA.

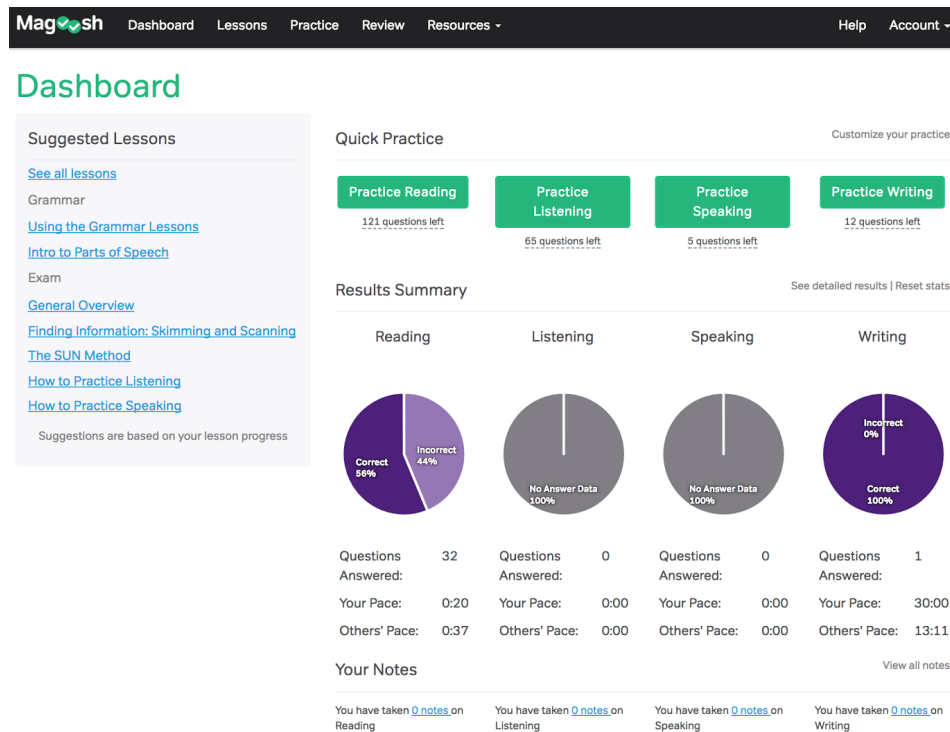


Email us at help@magoosh.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions!

1.2 What is Magoosh?

Magoosh IELTS prep is an [online course](#) that offers:

- Over 90 video lessons
- Hundreds of practice questions
- Video explanations to practice questions
- Email assistance from experienced tutors
- Access anytime, anywhere from an internet-connected device



Featured in:



1.3 Why Our Students Love Us

The following quotations are survey responses sent to us by real students after they used Magoosh to prepare for the IELTS exam.



“The tips and practice questions have helped [me] score 8.5 in reading, listening and speaking. I had 6.5 in writing, in my last test it was 7.5.” - Hayat R., 8.5



What was your overall score on the actual IELTS?

8.0

How did Magoosh help you?

Helped me prepare in less amount of time and with the most accurate material and resources.



What was your overall score on the actual IELTS?

7.0

How did Magoosh help you?

- 1) Strategy for attempting each question type.
- 2) Explanation for each answers - why the right answer is right and the wrong answer is wrong.
- 3) It tracks every activity closely and boost your confidence level as you are being guided by competent (/best) professionals.



What was your overall score on the actual IELTS?

8.0

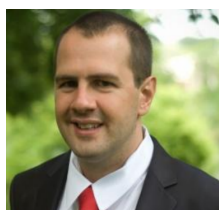
How did Magoosh help you?

The video lectures were very useful. It gave me a true feel of how the exam would be. The practice material covered all the sections thoroughly and the on screen timer helped to keep a check on the time spent.

1.4 Meet the Authors



Eliot Friesen is the IELTS Curriculum Manager at Magoosh. He brings a love of language and assessment to the role, along with years of experience as a college ESL instructor. After completing his graduate studies at New York University and Harvard, Eliot taught at Northeastern University, University of California, Irvine, and Harold Washington College.



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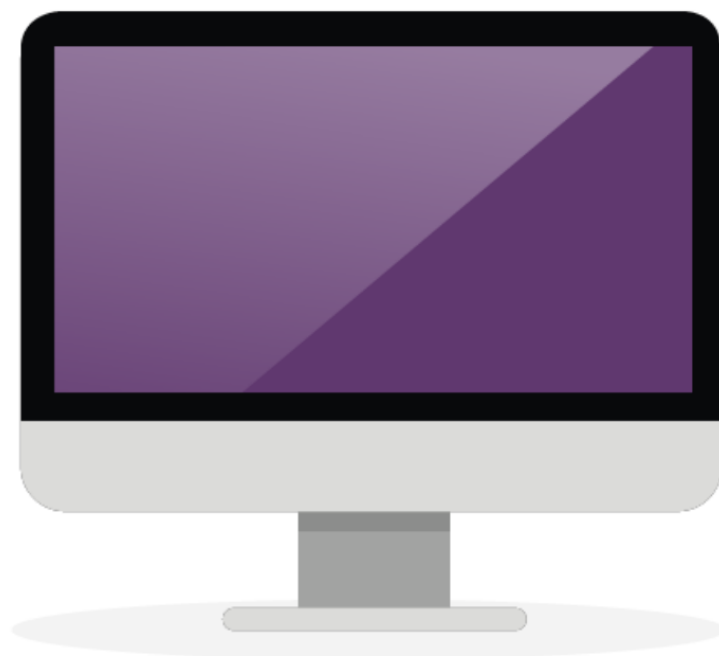
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2: Introduction to the IELTS Exam



2.1 What's on the IELTS?

2.1.1 IELTS Format

The IELTS Format

The IELTS is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on one language skill. The sections are: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking.

For Listening, Reading, and Writing, you get a test booklet with pre-printed questions. Unlike many other standardized tests, the IELTS is not a computer-generated test that is viewed onscreen. You enter your answers on paper with a pencil instead of using a keyboard. Multiple versions of the IELTS exist, each with a different mix of questions. The booklets are changed often, to prevent cheating. The Speaking section is an interview, and is scheduled separately from the rest of the exam.

There are two versions of the IELTS: Academic IELTS and General Training IELTS. As you might guess, Academic IELTS is used for school admissions. General Training IELTS is used most often for immigration and employment. However, Academic IELTS is still used for medical jobs and medical skilled migration. The Academic and General Training versions of the exam have the exact same Listening and Speaking sections. However, the Reading and Writing sections on these exams are somewhat different.

Below, we'll take a closer look at each of the four sections individually. And later in the book, each part of the test gets its own chapter.

2.1.2 The Reading Section

The Reading exam lasts one hour and consists of 40 questions. The **Academic IELTS** contains three passages. Even though they are written at a college or university level, the

passages do not require in-depth subject matter knowledge. Time management is a key skill for the Academic Reading exam. It can be challenging to read each passage and answer all of the questions in time. The **General Training Reading** section contains three (or sometimes four) passages. The first focuses on a very basic topic from daily life—information about public transportation, a community notice, etc. The second section contains two short informative passages that are typically related to school, work, or community topics. The third (and possibly fourth) passage is a longer essay or article.

2.1.3 The Listening Section

The Academic and General Training IELTS have the same Listening exam. It contains four passages, each with 10 questions (40 questions total). During the first 30 minutes, test-takers listen to the passages and mark answers in their test booklets as they listen. Each recording is played only one time. The first two passages are usually about topics from daily life, while the last two are more academically oriented. The language gets increasingly challenging from the first recording to the last.

After each recording has been played, there is a 10-minute period in which test-takers transfer their answers from the test booklet to the answer sheet. Only answers submitted on the answer sheet will be graded.

2.1.4 The Speaking Section

The IELTS Speaking exam is an in-person interview. It can be scheduled on the same day as the paper exam, or up to one week before or after the paper exam. Check with your local exam center to see when Speaking exam appointments are available for you.

The interview takes 11–14 minutes and contains three sections. In the first section, the interviewer asks very basic questions about general topics: family, hobbies, travel, interests, etc. The second section is a prepared monologue. Test takers have a minute to plan an answer to several prompts related to a specific topic or question. In the third

segment of the test, the question and answer format resumes. However, this time the questions are more abstract, requiring complex language and vocabulary from you. The questions will relate in some way to the topic of the monologue in the previous section.

2.1.5 The Writing Section

The IELTS Writing exam involves writing two short passages in one hour. Task 1, which is worth $\frac{1}{3}$ of the score, must be at least 150 words long. Task 2 is worth $\frac{2}{3}$ of the score and must be at least 250 words long.

On the **Academic IELTS**, Task 1 involves summarizing the most important information from charts, graphs, diagrams, and/or other visual prompts. On the **General Training IELTS**, test-takers write a letter for Task 1. The topic and purpose of the letter (i.e. to complain, request information, etc) is provided in the prompt.

Task 2 is a formal academic essay. In the second IELTS Writing task, test-takers will respond to an essay prompt. They will need to give their opinion on an issue, supporting their point of view with details and examples. IELTS Writing Task 2 is the same on both versions of the test.

2.2 How Hard is the IELTS?

This is a very common question from students, and unfortunately there is no easy answer. Let's consider the Academic IELTS. In theory, an Academic IELTS score should provide an academic institution with a useful measurement of how well a student can perform tasks like these in English:

- Can the student write a clear essay in a short amount of time?
- Can the student communicate complex and abstract ideas when speaking?

- Can the student understand a detailed academic lecture?

The reality is that some test-takers will be more comfortable performing these kinds of IELTS tasks than others. Importantly, this variation cannot simply be explained by English language ability. Test-takers who are not familiar with IELTS-like tasks will have a more difficult time performing them. For example, a student with excellent English skills who has very little experience writing a five-paragraph essay will find the IELTS writing section very tough! Similarly, someone whose main exposure to English is through television or movies may struggle to understand the topics in some of the more challenging IELTS Listening passages.

The basic point is that the IELTS will pose different challenges to each student. Nevertheless, let's take a closer look at each section of the test to consider their unique challenges.

2.2.1 How Hard is IELTS Reading?

Academic

Generally speaking, Academic IELTS reading is near the same difficulty as reading authentic news sources, although the subject matter and vocabulary aren't exactly the same. News media are not as focused as the IELTS on topics taken from academic subjects, such as science and history. That academic focus is a large part of the difficulty.

But the sense of "difficulty" one experiences depends in part on your native language. That's because there is no conversational, informal English in the text—only material you might find in a book that you read from a newspaper or for a university class. And if your native language has Latin roots (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, or French), then academic English may be easy compared to informal English, because academic English often has Latin roots. If your mother tongue isn't Latin-based, though, those academic

words are more difficult, because they are rare in general English. Words like "comprise," for example, might show up in IELTS reading, but are rarely used in relaxed speech.

The timing of the reading section can also cause some serious trouble. You must find ways and develop strategies to answer all the questions in 60 minutes. This isn't easy, even for very proficient English readers. Maybe you can work slowly through an article you read for pleasure or a book you read for class and understand a lot, but that doesn't mean you're going to get a top score on IELTS reading. Look to the Reading section of this guide to find time-management strategies for the Reading paper that can help you overcome this difficult part of the test.

General Training

General Training Reading is much less difficult than the Academic IELTS Reading. This is primarily because:

- 1) Only one of the three sections will contain a lengthy academic or journalistic article with the kind of complex vocabulary and subject matter found on the Academic IELTS exam.
- 2) Much of the reading material, especially towards the beginning of the Reading exam, is relatively short and basic. Often, you will have to read advertisements, public notices, or other type of reading material taken from daily life.

The vocabulary found in the first two sections are words that one is likely to encounter simply from living in an English-speaking context, reading for fun, or navigating daily life. Since the first texts in the section are shorter, time management is a smaller problem for many test-takers on the General Training IELTS than it is on the Academic IELTS.

However, this is not to suggest that General Training Reading will be easy. Obviously, everyone comes to the test with a different level of English. Everyone has read different materials. And everyone has a different vocabulary. What might feel tough for one intermediate English user might feel easy to another.

Additionally, it is just as important to master IELTS test-taking strategies for the General Training exam as for the Academic Exam. It's critical to know, for example, how to efficiently and accurately answer Short Answer questions. You will probably need to employ "skimming" and "scanning" strategies as well (see the Reading section for more details). In short, General Training Reading requires preparation and practice in order to do your best.

2.2.2 How Hard is IELTS Listening?

For a lot of students, the listening section is the hardest. The reading section has the hardest vocabulary, but the listening section presents two major problems that the reading doesn't.

First of all, the recordings, though they are slightly slower than natural speech, are otherwise completely natural. They include all the "umms," "likes," "y'knows," and sloppy pronunciation that make natural speech sound the way it does.

Second, you can only hear each recording once, and they are several minutes long. It's tough to pay attention that long, and it's even tougher to follow what the speakers are saying without losing your place sometimes. Indeed, being able to follow a recording for an extended period of time is absolutely critical in order to score well on IELTS listening.

If you can listen to lots of authentic speech (TV shows, for example), then you're in a good position. That's not to say that IELTS Listening is very similar to the English you will hear on TV. It's not. TV shows are much more difficult, on average, because characters

speak more quickly, use more idioms, and often speak at the same time as each other. IELTS Listening is comparatively simple (even though Parts 3 and 4 are about challenging academic topics). But keep in mind that the listening section is difficult largely because of the amount of information you must hear and follow in each passage.

The key strategy is to learn how to use the questions to your advantage. They can be used as clues to tell you when to expect answers from the speakers, because IELTS Listening questions always occur in order. In other words, the information that helps you answer question number one will come earlier in the listening passage than the information you need to answer question number two (...and so on). Following along and looking ahead at the questions while the speakers talk takes practice. Indeed, a lot of native English speakers might struggle to multitask like this!

2.2.3 How Hard is IELTS Speaking and Writing?

I'm going to group these two sections into one here, because they're equally hard to measure. What makes a Writing or Speaking question hard when, in most cases, there is no "right" or "wrong" answer against which we can measure the difficulty? Whether in an oral interview or on a Task 2 Writing exercise, answering a question on the theme of "Name a person you respect, and explain why" can produce a very wide range of answers, depending on your level of English. So you might say that it's a "hard" question because you can give a complicated answer. But you could also say it's "easy," because a simple answer with common vocabulary is also possible.

In other words, the difficulty here is based largely on how advanced your vocabulary and grammar are, ranging from non-communicative up to native-speaking. The difficulty depends on you and your vocabulary and grammar.

It is crucial to be very prepared for Writing and Speaking, even if you have very advanced English. Your preparation can make certain aspects of the test quite a bit simpler than

they would be otherwise. For example, to prepare for the Speaking exam, practice giving answers to “small talk” questions from Part 1 as much as you can. Even though you can’t predict with any certainty exactly which topics you’ll have to discuss in Part 1, you know that these questions will relate to everyday life. Questions are often about friends, family, school, your hometown, travel, etc. The more you practice talking about these basic things, the better you’ll do in this section.

Similarly, master the formula for writing Task 1 questions for Academic Writing. Even though the charts and graphs can look intimidating, the basic structure of your answers can almost always be the same.

On General Training Task 1, learn vocabulary that will help you write both formal and informal letters. You should know a few phrases to help your letter sound like it has been written for the appropriate audience.

You will learn about these topics and much more in the Writing and Speaking chapters of this book. For now, the main takeaway is that practice really does pay off for Writing and Speaking, and can greatly impact how “difficult” you find these sections.

2.3 What to Expect on Test Day

IELTS test prep is like a marathon race. You have to go a long distance before you cross the finish line. Taking the test, of course, is your finish line. To have a strong finish you need to know what to expect on test day. If anything on test day takes you by surprise, you could lose your focus and score poorly, even if you studied well. Don’t run this race only to slip and fall at the finish line! Let’s look at everything you need to know about test day, so there are no distracting surprises at the end of your study marathon.

The Testing Center

Many testing centers are computer labs in schools or universities. But other test centers are administered by specific education organizations, such as IDP, British Council, AMIDEAST, and the Anglo Mexican Foundation. Either way, the test center will probably be inside a larger building, which in turn will likely be on a large campus or in a busy business district. There probably won't be any obvious signs outside the building, saying "IELTS test this way." In fact, you may not even see any signs for IELTS testing once you get into the building.

So if you can, take a "practice run" to your IELTS test center before test day, to make sure you really know how to get there. If that isn't possible, then try to show up an hour early on test day. You need to show up at least 30 minutes early to show ID, sign paperwork, and get checked into the test center; if you're going to your test center for the first time, take an additional 30 minutes of extra time to make sure you can find it.

Identification and Security Measures on Test Day

One thing you'll be expected to bring is a document that proves your personal identification. ID is very important, since you need to prove you really are the test-taker who registered. In most countries, you need to have either a passport or a valid, government-issued national photo ID card. However, identification can vary from country to country. So be sure to check with your local test center regarding the ID you need to bring.

In addition, there are other security measures. At the test center, IELTS officials will take your photo digitally and store a copy of it. The IELTS does this so they have record that your physical appearance matches the photo on your ID. (You can see details on this process [on the official IELTS website](https://ielts.org/faq/identification).) There is usually a security screening of some type to see what you are carrying on your person (to ensure you don't have a cheat sheet, digitally stored answers, cameras, or recording devices). There will be a special area

outside the testing rooms where you can keep anything that isn't allowed into the testing site.

During the Test

During the IELTS test, you'll be given paper for taking notes, a pencil, test booklets, and answer sheets for Listening, Reading, and Writing. You'll also receive headphones for the Listening portion of the test. The headphones are supposed to be noise-canceling, but I've heard students complain that they aren't. So don't expect your headset to truly shut out all background noise on test day.

There are no breaks between the IELTS Listening, Reading, and Writing sections. However, if you need to go to the bathroom, you can raise your hand and ask to go. However, the IELTS clock won't stop while you're in the bathroom.

During the Reading, Writing and Listening tests, you can also raise your hand to ask questions. Obviously, questions about English comprehension or what you should write cannot be answered. But if you see some confusing instructions, something appears to be missing from your test booklets, or you run into technical problems with the audio, raise your hand. It never hurts to ask for help.

We haven't discussed the Speaking section yet. This is because IELTS Speaking looks and feels very different from the rest of the exam. It's scheduled differently too. You may need to schedule your Speaking test hours (or even days!) before or after you take the rest of the exam. Usually, the IELTS Speaking section starts after IELTS Writing, with a short break between the Writing section and Speaking.

In IELTS Speaking, there is no test booklet. You do get handed a printed "topic card" and scratch paper for Speaking Part 2. (For more on this, see the section on Speaking that appears later in this eBook.) During your IELTS Speaking examination, you can also take bathroom breaks, and ask your examiner to repeat questions and clarify other things that confuse you.

After the Test

When you're finished with the first three parts of the IELTS, you can turn in your completed Listening, Reading, and Writing answers, collect your belongings, and go. You can even leave early if you want, but why would you do that? Unless you somehow managed to break your leg during the test and require medical attention, use all the time you're given.

The same goes for the Speaking test. Don't try to rush through it. Take your time, and let your IELTS interviewer guide the talk and tell you when you are finished. Then, at the end of the interview, you're free to go.

Test Day Outline

Now that you've read some details on how the test works and is scheduled, here is an overview of your test day, for quick reference. Below is a normal test day schedule.

| Time | Activity |
|------------------|------------------------------------|
| 7:45 am-8:45 am | Candidate identity check and photo |
| 9:00 am | Test begins |
| 9:00 am-9:40 am | Listening test |
| 9:40 am-10:45 am | Reading test |

| | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| 10:50 am-11:50 am | Writing test |
| 12:00 pm-1:30 pm | Lunch break |
| 1:30 pm-6:00 pm | Speaking test |

Note: Examiners collect test papers after each section. Therefore, the start and end time of Reading and Writing sections will be slightly different in different test rooms.

What to Bring: A Checklist

Now that we've seen an overview of the typical test day schedule, here's a quick reference list for what you need to bring. Check this list to ensure you aren't missing any important items when you finally arrive for your IELTS exam:

1. Original identification (such as your passport)
2. Two recent, identical passport-sized photographs
3. Pens, pencils, and erasers
4. A transparent bottle of water
5. IELTS confirmation receipt
 - a. Some test centers need it; check the requirements at your test center.
6. Food
 - a. This is especially important if you are taking the Speaking test in the afternoon. You will be asked to leave your food outside the test room, but you can eat during the lunch break. For more details on food, see the next section.

Remember: You should pack everything beforehand. Once you get fully prepared, just focus on the test and do your best!

What to Eat

A properly fed test-taker is a successful test-taker. What should you eat on test day, and how should you eat it? Read on to learn about this very important aspect of test day success!

Do not skip breakfast on the day of your exam. The IELTS test lasts around three hours, and your brain needs enough energy to work through a challenging exam. Eating protein-rich food can help your brain function better. Eggs, milk, yogurt, and toast are great choices. Also, drink enough water before the test. Avoid high-sugar food and beverages, as they can make you feel sluggish.

If you are taking the Speaking test on the same day as the written exam, make sure bring something to eat and drink during the lunch break, such as energy bars, fruits, and sandwiches.

Additional Tips

Finally, here is a look at a few more important reminders for test day.

Let's start with some **arrival tips**. You really should arrive early on test day. You should do this not just so you can find the test center and check in, but also so you aren't shut out of the test center for being too late. In most test centers, you are not allowed to enter after 8:45 am.

Now, let's look at **what you should bring to the test**, and what you should be prepared to leave outside the testing room. You will only be allowed to have a pencil, eraser, scrap paper, and ID in the test center. Of these three things, only the ID will be a personal belonging; you'll use a pencil, eraser, and paper provided by the examination center. You will be expected to leave all other personal belongings outside the test room. If you are wearing an overcoat of any sort, you may also be required to leave that behind.

Don't speak up out of turn, but don't be shy about raising your hand for permission to speak. If you need to go to the bathroom or have any other important request or question, put your hand right in the air. A test center worker will come over and help you.

Now, let's talk about **answer sheets**. In Reading and Writing, fill out the answer sheets as you think of the answers. In Listening, you can write the answers quickly on scrap paper, and then enter them into your answer sheet after you're done with all of the audio tracks. You have 10 minutes to fill in the Listening answer sheet at the end of the section.

Don't forget your Speaking interview appointment, and always remember that it's not automatically scheduled at the same time as the other three parts of the IELTS. Make sure should check your Speaking test schedule online before test day, and save the date and time in your phone or planner. The Speaking test may take place in the afternoon on the same day or the day after the test day.

Check out our post on [last minute IELTS tips](#) to learn more useful information!

3: Scoring



3.1 What is a Band Score?

Let's start with the basics of scoring. Your official IELTS score will be expressed as a "band." There are nine bands on the IELTS, numbered 1 through 9 in half-point increments. So the following IELTS scores are possible: 5.5, 6, 6.5, 7, 7.5, etc. Test-takers receive a band score for each of the four test sections (Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening), and also an overall score, which is simply the average of the four section scores.

Many standardized English tests—including the TOEFL—make adjustments to scores based on the difficulty of the questions a particular test-taker answers. So, for instance, if you take the TOEFL and get a harder-than-average mix of questions in a Reading section, your reading score will be raised on your official score report.

This doesn't happen on the IELTS. Instead, your official IELTS Reading and Listening scores are based on your *raw score*—the score that is calculated immediately in the testing center. Each section contains 40 questions, and although raw score to band score conversions can differ slightly from one test to another, they basically follow the pattern you'll find here (towards the middle of this page): [IELTS Reading and Listening—Raw Score to Band Score Conversion](#).

For Writing and Speaking, band score distinctions are fairly easy to comprehend. IELTS publishes a version of the grading schema they use to assess these two skill areas. As part of your preparation, you should study this information closely, especially if you are studying alone without the help of a teacher. If you *do* have a teacher or an IELTS Writing and Speaking coach, make sure they are using these documents to give you feedback:

- [Speaking rubric](#)
- [Task 1 Writing rubric](#)
- [Task 2 Writing rubric](#)

Whether or not you plan to get professional tutoring or coaching to help you with Speaking and Writing, it can be VERY valuable to find someone who can assess your level towards the beginning and end of your studies using the rubrics above.

3.2 What is a Good IELTS Score?

Regardless of why you're taking the IELTS, the better question to ask is probably, "What is an *acceptable* IELTS Score?"

The IELTS score is used by a vast number of institutions and organizations to figure out whether or not your English is 'good enough' for eligibility – immigration, admissions, hiring, etc. If you are taking the [IELTS for immigration](#), what they're looking for will depend on kind of visa you need (e.g. work, business, for investors, for students, etc.). If you're taking the IELTS as an international student, both the government and the institution may have a say about what is acceptable. So needless to say, there's no one answer to the question of what a good IELTS score is. But all institutions will give you guidance on what an *acceptable* score is for the institution's purpose.

It's also quite important to remember that institutions don't just require different IELTS scores. Different organizations also sometimes require different versions of the test. IELTS Academic is used for school admissions and medical jobs. IELTS General Training is used for just about everything else; it's the go-to exam for immigration and most employment. And the score requirements for General Training can be very different, depending on the visa or job. This makes perfect sense. After all, a factory worker won't need the same English proficiency as a technical writer, to give just two examples.

IELTS Score Scale and Skill Level

First of all, how does your IELTS score relate to your "skill level" in English? According to the [British Council](#), here are the descriptions of the different bands:

| IELTS Band Score | Skill Level |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 9 | Expert |
| 8 | Very good |
| 7 | Good |
| 6 | Competent |
| 5 | Modest |
| 4 | Limited |
| 3 | Extremely limited |
| 2 | Intermittent |
| 1 | Non-user |

As you can see in the chart above, if you score a 9 on the exam, you're an "expert" in English; if you score an 8, you're "very good" at English; and so on.

So how do these bands correspond to the marks you get in each individual section? For IELTS Listening and Reading, you can convert your *raw score* to an estimated band score. (Your raw score is the number of questions you got right in each section.) For IELTS Listening, you need about 35-40 answers correct for bands 8-9. 30-35 is band 7-8, 20-25 is band 6-7, and so on. For IELTS Academic Reading, the raw score to band conversion is the same as Listening. In General Training Reading, however, you need to score a few extra points to get the same band you'd get in Academic.

Raw scores are not a factor in IELTS Speaking and Writing; these sections are graded on a rubric that just uses the bands, not raw points. On the British Council website, you can find official [Speaking Band descriptors](#) and [Writing Band descriptors](#). These rubrics apply to both versions of the exam, and they give you a good idea of what each IELTS band looks like.

Now, let's look at the IELTS scores that schools may want to see on your applications. The universities in the chart below are all top, world-class universities, with competitive requirements for admission. As you can see, every university has its own unique IELTS requirements. This gives you an idea of the IELTS range you'll need in order to get into a top school.

IELTS Requirements at Top Schools Worldwide

All data taken from these schools' official websites, as of late 2017.

| University | Country | Undergraduate IELTS Requirements | Graduate IELTS Requirements |
|-------------------|----------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Oxford University | United Kingdom | 7.0 (whole test and individual sections) | Varies depending on program |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|---|---|
| Cambridge University | United Kingdom | 7.5, whole test, 7.0 for individual sections | Varies depending on program |
| Massachusetts Institute of Technology | United States | IELTS not accepted (TOEFL only) | Varies depending on program, but most commonly 7.0 |
| UC Berkeley | United States | 6.5 | 7.0 |
| University of Melbourne | Australia | 7.0 | Varies depending on the program, but is usually either 6.5 or 7.0 |
| University of Auckland | New Zealand | 6.0, with 5.5 in each section (higher in some programs) | 6.5, with 6.0 in each section (higher in some programs) |
| Queen's University | Canada | 6.5 | 7.0 |

What's a Good IELTS Score in Australia?

To the Australian government, a *good* IELTS score can fall into various categories. Your scores will tell them whether your skills are good enough to be determined functional, vocational, competent, proficient, or superior. Each visa type has a different minimal requirement. Here is how the overall IELTS scores measure up:

Functional: An overall IELTS score of 4.5

Vocational: A minimum of 5.0 in each category (Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking)

Competent: A minimum of 6.0 in each category

Proficient: A minimum of 7.0 in each category

Superior: A minimum of 8.0 in each category

BONUS! Eligibility for migration into Australia is determined on a point system. If your English is proficient or superior, you will extra earn points (10 and 20, respectively) that strengthen your application. Search [the Australian Immigration website](#) to find the required language skills and IELTS scores for your intended visa.

What's a Good IELTS Score in Canada?

In Canada, as in Australia, it depends on the kind of visa for which you are applying. For example, [here](#), you'll find that the skilled worker visa has different requirements for each applicant type. The scores here are listed in CLB—Canadian Language Benchmark—which is used to represent English and French language skills throughout the country. You must use a [calculator tool](#) to convert your IELTS scores for immigration requirements.

What's a Good IELTS Score in New Zealand?

In New Zealand, it's up to individual schools to decide which IELTS scores are “good enough.” And IELTS requirements for work visas depend on the kind of work that's being offered. For student visas, consult the individual universities to which you are applying. For all other visas, the IELTS score requirements vary, and are determined by NZ immigration regulations. Here are some examples:

Investors: 3.0 overall score or higher

Entrepreneurs: 4.0 overall score or higher

Parents Category: 4.0 in at least two categories (Listening, Reading, Writing, and/or Speaking)

Skilled Migrants: an overall average of at least 6.5

To see IELTS score requirements for other types of immigration to New Zealand, search [the New Zealand government website for immigration](#).

What's a Good IELTS Score in the UK?

For work visas, the [requirements](#) are based on the tier you're applying for and how long you'll be staying. These are quite varied, but in Tiers 1 and 2, for example, those requesting permission to stay must demonstrate a B1 or B2 minimum, respectively. These requirements are described in the format of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework (A1–C2). See [IELTS equivalents](#) here.

Schools and other organizations can “sponsor” your immigration, and it is up to them to determine acceptable IELTS scores.

What's a Good IELTS Score in the U.S.A.?

Surprisingly, the U.S. government is the only one on this list without minimum English requirements for visa applicants. However, if you are heading to the U.S. for your studies, you can expect to have to demonstrate your English skills before being admitted.

If you are considering moving to the U.S.A., consult with prospective employers, immigration offices, or immigration lawyers. They can help you find the best way to prove your English ability. The IELTS may or may not be a requirement for immigration or school. In the U.S., the IELTS is most often required for university admission, which is one way to obtain a student visa. Minimum scores for the Academic IELTS vary for each institution and are often different for undergraduate and post-graduate applicants. Again,

the best way to find your IELTS requirement is to check directly with the school or schools to which you are applying.

So, what does this all mean for you? Well, first it means you should find reliable, high-quality [IELTS prep](#) to help you along the way (hello, Magoosh!). If you're planning to apply to top-ranked universities, you should strive to achieve at least a 7.0. But if you're not applying to the world's top schools, a "good" score will likely be lower for you. Be sure to check those requirements on each university's website.

4: The Reading Section



4.1 Reading Section Overview

Many IELTS takers consider the Reading paper to be the most difficult on the IELTS. This is especially true of the Academic Reading paper, since time is extremely limited. Most test-takers have to read and answer questions very quickly in order to complete the section. The General Training Reading paper is less challenging, but can still pose a timing challenge for many IELTS takers. No matter which version of the IELTS you will take, developing a strategic approach to the Reading paper is crucial.

Before discussing strategy, let's take a closer look at some features of the IELTS Reading test. Even though they differ in some important ways, the Academic and General Training IELTS Reading tests share some common features. Both take 60 minutes and contain 40 questions. Also, although some of the Reading passages are quite different between the two exams, the strategy for answering questions is actually very similar. This is because the question types are generally the same for both versions. Furthermore, the General Training IELTS always includes one passage (the last one in the section) that is the same general length and difficulty as an Academic Reading passage. Therefore, students who plan to take the General Training IELTS exam can benefit by studying Academic IELTS Reading passages and questions.

Now let's look at the key differences between the Academic and General Training Reading papers.

The **Academic Reading** paper consists of three passages. For each one, you will answer 10-14 questions. Reading passages cover a wide range of subjects, such as science, history, the environment, etc. You do not need to be an expert in any of these fields. However, test-takers with a large vocabulary have a huge advantage. Academic IELTS Reading passages may contain some technical terms and even visual materials such as

charts and graphs. IELTS commonly uses passages from professional and academic journals, textbooks, reports, and newspapers.

Like Academic Reading, **General Training Reading** also includes articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines. However, the majority of the passages are much shorter, with simpler vocabulary. Additionally, the topics tend to relate to daily life. Some passages, especially towards the beginning of the General Training Reading paper, are taken from advertisements, guidebooks, magazines, notices, or employee manuals.

While each version of General Training IELTS Reading can be slightly different, you can generally expect that the exam will get more and more challenging from beginning to end. In Section 1, there will be 2-3 very short (and relatively simple) articles related to everyday life topics. In Section 2, there will be two short texts. These are often related to work in some way, such as a job application or company handbook. Finally, as noted above, Section 3 will contain a longer text discussing a more academic or abstract topic. This is the toughest article on the General Training Reading exam.

4.2 IELTS Reading Topics

Academic Topics

There are three passages in the IELTS Academic Reading section. All three passages are educational nonfiction.

The first and second passages on the IELTS Academic Reading Test are up to 900 words long, and usually no shorter than 800 words. The IELTS Reading section then closes with a third passage that's a little longer, usually in the 850-950 word range.

Sources for Academic Reading Texts

IELTS Academic Reading passages are usually adapted from sources such as:

- scientific magazines and newspapers
- informative nonfiction books
- research reports
- scholarly journals
- textbooks

Common IELTS Academic Reading Topics

The passages can cover a variety of academic topics, although topics related to the physical sciences and social sciences are the most common. You won't really see topics outside of the hard sciences and social science. For instance, there are no literature passages, nor are there passages that focus exclusively on history.

Here are some of the topics you're likely to see in IELTS Reading:

- health
- psychology
- biology
- animal science
- environmental science
- engineering
- agriculture
- global politics
- economics
- inventions and technology

Another feature of Academic IELTS Reading passages is that they almost *never* focus on just one topic. Instead, you'll see a combination of two or more of the topics above, all in one Academic Reading article.

For example, an IELTS Academic Reading prompt might discuss the sounds that bats make, and then talk about how these sounds are similar to human sonar technology. Such a passage combines animal science with engineering. To give another example, a passage might talk about government control of industrial pollution. A passage like that ([as seen on the official IELTS website](#)) involves national and global politics, economics, environmental science, health, chemistry, and agriculture.

General Training Topics

Let's have a look at some of the type of texts used in each section and the topics you might see.

Type of Texts Used

The type of texts used in the IELTS Reading General Training are taken from:

- advertisements
- books
- company handbooks
- magazines
- newspapers
- notices
- official documents

General Training Topics You Might See

There are a variety of topics covered during the test with each section having a particular focus. Let's look at each one in turn.

Section One

The first section contains two or three really short factual texts like notices, advertisements, and timetables, that would be important to understand in a country where English is spoken in order to conduct your day-to-day life. The texts in section one may include a number of “mini-texts” to look through, such as a series of advertisements on similar subjects.

Topics might include:

- community education programs
- evacuation procedures for a public space
- product return notices
- advertisements for foreign language centres
- a charity cycle ride information pack (i.e. London to Brighton Bike Ride)
- mail order products

Section Two

In this section, you will find two short, factual texts focusing on work-related issues. The texts here will be more complicated than in section one and will use more difficult language and structures.

Topics might include:

- company policies
- pay and working conditions
- workplace facilities
- applying for a job

- staff development
- workplace dismissals
- job descriptions
- job contracts
- training materials
- company expenses policies
- complaint procedures

Section Three

Here, you will need to read one longer, more complex text on a topic of general interest. This extended prose will be the most complex in structure of the three sections and the emphasis will be on descriptive and instructive texts. This third General Training Reading passage is similar to the passages found in Academic IELTS Reading.

Examples include:

- Calisthenics Today (i.e. using only one's body weight to increase muscle mass)
- Understanding Bee Behavior
- Robots At Work
- The History of Cinema
- Lack of Sleep

4.3 IELTS Reading Question Types

There are several types of questions you may encounter on the IELTS Reading paper. The descriptions and tips below will help you understand each one. Make sure to study the official practice questions as well! Wherever possible, links to Academic IELTS and General Training IELTS examples are included.

Multiple Choice

This is a traditional question type with which you are probably very familiar. You will be asked to select the correct answer to a question from a set of choices. IELTS Reading Multiple Choice questions can test a variety of things. For example, some will focus on details, while others focus on main ideas.

As with other question types, you should look for keywords in the questions and the answer choices before you scan the passage for answers.

Click the following links to view examples of Multiple Choice questions:

- [Academic Multiple Choice Example](#)
- [General Training Multiple Choice Example](#)

True / False / Not Given and Yes / No / Not Given

True/False/Not Given questions can be very tricky. These questions will consist of several statements. You need to decide whether each one is TRUE according to the passage. This means that the information in the question statement agrees with information in the text. However, if the question statement *contradicts* something found in the passage, you must mark the answer FALSE.

A third option is also possible on the IELTS. If the information in the question statement *cannot be found* in the article (the article does not say whether the statement is true or false) you must mark NOT GIVEN. This is tough! It is very easy to waste a lot of time searching for something that is, in fact, not there.

Try your best not to spend excessive time on these questions. If you can't find an answer after you've searched for it thoroughly in the article, mark NOT GIVEN and move on. You don't want to lose easier points that come later in the Reading paper because you spent too much time looking for information that might not be in the passage at all.

[Here is some additional information](#) on True / False / Not Given questions to help you with this question type.

- [Example General Training IELTS True / False / Not Given Question](#)

Yes / No / Not Given questions are almost exactly the same as True / False / Not Given questions. The difference is that they focus on IDEAS, not facts. Yes / No / Not Given questions are common for reading passages that present an author's opinions or perspectives. Your job will be to say whether the statements in the questions agree or disagree with what the author states in the essay. If the information isn't discussed directly, you must answer NOT GIVEN.

Matching

There are a few types of Matching questions on the IELTS Reading paper. Each one has its own unique features.

Matching Headings Questions

This type of question asks you to match a list of "headings" to each paragraph in the passage. A correct heading captures the main idea of one paragraph in the text. Usually, there will be some extra headings in your list which do not work with any of the paragraphs. These extra headings typically do not represent the text accurately, or (commonly!) they represent a minor idea found within one of the paragraphs.

To get a headings question correct, you must find the heading that articulates the main idea of a paragraph. Sometimes, you can find the main idea in the first sentence or two of a paragraph. This is definitely a good place to look first. But don't stop reading after the first two sentences as you try to answer these questions. Scan the remainder of each paragraph to confirm that the heading represents everything contained in the paragraph in a general way.

[This Magoosh IELTS article](#) offers some additional information on Matching Headings questions.

And here are some official sample exercises:

- [Example Academic IELTS Matching Headings Question](#)
- [Example General Training IELTS Matching Headings Question](#)

Matching Information Questions

This type of question asks you to match information from a list with one of the paragraphs in the passage. Matching Information questions can be very tricky because you need to search for details. To answer them correctly, you need to find the paragraph that contains the information presented in a question. As always, this information will be paraphrased, so don't look for the exact words in the question.

Here are some examples:

- [Example Academic IELTS Matching Information Question](#)
- [Example General Training IELTS Matching Information Question](#)

Matching Features Questions

This type of matching question presents you with a list of items in a box. These items will be categorized in some way. For example, they may be people or names of cities. Of course, each item will be mentioned in the reading passage as well. Your job is to match some phrases or sentences in the questions with the appropriate items listed in the box. If the box includes a list of people mentioned in the article, then the questions may ask you to match statements with the person who said them.

Frequently, some choices in the box will not relate to any of the questions, and some choices will be used more than once. The directions will always tell you whether you may use an answer choice more than one time.

Try to scan the passage for answers **to each question**, rather than using the items in the box to direct your scanning. Since some answer choices in the box may not relate to any of the questions, you might waste a lot of time scanning for information that doesn't answer any of your questions.

Take a look at these official examples:

- [Example Academic IELTS Matching Features Question](#)
- [Example General Training IELTS Matching Features Question](#)

Matching Sentence Endings

For these questions, you will have to match two halves of a sentence. The question will provide the first part of the sentence. You will have to select an appropriate ending to the sentence from a list of options. Like other matching questions, it is common to have extra answer choices that do not answer any of the questions. Keep in mind, correct answers must:

- 1) be grammatically correct.
- 2) make sense logically.
- 3) agree with the information in the reading passage.

Sometimes, you can easily determine that a few answer choices won't work with some of the questions because they create ungrammatical or illogical sentences when combined. However, this only works to eliminate a few combinations. To get the correct answer, you will have to search for information in the text to confirm that your combined sentence agrees with the passage.

An important feature of these questions is that the answers will come in order in the passage. In other words, if you find an answer to question 3 first, you will know that the answers to questions 1 and 2 will be found somewhere before the information for

question 3 in the passage. This can be incredibly helpful if you're confident you've found correct answers to a few questions! It helps you to locate more difficult answers in the text.

Here's an example:

- [Example Matching Sentence Endings Question](#)

Short Answer and Sentence Completion

Short Answer questions and Sentence Completion questions are very similar. Sentence Completion questions ask you to fill in a blank at the end of a sentence with some words taken from the text. Short Answer questions also require you to choose some words from the text for your answer, but the words you need to fill in aren't located at the end of a sentence. Typically, you simply need to answer a question about the text for regular Short Answer questions.

It is very important to read the directions carefully each time. The directions will state a word limit. For example, they will say you should write "NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS and/or a NUMBER" for your answer. Some questions limit you to ONE or TWO words. If you exceed the limit, the question will be marked wrong, so pay close attention to word limits.

On these questions, the answers will come in order in the passage. When you find a correct answer, you'll know that the answer to the next question will come later in the text.

Review this example:

- [Example General Training IELTS Short Answer Question](#)

Summary / Note / Table / Diagram Completion

This type of question asks you to complete a set of notes, a table, a diagram, or a summary with information from the text. Sometimes, this will be a Short Answer question. Other times, you will choose from a set of answers in a box or from a list.

Very often, the answers to these questions can be found in one portion of the reading passage, so it is very likely you won't have to scan the entire text to fill in the necessary information.

Here are a few samples:

- [Example Academic IELTS Table Completion Question](#)
- [Example Academic IELTS Diagram Completion Question](#)
- [Example General Training IELTS Flow-Chart Completion Question](#)

4.4 Essential Tips for IELTS Reading

All of the information in this section applies to the both Academic and General Training IELTS Reading exams. Let's start with some important keys to success on the Reading paper.

Pacing

Pacing is critical on IELTS Reading. This is especially true for the Academic IELTS, but it also applies to the General Training Reading exam. Sixty minutes is not a lot of time get through all of the passages and answer 40 questions. Since each question is worth the same amount of points (1) on the Reading paper, it makes most sense to divide the 3 sections equally—20 minutes per section.

Instead of reading each passage carefully, it works much better for most people to “skim” the Reading passages. This is something we will discuss in detail in the “Strategy” section of this chapter. I recommend spending 3–5 minutes quickly skimming the passage before looking at the questions. That leaves 15–17 minutes to study the questions and find answers in the text.

Note: Unlike in the Listening exam, you do not have an extra 10 minutes to transfer answers from your Test Booklet to your Answer Sheet. You need to record all of your final answers to the Answer Sheet within the 60 minutes you spend on the Reading paper.

Scoring

Scoring is fairly simple on the Reading section. Each question is worth 1 point, so you can achieve a “raw” score of up to 40 points. From there, IELTS converts your “raw” score into your Band score. You can find [a basic conversion table on this page](#) of the official IELTS website. However, keep in mind that each version of the IELTS is just a little bit different. Therefore, getting 23 out of 40 correct may earn you a slightly different Band score on two different versions of the test. Nevertheless, the tables can give you a general idea about how “raw” Reading scores are converted to band scores.

As noted above, the hardest questions and the easiest questions count equally towards your band score. Therefore, if you’re struggling to finish all of the questions within 60 minutes, make sure you’re not losing out on easier points because you get stuck on hard questions. Sometimes, you simply won’t understand a question or a segment within a passage fully. Other times, no matter how hard you try, you won’t find an answer in the text. If this happens, just make your best guess and move on so you don’t miss out on easier points later in the test! You can always return to a difficult question later if you have spare time at the end before your 60 minutes is up.

Vocabulary

The more vocabulary you know, the easier the IELTS Reading exam will be for you. Vocabulary is very, very important if you're aiming for a high Band score. As you prepare for the exam, make sure to study new words regularly. Your goal should be to learn 15–20 new words each day.

Also, try to read in English regularly (15–20 minutes per day at least!). It's an excellent idea to keep a vocabulary journal based on the articles you read. Record new and unfamiliar words, and then define each one with a synonym or short definition. Keep it simple. You should return to your list a few times each week to review, focusing attention on terms you have difficulty remembering. [This Magoosh IELTS Blog post](#) includes some online resources with good Reading passages for IELTS study (towards the middle of the post), including appropriate vocabulary for the more challenging passages on the exam. Additionally, Magoosh offers a (free!) [vocabulary flashcard app for the IELTS](#). No matter how you prefer to review vocabulary, study a little bit every day!

Focus on the Directions

Attention to detail is very important on the IELTS Reading paper. Unfortunately, too many test-takers lose points unnecessarily because they don't pay close attention to the directions. The directions for **each task** will tell you how to mark answers on your Answer Sheet. For example, some questions require numerals (i, ii, iii, iv, v, etc.), while others require letters (A, B, C, etc.). Short Answer questions are even more complicated. The directions may say something like, "Choose **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** from the passage." Each set of questions will have its own instructions telling you how to mark your answers. As you practice, get into the habit of looking at these instructions every time. You don't want to miss points because you didn't notice a key detail in the directions.

4.5 IELTS Reading Strategy: Skimming and Scanning for Answers

The IELTS Reading exam is probably different than the English reading tests you've taken in school. Most of the time, reading exams involve carefully reading a passage from beginning to end, and then answering comprehension questions about it. In theory, this is also what you should do on the IELTS Reading paper. However, in practice this approach doesn't work very well for most people. The reason is simple—there isn't enough time on the IELTS Reading paper to read each passage slowly and carefully AND answer all of the questions. This is especially true on the Academic IELTS, where you only have 60 minutes to read 3 long and complex passages. For proficient readers taking the General Training IELTS, it may be possible to read each passage carefully. Nevertheless, a different approach can help you answer questions more efficiently. Try these strategies as you practice:

Strategy 1: Skim each passage for 3–5 minutes before looking at the questions.

Skimming a passage effectively can save you a lot of time. To skim, simply look over each paragraph quickly, but in a strategic way. You should read the first line or two of each paragraph normally, but then you should go much faster over the rest. As you skim, you're trying to notice words that stand out because they seem important. This helps you to get the “gist,” or the basic sense of each paragraph.

The ultimate goal of skimming is to notice things in the text that will help you answer questions. You may find people's names, or important dates. You may also figure out how a passage is organized. For example, imagine you are reading a historical text. Often, historical passages are organized chronologically, from the beginning of a time period to

the end. Skimming effectively will help you to notice this organizational pattern, and this knowledge will most likely help you to find answers to questions more quickly. Anytime you get a question that includes a date or time reference in this case, you'll know where to look because you've skimmed the passage effectively.

Here is a summary of the key skimming skills you should master.

IELTS Reading Skimming Techniques:

1. Notice the title of the passage. It often gives you a general idea about the main idea of the text.
2. Read the first sentence or two of each paragraph. Often, this is where the main idea of each paragraph is located.
3. Underline words that stand out to you as important. This will help you get a general idea of what is being talked about.
4. Pick out words that have something in common (i.e. airports, passengers, lounge, fly).
5. Ignore words that you do not know. Focusing on words that are unfamiliar to you will slow you down.
6. At all times, try not to get caught up in the detail when you skim!

Below is an extract from a Reading passage similar to one you would find on the IELTS. Some of the words are in **bold**, showing what a passage would look like after applying the techniques above. This can help you see how the key information jumps off the page when you incorporate skimming. Try it! Just read the **bold** parts and ignore everything else. Could you take a guess at the main idea of the paragraph?

Sample Passage Excerpt:

The surfboard evolved as the century progressed. The invention of polystyrene (commonly known by the brand name "Styrofoam") led to a much lighter board, as the foam is comprised of ninety-eight percent air, making surfboards far more buoyant.

*Around the same time, **fins were added** for stability and control, and a **shorter design** allowed for greater freedom of movement, which brought about revolutions in wave-riding techniques. Surfing was no longer a sacred ritual, but rather **a sport** attractive to thrill-seekers. The activity received **nationwide attention in the 1950s** with the inception of “surf music” and numerous surfing films popular with teenagers. Finally, with the **creation of the wetsuit**, it became feasible to surf in global waters year-round. By the 1970s, competitive surfing events made it possible for talented surfers to win handsome **prize money**, and **world tours** and **contests** attracted corporate sponsors, supporting newly professional surfers. Nowadays, surfing is **an international big-market sport** with celebrity athletes as much as it is the quiet leisure of riding the waves on a board.*

Strategy 2: As you skim, underline keywords in the text.

And

Strategy 3: As you skim, write short notes as reminders in the text.

Strategies 2 and 3 work together with the skimming strategy above. Basically, the goal of “underlining” and taking “notes” as you skim is that this helps you remember what you learned when you go to answer questions. It’s very simple. Here’s what you should do:

As you skim, quickly underline each word that seems important in your Question Booklet (which contains your Reading passage). In other words, don’t just skim with your eyes. Use your pencil to underline things that stand out as you skim the passage.

Secondly, as you skim, quickly write very short notes (two to five words) next to each paragraph with your **best guess** about the main idea of that paragraph. **IMPORTANT:** You don’t have to be comprehensive or even 100% right about your “guess” for it to be useful. To be sure, if you had time to read the paragraph carefully, you could almost certainly

come up with very good and accurate summary notes. Nevertheless, you might be surprised how close you can come to the main idea of each paragraph just from skimming.

For example, take another glance at the sample IELTS Reading passage we looked at already (above). Just by focusing on the words in bold, could you write a few notes next to the paragraph with your best guess about the main idea? Try it!

Did you come up with something like, “modern surfing development”? Just these simple notes can be incredibly valuable, especially if you can label each paragraph this way. Many questions ask you to find the main idea of a paragraph, for example. This is especially true for “Matching Headings” questions. However, your underlined words and notes will help you with other types of questions as well. For questions that ask you to find detailed information, for example, your notes can guide you very efficiently to the correct paragraph.

Strategy 4: Study the questions, noting keywords, and SCAN the text strategically for answers.

After you’ve thoroughly skimmed the text, you’re ready to turn to the questions. Each question type is slightly different, so you’ll have to vary your approach in some ways for each new set of questions. However, the strategy discussed in this section applies to all IELTS Reading questions. The basic concept is simple. First, read the questions carefully and look for keywords. Then, scan the passage for answers.

When you look for keywords in the questions, you should underline the most important ones. This may sound like a lot of extra work, but it really shouldn't require a lot of time. As you read, simply use your pencil to mark up the questions.

The keywords you find contain the information you'll need to search for in the passage. As you're probably aware, IELTS questions almost never use the same language as the actual reading passage (except for incorrect answer choices!). Instead, the questions will be *paraphrases* of information found in the article. This is one way the IELTS tests your vocabulary. Paraphrases will be synonyms, or different forms of words, found in the text. A paraphrase could also be an entire sentence that conveys the same meaning as a sentence in the passage, while using different words and sentence structures. *When you underline keywords in the questions, you're identifying the IDEAS you need to search for in the passage.*

Use a strategic approach when you scan the reading passage for answers. It's best to begin with questions that have keywords you think you can find easily in the text. After answering one or two easier questions, you will learn a little more about the text because you read a part of the passage carefully to confirm your answer. It is possible you might find answers to more difficult questions in this process!

What makes one question easier to scan for in the text than another? Perhaps a question stands out to you because you remember seeing the topic in the text when you skimmed, underlined, and took notes at the very beginning. But there are some other things that can make an answer easier to find by scanning. For example, numbers and proper nouns like names or locations often stand out visually in a text. A date like 1950, or the names Jane Smith and New York City, would be very easy to locate among other words. Once you find the words you're looking for, read the surrounding sentences carefully to find an answer to your question.

4.6 Common Reading Difficulties

Time Management

You have roughly 20 minutes to complete each of the three sections of the Reading paper. However, General Training IELTS-takers may be able to work faster in the first two sections. Nevertheless, for most IELTS takers (especially those taking the Academic test), 20 minutes is just barely enough to finish the test and maybe check a few answers. The best advice for people who have trouble with time management is to do lots and lots of timed reading practice before test day. Finishing a section in the right amount of time is a learned skill, so practice it! Set a timer when you answer IELTS questions, and don't cheat! Giving yourself extra time to answer questions will not help you with time management problems. Later, after you've answered each question, you can go back to check your answers and study the passage carefully. The first time through, always approach a reading passage and its questions as though you're taking the test. This is the best way to increase your speed.

Missing Key Information in the Directions

As you go through the test, you may start to rush and make unnecessary mistakes. For instance, students often miss critical details in the question prompts such as word counts for short answer questions (example: WRITE NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS...).

Similarly, many people read the question prompt too quickly and misunderstand what the question asks. Read question prompts carefully, and always reread the question before choosing your final answer.

Unfamiliar Vocabulary

It is very likely you will see unfamiliar words on the test. When you do, there are a few steps you can take: 1) Check to see if it is underlined and defined at the bottom of the passage. Some IELTS Reading passages include a vocabulary note at the end. 2) Read the sentence to check if you can make a reasonable guess about the word's meaning. 3) Look at the surrounding paragraph for context. Even if you can't guess the meaning of the specific word, you may be able to guess the meaning of the whole sentence based on its surroundings. This strategy is very important. Do not get stuck on a single word or phrase—use what you do know to infer the total meaning if possible!

Getting Caught up in Details

Just like getting stuck on the meaning of a single word, many students get stuck looking at small details: a particular phrase the author chose, or a specific fact from the article. Don't get so focused on these details that you forget the main idea of the passage. If you're doing okay on time, take a minute after reading the passage to summarize it to yourself. If you ever start to mark an answer that contradicts the main idea of the passage or paragraph, look again—it's probably not the correct answer.

4.7 Resources for Reading Practice

Official Materials

The best way to practice IELTS Reading is to take official Reading tests. It cannot be stressed too much that you should train with official IELTS reading material as much as possible. These will offer you the most realistic Reading material and the most realistic questions. I highly recommend purchasing these books for your practice:

- [*Official IELTS Practice Materials Vol. 1*](#)

- [Official IELTS Practice Materials Vol. 2](#)
- [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#)

Unofficial Materials

Apart from taking practice tests, you should be reading English regularly as you prepare for the IELTS. Definitely don't limit yourself to IELTS practice materials. Reading English newspapers and magazines is an excellent way to develop your comprehension. In fact, many IELTS reading passages are selected from these sources. Here is a list of resources you can use to develop your English reading abilities. These materials are all very appropriate for IELTS study.

New Scientist

[New Scientist](#) is an international science magazine from UK. Some New Scientist articles, such as one called [Flawed Beauty: the Problem with Toughened Glass](#), can be found in Cambridge IELTS books and past IELTS exams.

Scientific American and American Scientist

[Scientific American](#) and [American Scientist](#) are two popular American science magazines. They also include health and education articles, which are very similar to IELTS Academic Reading passages. What is more, Scientific American offers hundreds of [60-second science podcasts](#), which are great for IELTS listening practice!

BBC News

Get the latest news from different parts of the world in English. There are many kinds of reading materials on [BBC News](#) that work great for IELTS prep.

The Economist

[The Economist](#) is another common source for IELTS reading passages. Many articles from past exams were taken from this magazine.

National Geographic

[National Geographic](#) contains articles about geography, animals, culture, the environment, travel, and adventure, which are common topics for both Academic and General Training Reading exams.

History Extra and History Net

[History Extra](#) and [History Net](#) are two great history magazine websites with podcasts, articles, and reviews on a variety of events.

Newspapers and Media

- [New York Times](#)
- [The Washington Post](#)
- [CBC News](#)
- [The Australian](#)

5: The Listening Section



5.1 Meet the Listening Section

Before we get to strategies for the Listening test, let's take a look at some basic information you should know about the IELTS Listening paper.

General Training vs. Academic

There is no difference between the General Training and Academic IELTS Listening papers. IELTS Reading and Writing are the only sections that differ between the two IELTS exams. Therefore, everything in this post is relevant to both Academic and General Training IELTS preparation.

Timing for IELTS Listening

IELTS Listening will take about 40 minutes total. Approximately 30 minutes of this time is devoted to actually listening to recordings and answering questions in your Question Booklet. The Question Booklet is the place where you will see the instructions and the questions you need to answer. The Question Booklet is separate from your Answer Sheet. The Answer Sheet, [which looks like this](#), is where you will write your final answers for grading. **ONLY** the answers you write on your Answer Sheet will be marked. After you listen to the final passage, you will have 10 minutes to transfer answers from your Question Booklet to your Answer Sheet.

You should use this “transfer time” to your advantage. There is no reason to mark final answers on your answer sheet until the 10-minute “transfer time” at the end. Use this time to write carefully and neatly. The grader needs to be able to read what you've written!

Misspellings are marked incorrect, so you should also use this time to check (and double check) your spelling.

Scoring for IELTS Listening

Scoring is fairly straightforward for the Listening paper. Each question is worth 1 point, so you can achieve a “raw” score up to 40 points. From there, IELTS converts your “raw” score into your Band Score. You can find [a basic conversion table on this page](#) of the official IELTS website. However, as with IELTS Reading, it’s important to keep in mind that each version of the IELTS is slightly different. Therefore, getting 23 out of 40 correct may earn you a slightly different Band score on two different versions of the test.

Nevertheless, the tables can give you a general idea about how Listening is scored.

The passages get tougher and tougher as you progress through the Listening paper. However, question 1 is worth the same number of points as question 40 (one point each). Therefore, you must treat the questions from Section 1 the same as you do for the questions from Section 4. Read the directions carefully, make sure you spell words correctly, etc. You don’t want to miss easy points in the first sections because of silly mistakes!

Additionally, since all points are worth the same, you don’t want lose points because you’re focusing too much attention on a particular question. Sometimes, despite your best effort and close attention, you might not hear the answer to a question or you may not understand a large section of the listening passage. If this happens, just make your best guesses and move on. Don’t miss points on upcoming questions because you can’t figure out the answer to the question you’re currently working on.

5.2 Types of Listening Recordings on the IELTS

The Four Sections of IELTS Listening

You will hear four different listening passages during the Listening test. You will answer 10 questions in each section (40 total). The passages get tougher as you progress through the exam.

Passage 1: This is usually a conversation between two people. Typically, the conversation will involve a basic exchange of information. For example, someone might be placing an order over the phone, or confirming details for a reservation. The topic will be a daily-life situation.

Passage 2: This is usually a monologue (one person speaking). Passage 2 will also come from a common daily situation. For example, you might hear someone providing directions, or presenting basic information about a place or an event.

Passage 3: The topics become noticeably more challenging in Passage 3. This will be a conversation, often among several people, about an academic topic. You might hear a few students discussing something from class, or a professor providing feedback about an assignment, for example. Passage 3 is tougher because the vocabulary is more difficult, the topics are more complicated, and there are more speakers involved in the discussion.

Passage 4: This will be a lecture from a professor. It could cover any topic from a typical college course. You are not required to have specialized knowledge about the subject matter. However, the language will be difficult and the lecture will be complex. This is the toughest passage on the Listening exam for most students.

5.3 IELTS Listening Strategy

Although each Listening question type has unique features (which we will look at in the next section of this chapter), the basic approach to each one is the same. There are three things you must do for each set of questions you encounter:

1. Analyze the questions.
2. Predict the answers.
3. Track questions and the speaker.

IELTS Listening Strategies 1 and 2: Analyzing and Predicting

The first two steps require practice, because you must be able to do both quickly during the actual exam. Before each recording, the IELTS gives you some time (30-40 seconds) to look at the questions in the next section. Some students use this time to check their answers from the previous section, but this is a big mistake. It is very important to study the upcoming questions. Remember, the best approach to IELTS Listening is to answer questions in your Question Booklet while you're listening to the speaker. If you try to answer questions without looking at them first, there is a very good chance you'll get lost and miss the information you need.

The best approach is to use your 30-40 seconds strategically. First, you should **analyze** the question. Quickly determine:

- What type of question is this? (Question types are discussed below)

- How should you answer? Look to the directions, which will tell you whether your answer should be a letters, numbers, words, etc.
- What are the keywords in the questions? Quickly underline words and phrases that seem most important in each question, keeping in mind that *correct answers are almost always going to be paraphrases of these words*. Underlining them helps you to focus your attention on what's most important as you listen.

For example, you might encounter a Sentence Completion question that looks like this:

After the exam, Marcus scheduled a meeting with_____.

These keywords are the concepts you'll listen for in the passage. As an example, you might hear something like this from the speaker to answer this question:

Marcus: "I feel so disappointed about the test yesterday. I met regularly with a study group to help me prepare and I thought I was ready. But I've decided to make an appointment with a tutor since I got such a poor grade. I guess I need more help."

In the example above, the underlined keywords would help you remember that you need to find 1) who Marcus scheduled a meeting with 2) after the exam. He met with a study group before the exam, but he met with a tutor after he got his disappointing results. Underlining the keywords helps you keep these concepts straight as you listen to the speaker.

This leads to the second goal for the 30-40 second period you have to examine the questions. This may seem like a lot to accomplish in such a short time, but the second goal is closely related to the first: **make predictions**.

Very often, when you are underlining key words as you analyze the question, you will come across very useful information that will help you make predictions about answers. For example, let's revisit the sentence completion question we just looked at above:

After the exam, Marcus scheduled a meeting with _____ (noun/person) _____.

You could easily predict, based on the sentence alone, that you will need to listen for a noun because the sentence ends with the preposition "with." Indeed, nouns typically follow prepositions. In fact, it would also be very reasonable to predict that you need to listen for a specific person's name or a type of person. Since we know, simply based on the information in the sentence, that Marcus just finished an exam and he's now scheduling a meeting, it would be a very good guess that he might schedule a meeting with *someone who is going to offer help*.

All of these things are **predictions**. You won't know the answers until you actually listen to the passage. However, if you have a good sense of what to listen for based on your predictions, it will be much easier to catch the answers while the speakers are talking.

IELTS Listening Strategy 3: Track Questions and the Speaker

The final IELTS Listening strategy is called **tracking**. Tracking is something you do while you listen to the recording, and it requires great focus and attention. Basically, your goal is to keep track of where the speaker is in the passage, and which question you should be answering in the Question Booklet *at the same time*.

Tracking works because IELTS Listening questions always provide contextual clues to help you know where you should be in the passage. **Importantly, IELTS Listening questions also come in order.** In other words, the speaker(s) will provide the answer to question 1 before you will hear the answer to question 2, and so on. Therefore, imagine you are filling in a set of notes based on a professor's lecture for Section 4 of the Listening exam. In your Question Booklet, you will see the notes with blanks for the information you need to fill in. Tracking successfully in this task means that you will use the information in the notes to determine where the professor is in the lecture.

As you listen, you should focus on the question you're trying to answer AND you should keep your eye on the next question as well. If you miss an answer to a question, you'll know because the professor will be discussing something related to the next question, not the one you're on. In this case, it is very likely that you missed an answer. While that can be frustrating, *it is much worse to get completely lost as the speaker is talking.* You will have to make a guess about the question you missed in this case. It is more important to continue tracking the speaker and the current question so you don't get completely lost.

5.4 Types of Listening Questions

Let's take a look at the types of questions you'll face on the IELTS Listening paper, along with some strategic considerations for each one.

Short Answer

Remember to read the directions! You must follow the word/number requirements for short answer questions.

Very often, you will have to find detailed information related to some category. For

example, you might get a question like this:

“What **TWO** types of tree cannot survive in a desert environment?”

In this case, you should underline “type of tree cannot survive” as you analyze the questions before listening.

- [Sample short answer question](#) and [recording](#)

Multiple Choice

IELTS Multiple Choice questions only have 3 possible answers. Sometimes (but not frequently), there will be more than three answer choices. In this case, you will usually be instructed to choose more than one answer.

You must remember to answer with LETTERS (A, B, or C) on your Answer Sheet. Don’t write the answer choice word(s)!

Sometimes, you will only have 2-3 Multiple Choice questions in a section. But it is possible there could be more (5 to 8). Treat Multiple Choice questions exactly like other question types. In the time provided before you listen to the passage, skim all of the questions and *the answer choices* to find keywords. Answers will come in order in the passage, so you need to track answers across all of the questions in the task you’re working on.

- [Sample multiple choice question](#) and [recording](#)

Form Completion

This is a common question type in Section 1 of the Listening exam (although it can come up in other sections too!).

In this question type, you will fill out a form of some kind. Often, these are standard types of forms such as an application or an order form.

The forms will include a lot of information you can use to make predictions before you listen. For example, most forms will have some kind of title at the top, or an indication of the kind of information to expect in the discussion. It is common to see blanks next to “Phone number” or “Address” on these forms, for instance. Use contextual clues on the form to track where the speakers are in their conversation as you follow along.

- [Sample form completion question](#) and [recording](#)

Sentence Completion

Sentence Completion questions are a form of Short Answer question. Therefore, it's crucial to look to the directions for word and number counts.

As the name suggests, this question type requires you to complete a sentence with a short answer at the end. The sentence will almost always be a paraphrase of something you'll hear in the passage. In other words, *don't expect to hear a speaker say the exact sentence as it's written in the question.*

The sentences will provide a lot of information that will help you make predictions about the answers. In particular, it is often possible to gather information about the grammatical form of the answer (noun, verb, adjective, etc).

- [Sample sentence completion question](#) and [recording](#)

Plan/Diagram/Map Questions

These questions involve a visual of some kind, with missing labels that you will have to fill

in based on what the speakers say.

You can get a lot of clues by looking at the visual for these questions. For instance, if you are answering a Map Question, look at the location of the first question, and then look around the map to see where the following questions are located. This provides the order in which the speaker will describe the visual. Study the Map further, and you will become familiar with the location of other places. For example, perhaps the map includes a statue, a restaurant, or some other landmark. Getting familiar with the Map, Plan, or Diagram before you listen to the speaker will help you get oriented.

- [Sample plan question](#) and [recording](#)

Matching

Matching Questions usually involve listening for detailed information in the discussion. It is very important to look at the category of information that you will match to the answer choices. These will be lettered options that look like the example below:

Within which timeframe will each event occur?

Event Starting Times

- A. 9:00 to 12:00
- B. 12:01 to 16:00
- C. 16:01 to 23:59

These choices may be presented inside a box, or as a list of items like the example above. In this example, you know that you will need to listen for the time certain events will occur. You will then have a list of times to “match” to the appropriate event.

1. Ceremony _____

2. Orientation _____

3. Registration _____

When you analyze these questions before listening to the passage, make sure you understand the category of the lettered answer choices, and pay close attention to the order of the items you need to match in the questions. **It is the questions (not the lettered answer choices) that will be presented in order within the passage.** You will listen for each of these question items as you “track” answers in the passage.

- [Sample matching question](#) and [recording](#)

Flow Chart, Table, Note, Summary Completion

These question types look different, but they share a lot in common. They are often Short Answer questions, but you may also be presented with a list or a box with answer choices. Basically, you will need to fill in missing information based on the Listening passage.

It is very important to look at each question number. Notice where it is located on the visual or summary and what the keywords are that surround it. You will need to “track” these keywords as you listen to the speaker.

Question Descriptions:

A Flow Chart is a kind of visual that shows steps or stages in a process. You can expect that you will need to listen for the different stages of the process.

A Table could be many things. Often, a table is used to categorize several things, so you will need to fill in missing information on the table.

Notes Questions are a common question type for Passage 4, in which you will hear a lecture. You will have incomplete lecture notes that you need to fill in based on what the professor says.

For Summary Questions, you will be presented with a paragraph of several sentences which summarize the listening passage. Like the other questions in this category, you need to fill in words that complete the summary based on what you hear.

- [Note completion question](#) and [recording](#)

5.5 Common Listening Difficulties

Difficulty 1: The Directions

Attention to detail is very important on the IELTS Listening exam. Unfortunately, too many people lose points unnecessarily because they don't pay close attention to the directions for each new question set. Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Make sure you write the correct type of answer on your final Answer Sheet. For example, on Multiple Choice questions, the correct answer will be a letter (A, B, or C). As noted earlier in this chapter, sometimes students mistakenly write the words that come after these letters. This will be marked incorrect, even if you wrote the word next to the correct letter choice.

- Various types of short answer questions are common on the Listening paper. You may need to fill in a summary, a map, some notes, or just listen for some specific words that you must fill in on your answer sheet. The IELTS will always tell you how many words and/or numbers you are allowed to use in your answers. It is very important to read the directions for each set of questions because the requirements change. One set of questions may allow a short answer of three words, but the next may only allow two. If the directions tell you that you may not use **“MORE THAN TWO WORDS and/or A NUMBER,”** then your answer will be marked incorrect if you write down three words, or more than one number.

Problem 2: Not Knowing the Subject Matter

The IELTS is designed not to require any prior knowledge of the topics on the test. In other words, hypothetically, an artist should find every recording as easy as the engineer next to him does. In spite of this, there’s no doubt that if you’re already familiar with the subject matter, your score can only go up. On the other hand, if you have no familiarity with the topic, you may be unfamiliar with words that you need to know to fully understand the recording.

Inevitably, you will not be an expert on all of the subjects you’ll encounter on the IELTS. So prepare for the worst by applying the same study practices to listening that you would to reading. When we read, we learn how to pick up on all kinds of context clues, or hints that help us figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. For example, in case you were unfamiliar with the phrase “context clues,” I defined it immediately after saying it for the first time. Professors will frequently do this in lectures (Part 4 of the test) as the words that are central to the new ideas they’re discussing are often unfamiliar to their students. Even if the speaker doesn’t define a word, you can try to figure it out by looking at what else he or she says: examples, clarifications, and so on. When you encounter an unknown word, don’t let it distract you. Instead, focus your attention on what hints the speaker might be giving as to the word’s meaning.

Problem 3: “Natural” Style

The listening section is full of informal language that is designed to sound like real-world speech. It’s also not as slow as some resources for non-native speakers. One great way to deal with this is to practice listening to interviews. The speakers are not reading from scripts, unlike TV characters, so they're generally slower and more broken up, with those pauses and repetition. You can find interviews from American shows and radio online, and many websites include transcripts or offer subtitles that can help you out at first. Be sure not to rely on subtitles forever, since you won’t have access to them on the test.

Problem 4: Losing Your Place

The Listening “Strategy” section above discusses the strategy of “tracking” the question prompts as the speaker is talking. Since IELTS Listening questions always come in the same order as in the Listening passage, the strategy is to keep track of which question you should be answering as the speaker is talking.

Unfortunately, this is not always easy to do. There are two main problems that can cause you to lose track of the question you should be answering:

- 1) You cannot understand the speaker(s).
- 2) You do not make the proper connection between the paraphrased language in the question prompts and what the speaker says.

Regarding issue #1, if you cannot understand enough of what the speaker says, obviously you will have a very difficult time following along. This could indicate that you need more listening practice or that the vocabulary level of the passage exceeds your own.

In my experience, issue #2 is far more common among IELTS students. It is simply quite challenging to read along in the question booklet and listen to a speaker at the same time. Even a very advanced English listener can get lost easily.

What can you do? Practicing IELTS Listening questions is the first key. Don't assume that you will be able to answer questions well because you can watch and understand television or movies easily in English. IELTS Listening is different—a little like the difference between simply throwing a ball up into the air and catching it versus juggling. Specifically, practicing the actual IELTS Listening task of answering questions and looking ahead to see what question is coming next while you are listening is a completely separate skill from day to day listening. It's hard to improve at it unless you practice...a lot.

Secondly, make sure you are using a pencil to mark up your question booklet. If you get lost, the underlining of keywords you do during the 30 second pause between sections can really help you to recover your place in the passage and the questions.

Whatever you do, don't panic if you get lost. Keep listening closely and scan the questions to see if you can regain your place. In the worst-case scenario, even if you get completely lost and can't recover your place, you will have time in the 10-minute period after Part 4 to transfer answers to your answer sheet. At this time, you can make good guesses about the answers if you continued to listen closely to the speaker even after losing your place. Hopefully, it won't come to this! If it does, answer the best you can and don't get rattled.

5.6 The Best Listening Practice

Official Practice

As discussed earlier in this chapter, practicing official IELTS Listening questions is essential. The sample exams published by the British Council and Cambridge English are the best for authentic practice. When you practice IELTS Listening, try your hardest to recreate the same conditions you will face on the real Listening test. That means you should not start and stop the recordings, or listen to the recording more than once before

you answer. Answer questions the first time through. This will give you a realistic sense of how well you're doing.

Then, as you review your answers, go back to the listening passages and study them closely. Most textbooks and practice exams provide a transcript of the Listening materials. Study them. Make sure to understand each mistake you make, and keep track of new vocabulary.

Unofficial Practice

Don't limit yourself to practice tests. You should listen to a wide variety of material in your IELTS preparation. Keep in mind that there are plenty of unrealistic, unofficial imitations of IELTS materials. However, there aren't many practice listenings that accurately reflect the content, style, and level of English that IELTS uses on the test. Be very wary of unofficial, free materials. They might be good for general English listening practice, but you probably won't get realistic questions, and the recordings will almost always be different from what you'll really get on the day of your test.

But that leads to another point: if you want to practice your English listening skills in general, there's no reason to limit yourself to amateur recordings and poorly-written questions that just look a little like the IELTS. Instead, we can practice listening with anything that has similar vocabulary and style of the IELTS Listening exam.

I highly recommend the lectures on TED.com for practice. TED invites lecturers from around the globe, so it's possible to hear a variety of English accents. The best feature of TED is that if your listening skills are still very low, there are text transcripts of almost every lecture, so you can read while you listen. The TED lectures are definitely more difficult than IELTS recordings, too. That's not a bad thing, though—the best way to train is with difficult material.

Here is a list of listening materials that would also be beneficial as you prepare for the IELTS:

- [This I Believe](#) from NPR
- [Listen and Watch](#) from the British Council
- [BBC Radio](#)
- [ABC News \(Australia\)](#)
- [Additional Australian listening resources](#) from David Recine on Magoosh's TOEFL Blog

Podcasts

If you want to study at an English-speaking university, you will have to listen to lectures in English, of course—what better way to practice for that than to listen to real English lectures from actual professors? Many universities offer podcasts of real lectures. Not all of them are perfect, of course, but there is a lot of great IELTS practice there.

Documentaries

So you like watching TV and movies in English? That may be good English practice in general (although very difficult), but it's not always appropriate for the IELTS. But documentaries are great practice. I highly recommend BBC's Planet Earth, for one. The science that it discusses is very, very similar to what you will hear in IELTS lectures in Part 4 of the test. Also, the material is extremely interesting, and the videos are absolutely beautiful. But don't stop there; almost any documentary is a good idea.

The Main Point

If you're looking for sample IELTS listening material, head to the official site first. Unofficial, free samples are only really useful for general listening practice. If you're practicing that, then don't limit yourself to suspicious imitations: consume anything you can that's academic and challenging.

6: The Speaking Section



6.1 Meet the Speaking Section

IELTS uses a “paper” format for its Reading, Writing, and Listening tests, all of which are completed together in one sitting. Speaking takes place separately. In most cases, Speaking interviews are scheduled on the same day as the paper test. However, sometimes the interview can be scheduled up to one week before or after the paper exam. You will receive instructions about this when you register for the IELTS at your local test center.

When you take the Speaking test, you will enter a room where your examiner will be waiting to greet you. He or she will ask you to identify yourself, and your Speaking test will begin immediately after that. To get an idea of what the test is like, check out [this short video](#). The student is answering questions in Part 1 of the exam.

The IELTS Speaking Test has three parts. We will look at each part in depth later in this post. For now, let’s just get familiar with each one.

Part 1 is like a personal interview. It lasts about four to five minutes. You will introduce yourself and talk about topics related to your life and your experiences in response to the examiner’s questions. Think of this interaction as “small talk.” These are the kinds of questions you might exchange with someone you just met.

Part 2 is called the “long turn.” Here, you are given a question on a topic and some sub-points you must cover in your speech. You will have a minute to prepare a response, and your goal is to speak for about two minutes. The examiner may ask you some follow-up questions when you finish your short speech.

In **Part 3**, you’ll have a conversation on the same (or similar) issue you spoke about in Part 2. This will be a discussion, much like the first section of the exam (Part 1). However, the questions are more complicated because they require you to

offer an opinion or some analysis. To illustrate, imagine the Part 2 topic asks you to describe a happy memory from your childhood. In Part 3, the examiner could ask you: “What are some important things a person should do in order to live a happy life?” Here, the theme of “happiness” connects both sections.

IELTS Speaking: Scoring

IELTS uses four scoring categories to assess your speaking skills. Make sure to study these “[Band descriptors](#),” which IELTS uses to assign Speaking Band scores. To help you understand the grading schema better, let’s take a look at each category.

Fluency and Coherence

Fluency and Coherence are measurements of a speaker’s ability to communicate logically, clearly, and without difficulty in English. For *Fluency*, a perfect Band score of 9 means the speaker doesn’t have to pause to recall words or mentally review grammatical structures. The speaker can focus on the message she wishes to convey rather than the language needed to say it. *Coherence* is related to fluency, but slightly different. It measures how well a speaker’s ideas make sense together. A high Band score indicates that a person can use a variety of [cohesive features](#) and [discourse markers](#) with ease in order to articulate ideas in a clear and logical way.

Lexical Resource

This scoring category measures vocabulary. You will be assessed on your ability to use words appropriately (in the right context) and accurately (with the correct meaning). IELTS Speaking rewards test-takers with large vocabularies. If this is a concern for you, [Magoosh offers free IELTS flashcards](#) to help you learn words you should know for the IELTS!

The examiner will be listening carefully to assess whether or not you can use a wide variety of words and phrases (which is good), or whether you use the same language

over and over again (which is bad). Related to this, you will also be assessed on whether or not you can accurately paraphrase the examiner's questions fluently. See the tips and strategies chart for Part 1 (Ch. 6: "Part 1 In Depth," below) to learn more about paraphrasing the examiner's questions.

Grammatical Range

Your grammar will be assessed on the Speaking exam. You should try to use a wide range of grammatical constructions appropriately and accurately. Keep in mind that your grammatical range score is not simply about avoiding grammar mistakes. Yes, limiting errors is important. However, you can only reach a very high band score if you can also demonstrate that you have mastered complex sentence structures, verb tenses, and other advanced grammatical features.

If your grammar skills are limited, or you make a lot of grammar mistakes when you speak, it is especially important that you record yourself when you answer practice questions. Listen for errors that you make regularly and think about how you can fix them. Get feedback on your grammar from a native English speaker if at all possible. If you have enough time before your exam (a few months or more), consider taking a class or investing in [a good grammar book for self-study](#).

Pronunciation

IELTS Speaking also measures your pronunciation. Top Band scores only go to those test-takers whose pronunciation is "effortless" for a native English speaker to understand. Scores are reduced for mispronunciation, especially if pronunciation problems make it difficult to comprehend a speaker's message.

Pronunciation involves more than just articulating individual words correctly. Many students have even larger pronunciation problems at the *sentence level*. These problems occur when a student doesn't have a feel for native-like [rhythm](#) or [intonation](#) patterns.

Unfortunately, there is no easy fix for most pronunciation issues. Generally, the best way to improve is to use your English in daily life.

If you can't use English on a regular basis, then it can be helpful to listen to recordings of English speakers. Pause the recordings occasionally and attempt to pronounce entire sentences **exactly** the same way as the speaker. Try to copy the speaker's tone (the rise or fall of the voice). Also try to copy how the speaker speeds up, slows down, and pauses throughout the sentence. Even try to mimic the speaker's emotion. You may feel a little silly doing this exercise, but that is probably a sign you're doing it correctly! Over time, you will develop your ear to hear the sounds of English and reproduce them more accurately.

6.2 Speaking Topics

The IELTS Speaking interview is all about you. You'll be asked to talk about your life, your personal experiences, and your opinions. But don't worry; things don't get *too* personal. Instead, as noted earlier in the chapter, IELTS Speaking topics are best described as "small talk." The focus is general language skills, not in-depth conversation. Expect the same kinds of light, friendly topics you might discuss with a co-worker or a classmate on a lunch break.

In Parts 1 and 3 of the IELTS Speaking section, the questions are fairly simple. You may be asked if you like a certain activity, with a follow-up question of "why or why not?" Or you might be asked an either-or question about a personal preference. You'll give brief descriptions of certain aspects of your life, too. Replies can be short, especially for Part 1. If your interviewer wants you to say more, he or she will ask you a follow-up question or two.

Part 2 covers the same kinds of personal topics as Parts 1 and 3, but the questions and answers are longer and more complex. In this second section, you'll be given a single

topic that is printed on an “IELTS Topic Card.” Topic cards ask for an in-depth description of some aspect of your life. Each topic card also asks you to include three specific supporting details in your reply. And you’ll be asked to explain your answer. For this part of the IELTS Speaking test, expect to give a reply that is one to two minutes long.

More information about the IELTS Speaking topics can be found in the next few sections of this book. The sections below include example topics, and links to many additional sample IELTS Speaking questions from Magoosh.

6.3 Part 1 In Depth

Part 1

If you’ve had an opportunity to interact with English speakers, it is very likely that you have already answered questions that would fit in Part 1. They target basic personal information about things like your school, hometown, family, or possibly even the weather in your hometown. Treat Part 1 like a warm-up for the rest of the exam. If you’re feeling nervous about the test, hopefully by the end of this section you will feel more comfortable and prepared to tackle Parts 2 and 3. Take a look at this official Part 1 [prompt](#), [recording](#), and [transcript](#) to get familiar with this section of the test.

The questions from Part 1 are noticeably easier than than Parts 2 and 3. However, this does not mean you shouldn’t prepare for Part 1! On the contrary, your preparation can really pay off. Getting off to a good start is important to showing your examiner that you’re feeling comfortable and confident. With enough practice, you can feel very comfortable answering Part 1 questions without much effort. To help you, [here is an excellent list of Part 1 and Part 2 questions](#) that one of Magoosh’s test prep experts, David Recine, put together to help you practice! Try to implement the following strategies as you practice:

Part 1 Tips and Strategies

| Part 1 Tips | Explanation |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Expand your answers | <p>In Part 1, you may get questions that only require a very simple answer. For example, you may get a yes/no question like this:</p> <p>“Does your family have any special traditions?”</p> <p>The answer may be “yes” or “no,” but you shouldn’t stop there. Always expand your answers and say more.</p> <p>Example: “Yes. Every year my relatives travel to my family’s house to celebrate Thanksgiving.”</p> |
| Paraphrase the question | <p>No matter the question type, it can be very helpful to begin your response by restating a portion of the question. However, you should try your hardest to <i>paraphrase the</i> question in your response rather than simply repeating what the examiner said.</p> <p>You can use synonyms where possible, but you can also rearrange the sentence structure of the question. Here is an example:</p> <p>Question: Who helped you with your homework when you were in school?</p> <p>Poor response: “My sister helped me with my homework when I was in school.”</p> |

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| | <p>(The words and structures are almost exactly the same as the question.)</p> <p>Better response: "My sister helped me study when I had difficult assignments in school."</p> <p>(Good use of synonyms, but sentence structure is very similar to the question.)</p> <p>Best response: When I had a difficult school assignment, my sister was always there to assist me.</p> <p>(Good use of synonyms and changes to the sentence structure.)</p> |
| Stay on topic | <p>Don't allow your responses to wander away from the question the examiner asks you in Part 1. Your answers do not need to be long—a few sentences is fine. When you've answered a question, stop talking and let the examiner ask the next question.</p> <p>If you're feeling nervous, it can be very easy to lose focus and take the conversation away from the original question. You may lose points for this. Also, the more you say beyond what's necessary, the more likely it is that you will make mistakes!</p> |

6.4 Part 2 In Depth

Part 2

In IELTS Speaking Part 2, you will receive a “topic card” that contains a detailed, multi-part question. Take a look at this official sample [prompt](#), [script](#), and [recording](#) of a Task 2 question to get a sense of what to expect. You will have one minute to prepare a short speech in response to the topic card. Then you should speak for 1-2 minutes.

Obviously, it is impossible to predict the exact questions you will receive on exam day, but some features of Part 2 questions are very predictable. Consistent practice will help you to plan and deliver well-organized responses. As noted above, Magoosh offers a great [list of Part 1 and Part 2 prompts](#) to help you with this!

Let’s look closely at the main elements of every Part 2 question. The card you receive will contain three main features:

Feature 1 Topic Introduction

Feature 2 3 Detailed Points

Feature 3 Discussion

The right side of the card below shows the typical appearance of a Part 2 question. The notes on the left (not included on an actual IELTS topic card) highlight the three main features of this question type.

Part 2 Topic Card

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Feature 1 → | Describe a time when you gave someone advice. |
| Feature 2 → | <p>You should say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to whom you gave the advice • what the advice was • whether that person took your advice |
| Feature 3 → | and explain why you gave the person that advice. |

You have one minute to plan your response before you speak. That may not seem like a long time to think of a response to all of these questions, but fortunately, planning a Part 2 response is simpler than it may look at first.

You will be provided with a pencil and some paper to write notes. I advise students to read **Feature 1** and **Feature 2** first, BUT, avoid writing notes about these questions. The best approach is simply to use these points on the card as reminders about what you need to say. At the beginning of your short speech, go through each point one-by-one with a brief response.

Let's look at an example that covers the points on the sample topic card above:

"When I was in secondary school, I told my best friend that he should be more serious about his studies. My specific advice was that the decisions he makes now could have serious consequence for his career opportunities in the future. Fortunately, he listened to me and after that we helped each other to remain focused on our schoolwork."

This simple response answers each of the questions listed in **Features 1 and 2** very directly. Without much planning or thought, you can go down the list and supply the

necessary information to cover these points. Do not skip anything, because you will be marked down for missing information. Nevertheless, you can move through these points quickly in order to get to the more detailed response you will provide for **Feature 3**.

You should use most of your one-minute preparation time to plan your response for **Feature 3**. This point requires more detail and depth than the other talking points on the card. As you prepare, your goal should be to come up with *at least two main points* for **Feature 3**. Hopefully, you can also think of some details and examples to support these points during your one-minute prep time. Unfortunately, you don't have time to write detailed notes with complete sentences. Just write down a few words as reminders of what you plan to say.

Below is a sample of some notes related to the topic card above. For clarity in this eBook, I added more language on these notes than you would have time to include on the real exam. Still, this will give you a sense of how to organize ideas for a good Part 2 response.

Sample NOTES: (Why did you give the advice?)

Reason 1: My friend was failing his classes.

- Detail 1: He was almost kicked off the basketball team.
- Detail 2: His college plans were in danger.

Reason 2: He was very smart and should have done better in school.

- Detail 1: He hated to do homework, but he always knew the answers in class.
- Detail 2: He just needed someone like me to motivate him.

The following chart provides a summary of some of the key tips described above for Part 2 of the Speaking test:

Part 2 Tips and Strategies

| Part 2 Tips | Explanation |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Answer all of the questions | As noted above, don't skip anything listed on the topic card. |
| Stay focused | Make sure you respond very directly to the prompts on the page, and don't discuss unrelated topics. |
| Timing | <p>Use your preparation time to develop an answer to Feature 3 (discussed in detail above) of your topic card. This part of the card requires an extended response with main points and supporting details.</p> <p>Do not waste time writing out notes for the first questions (Features 1 and 2). Use the topic card as a reminder of what you should say.</p> |
| Write simple notes | You don't have time to write out lengthy notes in one minute. Even if you had more time, your examiner would penalize you for reading responses that you wrote out ahead of time. Write notes as reminders of what to say. |
| Paraphrase | As with other sections of the Speaking test, make sure you paraphrase anything that is similar to the language on your topic card. You will be marked down if you use too much language taken directly from the card. |

6.5 Part 3 In Depth

After Part 2, the examiner will ask you a few “rounding-off” or “follow-up” questions. These questions will be related directly to the topic of your short speech, usually requesting clarification or further detail about something you said. However, after one or two of these questions, the exam will quickly move to the final section: Part 3.

Part 3 of the IELTS Speaking exam should feel like a smooth transition from Part 2. The first topic of Part 3 will always relate to the topic of your Part 2 monologue in some way. However, this time you will not have any time to prepare your responses.

Part 3 questions can be tough to answer because they require detailed and complex answers. Here are some example Part 3 questions to give you a sense of what to expect:

- What are some qualities of an excellent teacher?
- What habits lead to success in school or work?
- In what ways will life be better for the generations that follow yours?

Take a few minutes to look at these official [Part 3 questions](#) and [responses](#) (here is the [transcript](#)) to get a good sense of Part 3.

To succeed in Part 3, you must remain calm and focused on the examiner’s questions. Your only job is to demonstrate your English abilities by responding with as much detail as you can. Your goal should be 1) to provide a direct and clear answer to each question and 2) to support each answer with at least one or two examples or details. When you’ve finished speaking, your examiner may ask you a follow-up question, or she may change the topic entirely! Just follow the examiner’s lead wherever the conversation goes.

As you might imagine, the number of questions you receive in Part 3 depends on how much you say in your responses. If your answers are very short, you may get a lot of

questions. If you speak with more depth, you will receive fewer questions. In general, you can expect that the examiner will cover two to three different topics in Part 3.

Here are some more tips to help you prepare for IELTS Speaking Part 3:

Part 3 Tips and Strategies

| Part 3 Tips | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Say what's easiest... | Part 3 questions normally require you to respond with your perspective on a topic. There are no “wrong” or “right” answers to these questions. Furthermore, keep in mind that your examiner is not grading your ideas. You are only graded on your ability to answer the questions appropriately in English. |
| Say what demonstrates your English... | Your Part 3 responses must always answer the questions directly, and they must be reasonable and logical. However, you are not required to express your “true” opinions. Since you don’t have much time to think during Part 3, it is often better to go with the first thing that comes to mind. <i>Your goal should be to provide fluent responses.</i> That’s it. As much as possible, respond by discussing ideas you know how to express in English so you can display your skills. Avoid saying things that you can’t discuss fluently, even if those ideas would represent your perspective more accurately. |
| When necessary, buy some time to think.... | <p>The speed of Part 3 can be challenging. Sometimes, it may help you to slow things down so you can gather your thoughts before speaking. This is especially true if you don’t fully understand the examiner’s question.</p> <p>It can lower your score if you have too many long pauses, or if you stumble over a lot of words. It can also lower your score if you simply</p> |

repeat the examiner's question as you think of your answer.

Try to avoid this by using one of the tips below. They can help you to gain a few precious seconds to think about what you want to say!

NOTE: *You should only use these when truly necessary. Try your best not to use any of these tips more than once.*

You can:

1. Ask the examiner to repeat the question.

Example: "I want to make sure I understood the question. Could you please repeat it?"

2. Comment on the question.

Example: "That's an interesting question. I would say that..."

3. Introduce your idea.

Examples:

"Well, the first thing I would say is..."

"I haven't considered that before, but one thing that comes to mind is..."

"People have many opinions about that in my country. I believe..."

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| | <p>4. Ask about the meaning of a word.</p> <p>Example: “I didn’t understand the meaning of _____. Could you please explain what that word means?”</p> <p>Note: Only ask about the meaning of a word if you truly don’t understand.</p> |
| Just answer... | No matter what, you must attempt an answer to each question. Don’t give up! |

6.6 Staying Focused When Speaking

It can be easy to lose track of what’s being said in an English conversation. But in the IELTS interview, you can’t let that happen! If you miss part or all of a question, you can give confusing or incomplete answers. And you certainly don’t want to forget what you need to say during the Speaking Part 2 “long turn.” Below are some tips to help you stay focused throughout the speaking exam.

Stick to the Main Ideas

In IELTS Speaking Parts 1 and 3, there’s no time to talk at length about a lot of little details, no matter how interesting or relevant they may seem. As a general rule, keep each answer to one or two sentences, and let the interview move forward. If your examiner wants more details, she will ask you additional questions. Remember that the Part 1 and Part 3 answers are part of a conversation; they are not long solo speeches.

Even in the Part 2 “long turn,” you need to be careful of the “too-many-details” trap. In your longer Part 2 response, if you’re going to answer the question fully, you probably can allot no more than two or three sentences to each example or major point you want to make, so your examples will need to only include a few specifics. Bear in mind that the most important part is communicating the main ideas, not explaining smaller details that you personally find interesting. If you get stuck trying to explain something that’s causing you trouble, move on to the next idea in your long turn as naturally as you can. Transition words can really help in that case.

Don’t be Afraid to Ask the Interviewer to Repeat the Question

You may have heard that you can’t ask your examiner to repeat the question in IELTS Speaking. But this is a myth! One of the tips mentioned in the previous section is that you *are* allowed to ask the interviewer to repeat themselves. Technically, every question you hear in IELTS Speaking can be repeated one time, at your request. (If you ask for a second repeat, the interviewer will simply move on to their next question.)

Of course, it’s best to avoid asking the examiner to repeat questions if possible because this indicates you are struggling to understand and respond. Your goal should be to make the Speaking exam seem as effortless for you as possible. However, if you’ve lost focus, asking for a repeat can get you back on track. If you weren’t paying attention or didn’t understand the first time your interviewer spoke, you can always get a second chance. Take advantage of that second chance, but only as needed.

Don’t Get Stuck When You Don’t Know the Right Word

It’s awful when you want a specific word, but you can’t think of it. It happens to all of us, and it may very well happen to you during your IELTS Speaking interview. If it does, try

not to sit there blankly, waiting for the word to come to you. Change your response to include words you can remember, or describe the word you can't think of.

If all else fails, be honest. Tell your interviewer you're not quite sure how to describe your answer, and then move forward to the next parts of the conversation.

Say Something

If you don't know what to say, don't just sit and create a long, awkward pause in the interview. Instead, use the honesty I just mentioned above. If you simply cannot get yourself on track, then say so. Oftentimes, just speaking will get your mind back on the task at hand. For example, you could say something like "I don't know what to say because _____" or "This is a difficult question because _____." Frequently, whatever follows the "because" will address the question, giving you an opportunity to ease back into your answer and continue with confidence.

6.7 Improving Your Pronunciation

Speaking perfectly doesn't need to be the focus of your studying. If your answers are easy to understand, then a slight accent won't affect your score. But if your interviewer can't understand you, he or she won't ask you to repeat and repeat your answers until it's clear. So even if you don't need to speak exactly like a native, you should still spend some time working on the parts of your speech that make it hardest for native speakers to understand you—after all, the easier you make your test graders' lives, the better your life will be.

But it can be hard to decide how much work your accent needs. There are a couple of ways you can find this out. The best way is to ask a native speaker. It's difficult to get an honest answer that way, though, unless you're speaking to a teacher who knows the

value of honesty. Many native speakers might say they understand and that your accent is great even if that's not true, because it's a slightly sensitive topic—they don't want to insult their friends, of course.

The other way isn't as effective, but there's no danger of dishonesty: compare yourself to a native speaker. That is, you will get a recording of a native speaker, then you will record yourself saying the exact same thing. What's different between them? How do you sound in comparison to the native speaker?

Practicing Intonation

The easiest way to learn intonation is to imitate native speakers. Here is one way recommended by Magoosh test prep expert Lucas Fink: take clips from the media and do a variation on what one prominent polyglot (speaker of many languages), Alexander Arguelles, calls “shadowing.” If you’re using complicated material (not intended for language learners), listen to it a few times first so you know what it’s saying. Look up any words you don’t understand. Then listen all the way through, repeating everything the speaker says as soon as he or she says it. Pay special attention to replicating the speaker’s intonation. This variation on shadowing requires a huge amount of concentration, which you may not have every day. On those days, just pick a sentence or two to imitate, and say them to yourself as many times as you can over the course of the day. By listening and repeating and listening again, you will adopt the natural speech patterns of the native speaker.

6.8 Common Speaking Difficulties

Sentence Variety

Because there isn't time to fully plan responses during the IELTS interview (even the minute you have to prepare for Part 2 isn't a lot of time!), many people fall into a trap of repetitive sentence structures: "I think that _____. I think that _____. I think this is because _____."

One way to avoid this is to practice by drawing cards, each with a different kind of structure written on it: have a simple sentence on one card, a compound sentence on another, a sentence with an introductory subordinate clause on another, and so on. To practice, pick a practice question/topic. Then draw one card. Your introductory sentence must use the structure on that card. Then draw another card, and form a second sentence based on it. When you're practicing this way, don't time yourself; slow is okay. The focus in this activity is on getting creative with your sentence structure and becoming flexible.

Going Off Topic

When you're trying your hardest to show off your speaking skills, it is sometimes possible to go off topic as you're trying to add details to the point you're making. Unfortunately, it can actually lower your score if your answers start veering away from the original question your interviewer asked. When you're answering a question, it's best to simply finish your thought when you've run out of things to say that relate directly to what you've been asked.

Now, in the ideal scenario for an IELTS interview, your interviewer will ask you questions and you will immediately know what to say, and how to speak about the questions at length in English. Unfortunately, this doesn't always happen on the IELTS interview. Whether due to nervousness, lack of vocabulary, or lack of ideas, it's very possible that you will not have a lot to say at some interview questions. In these cases, it is far better to finish after a short response than to lose focus and talk about something that's only somewhat related to the question. Instead, simply regroup and get ready for your interviewer's next question!

Not Speaking Clearly

My middle school band teacher used to praise students who messed up loudly—who played a note at full volume when everyone else in the band was silent, or made other obvious (and hilarious) errors. He said that everyone makes mistakes, but he wanted us to make them with confidence. That may seem backwards, but it's actually not a bad theory. First of all, people are more likely to respect you and have faith in your abilities if you appear to be convinced of your own ability. Even if you have to fake it, try to convey confidence in your spoken answers.

6.9 How to Practice Speaking Alone

When asked about good ways to practice speaking, the default answer for many people is to find a language partner—someone you can meet with, whether online, on the phone, or in person, to practice English conversation and test questions with. It's true that language partners can be a great resource as you study, but for a lot of people it's not a practical arrangement—particularly if you live in a non-English-speaking country. Practicing speaking by yourself can be tricky, but with some creativity you'll find that there are tons of great ways to do it. Here are some tips from Magoosh test prep expert, Lucas Fink. They will help you approach the speaking section with confidence.

Translate Reading Material

You can exercise your grammar and vocabulary by translating reading passages—orally, of course—from your native language into English. Try to translate each sentence as accurately as you can without using a dictionary. If you're not sure how to translate a particular phrase or structure, write it down so you can look it up or ask someone later.

As you do this exercise, avoid using a dictionary; if there's a word you don't know, try to describe it or give the closest synonym you can think of. Replacing words you don't know with ones you do is a skill that will give you a huge boost on the exam (and in life).

Retell Common Stories

If you translate something as you read it, you're going to be pretty confined in terms of your phrasing, since you're trying to match the text as closely as possible. For some more creative practice, try translating a fairy tale, a movie you just saw, or a well-known story. This method gives you a lot more control over the difficulty of the material you're translating.

Record Yourself

Nobody likes doing this, but it's still solid advice: record yourself speaking so you can listen and critique your response later. This will let you pick up on mistakes you're making that you may not even know about, plus you can compare your answers to sample IELTS answers more easily. It also will get you used to the stress of responding so that it's not quite so strange to be speaking to a stranger on test day.

IELTS Speaking Practice with "Lightning Questions"

Even though this exercise is normally used in a classroom setting, you can try a game called "lightning questions" on your own for speaking practice. First, let's look at how this game works in a classroom setting: each person gets a slip of paper, face down, that has five questions written on it. On the count of three, both people turn over the papers, and one student asks the other a question from it. The other student must begin immediately to answer the question; the goal is to speak continuously for whatever time limit is set, usually between 45 seconds and 1 minute.

The person speaking should try not to stop for any reason (except a fire)—if you can't think of something to say, say that you don't know what to say, and then try to explain

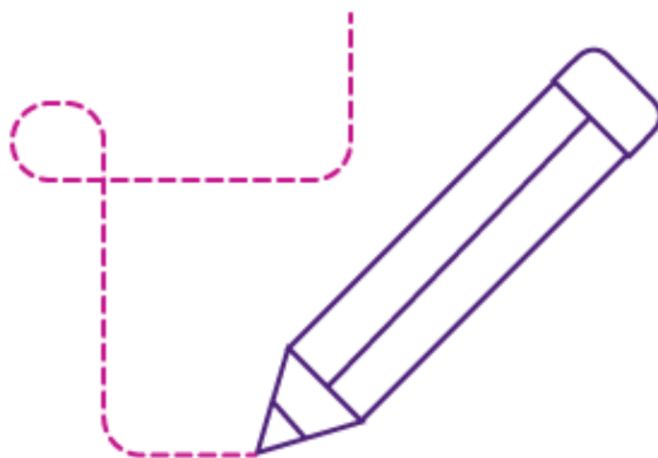
why. It doesn't matter—just keep talking. Then the other person answers the same question. This is not a conversation, and the goal is not to come up with interesting thoughts or beautiful turns of phrase. When time is up, you stop talking, even if you're mid-sentence, and there's no need to respond to anything your partner says (although it's always good to go back and critique each other at the end).

Even if you are not in a class and don't have a partner, you can still use lightning questions for IELTS speaking practice. Write some questions (or even better, have someone else write questions for you) on slips of paper and put them in a box. Pull each one out one-by-one and follow the procedure described above. It's great practice for IELTS Speaking!

If you're practicing speaking by yourself, it's best to use a voice recorder of some kind so you can go back over your answers. Not only does this help you track your progress, but it also makes it easier to identify and correct the errors that you're repeating over and over.

These [IELTS Speaking prompts](#) would also work great for "lightning questions!"

7: The Writing Section



7.1 Writing Section Breakdown

Academic IELTS Writing

The Academic IELTS Writing exam requires you to respond to two question prompts in one hour. If you've been studying for the IELTS already, you probably know that IELTS Academic Task 1 and Task 2 are quite different. Here is a breakdown of the basic differences:

- **Question Format:** Task 1 and Task 2 are very different types of questions.
 - Task 1 involves writing a report based on visual prompts such as charts or graphs, in 20 minutes.
 - Task 2 involves composing a formal five-paragraph essay in 40 minutes.
- **Points:** Task 2 counts towards a greater portion of your Writing band score.
 - Task 1 = $\frac{1}{3}$ of your score
 - Task 2 = $\frac{2}{3}$ of your score
- **Word count minimums:** Task 2 is longer.
 - Task 1 = 150 word minimum
 - Task 2 = 250 word minimum
- **Planning your response:** Task 2 questions require more thought.
 - Task 1 = transfer of information from a visual into writing
 - Task 2 = answer an open/abstract question with no clear or “correct” answer

Your answers for both Tasks will be scored just like the other sections of the test: on a “Band Score” scale of 1–9. There will be much more on Band scores in the Writing chapter ahead, but generally speaking, the highest marks go to essays that are

well-organized and include all of the important information required by the prompt. As in the Speaking section, a few minor language errors are not a major problem—this section is about communicating fully, so if your errors don't interfere with communication and are not numerous, then you probably don't have much to worry about. For the Task 2 essay in particular, top scores go to essays with clear arguments and examples to support those arguments. You should have a clear main point, and everything in your essay should contribute in some way to that point.

General Training

In IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, you need to write a letter in which you must respond to a given situation, explain a given situation, or request information about something. In this Task, you should spend 20 minutes to write a 150-word letter. The letter can be personal, semi-formal, or formal based on the situation. Like Task 1 on the Academic IELTS exam, the Task 1 letter is worth $\frac{1}{3}$ of your total Writing band score.

Task 2 on the General Training IELTS is worth the remainder of your Writing band score ($\frac{2}{3}$ of the points). It is just like the Academic IELTS Task 2 (see above)—you will write a four to five paragraph essay in which you offer your perspective on a question.

7.2 Academic Task 1

As noted above, Academic Task 1 involves writing a report about visual information (maps, charts, graphs, etc). There is no way to know what kind of information you will be asked to analyze beforehand. However, the structure of Academic Task 1 responses is actually quite predictable, and mastering a basic strategy for these questions can really pay off in a higher score. No matter the prompts you're provided on exam day, the basic structure of your responses—the Academic Task 1 template—can be very similar every time.

Before You Write—Learn to “Read” Academic Task 1 Questions

In order to understand the Academic Task 1 template deeply, let’s look at some essential skills you’ll need in order to “read” Academic Task 1 questions accurately.

Remember—time is extremely limited! You only have 20 minutes to complete your response. Your strategic approach begins from the second you open your test booklet and look at the question for the first time.

By “reading,” I don’t mean trying to understand all the words on the visuals. I mean taking a strategic approach to analyzing the content of your IELTS visuals so you can quickly decide which information to include in your response.

IELTS visuals often look complicated when you first glance at them. In reality, you’re not being tested on your ability to analyze difficult charts and graphs. You do not need to perform complicated calculations to score well on Academic Task 1. The questions are designed to measure your English language skills. Specifically, they aim to see how well you can report the information presented to you in diagrams, charts, graphs, etc. using appropriate and accurate language. That’s all. If you stay focused on the following areas as you practice “reading” IELTS questions, you will get better and better at gathering the information you need to write a great Academic Task 1 response.

How to “Read” Academic Task 1 Questions:

1. Read the summary and titles first.

Academic Task 1 instructions include a short summary sentence. Also, the visuals usually have a title. Read these things first because they give you a good overview of what is contained in the visual(s). This summary information will be very useful to you in the first

paragraph of your response, where you need to “introduce the visuals” (see the template below for more details).

2. Take note of categories / units.

Next, take note of the types of information contained on the visual(s). To get a high band score, you must provide accurate descriptions of this information. You can’t do this if you don’t understand it. Ask yourself questions like these as you take in the data:

- Do your visuals involve time? Is time presented in hours, days, weeks, months, etc.?
- Do your visuals show trends? In general, what are the trends? Increases, decreases, fluctuations, etc.?
- Do the visuals show a sequence of events? Steps in a process?
- Do the visuals categorize different types of things?
- Are numbers presented in hundreds, thousands, millions, percentages, decimals?

3. Find an interesting “angle” on the data.

As you’ll read below, paragraphs 2-4 of the template involve reporting on the main features of the visual(s). You have to select which information to include and, importantly, which to leave out. This can be tough, but it becomes much easier if you can quickly find an “angle” on the data to help you filter out what you need and what you don’t.

For example, let’s imagine you’re looking at a chart that shows a list of five different TV shows. These shows are ranked by their popularity among five different age groups. Here are some possible “angles”:

- Which shows are most popular/least popular among all age groups?
- Which shows got more popular as viewer age increased/decreased?
- Which shows were only popular in the middle-aged group?

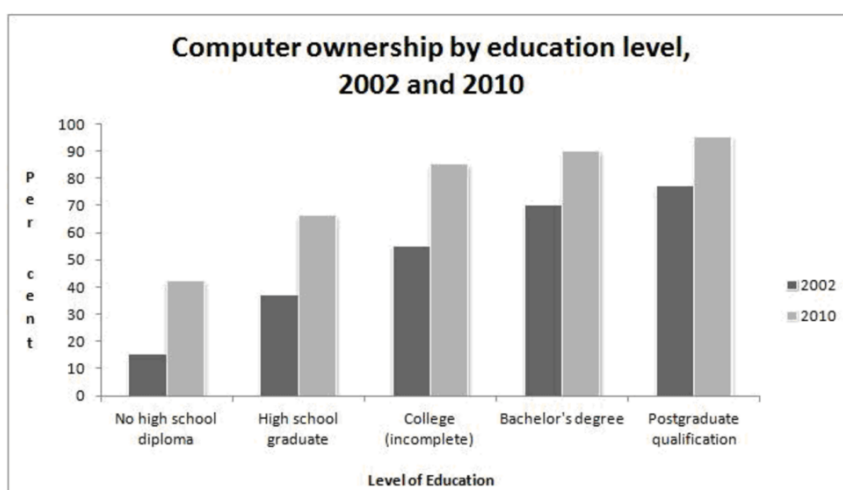
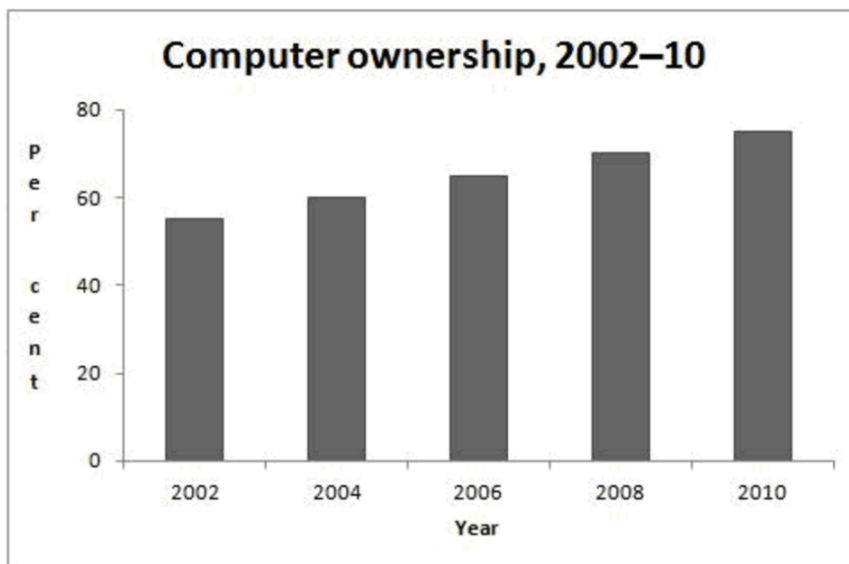
The “angles” you take should be the things that seem most interesting or striking to you as you look at the visual(s). Another way to think about this: if you had to give a report at a meeting or in a college class, which information would interest the audience most? The answer to this question will provide the content for much of your Academic Task 1 response.

Sample Academic Task 1 Question and Template

Template Overview

- Paragraph 1: Introduce the visuals (one to two sentences).
- Paragraph 2: Summarize the visuals.
- Paragraphs 3 and (sometimes) 4: Use data/details to highlight a key feature of the visual(s).
- Optional: Concluding sentence.

We’re going to go through each part of the template one by one below. In order to provide a specific sample response, I’ve also included a sample Academic Task 1 question from the British Council. It will be helpful to study this question carefully before before you look at the detailed description of the template. In fact, why don’t you take a minute to “read” it following the advice described above!



The graphs above give information about computer ownership as a percentage of the population between 2002 and 2010, and by level of education for the years 2002 and 2010.

Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.

Write at least 150 words.

[Practice Question Source](#)

Paragraph 1: Introduce the Visuals (1-2 sentences)

Introducing the visuals is very straightforward, but it can present challenges because it tests your grammar and vocabulary. All you need to do in these introductory lines is explain, in very general terms, what the visuals contain. You should try to do this in one sentence if possible.

Fortunately, you can find this information easily because it's provided for you very clearly in the question prompt. In our example, this is the sentence just below the second chart above (*"The graphs above give information about...."*) The titles of your visuals also provide useful information for Paragraph 1.

Paragraph 1 requires a lot of practice because you must paraphrase the language from the prompt and the titles. That means you need to put this information in your own words. Do your best to avoid using the same vocabulary and sentence structure as the prompt. Failing to do this will definitely lower your score. The IELTS is testing your vocabulary and grammar here! However, please note that you don't always have to paraphrase key terms. In our sample, the phrase "computer ownership" would be difficult to replace, for example. Everything else should be paraphrased!

Below is a sample Paragraph 1. Notice how the vocabulary and sentence structure differ from both the question prompt and the titles of the visuals.

Sample Paragraph 1:

The charts show rates of computer ownership from 2002–2010, including a more detailed look at ownership patterns by level of education.

Paragraph 2: Summarize the Visuals (2–4 sentences)

In this paragraph, you will provide a summary of the visuals without going into too much detail. Academic Task 1 instructions tell you to, “summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features” of the visuals. Paragraph 2 is your opportunity to do just that.

Avoiding details in this paragraph helps to focus your answer on the most important points contained in the visual(s). You don’t want your summary to get lost in numbers and figures. Save these details for your next paragraph(s). Instead, in Paragraph 2, you need to provide an accurate overview, or summary, of the contents of the visuals. In the previous paragraph (Paragraph 1), you explained what the visuals are about—*the topic*. Now, in Paragraph 2, you need to *describe the main information contained in the visuals*. You should select the information that stands out to you most. It might be a general trend in the data. It might be a striking or interesting overall pattern.

Sample Paragraph 2 (2–4 sentences):

These data show a constant increase in the percentage of the population that owned computers during the eight-year timeframe. This rising trend occurred across all education levels. However, although having more education correlated directly with higher computer ownership percentages from 2002–2010, the ownership percentage increased most among those with the least education during those years.

Paragraphs 3 and (Sometimes) 4: Use Data/Details to Highlight a Key Feature of the Visual(s)

Now that you’ve presented a summary of the main information in the visuals, you’re ready to go into details in Paragraph 3. This is where you report data related to the summary information you just provided in Paragraph 2. You **should not** attempt to

describe ALL of the data you see in the visuals. This would probably be impossible within the time limit even if you tried. You have to make choices. You need to report about data that relate directly to the main feature(s)—the key information—that you just presented in Paragraph 2.

In Paragraph 2 of the sample response, I focused on how 1) computer ownership rose steadily from 2002–2010 in general and across education levels, but that 2) those with the least education increased their computer ownership most over this period. Therefore, it would make sense to follow this paragraph with detailed information on these trends. As I described earlier in this chapter, these are the “angles” or perspectives I’ve taken on the graphs.

At this point, you have a second choice to make. Should you present all of the data in one paragraph (Paragraph 3), or should you separate it into two shorter paragraphs (Paragraphs 3 and 4)? You are not required to include a 4th paragraph in your response and it won’t necessarily help you to include one (unless you haven’t met your 150 word minimum!). However, many times having two shorter paragraphs can be best. This is especially true in cases where you need to present data/details about two distinct key features. In these cases, a 4th paragraph helps you to present different ideas clearly. For this reason, I chose to present the information in two shorter paragraphs in our sample response.

Sample Paragraphs 3 and 4:

In 2002, slightly more than half the population owned computers. That number increased to roughly 75% over the next eight years. Postgraduates were always ahead of the general population. While roughly three quarters of postgraduates owned computers in 2002, that rose to nearly 95% by 2010. By contrast, those who had not

finished high school began with only a 15% computer ownership rate, which increased to about 45% after eight years.

Notably, the three groups at the lowest end of the education spectrum saw the most significant computer ownership gains over this period. Their rate rose approximately 30 percentage points. College graduates and postgraduates saw more modest gains with 20 point increases between 2002 and 2010.

Optional: Concluding Sentence

You may include a concluding sentence on Academic Task 1, but it is optional. It can be very helpful to include one if you're struggling to reach your word count minimum of 150 words. Otherwise, a concluding sentence won't help your score significantly.

Sample Concluding Sentence (optional):

The first decade of the 21st century saw steady gains in computer ownership among a variety of education levels.

7.3 General Training Task 1

In the first IELTS General Training Writing task, you have 20 minutes to write a letter to someone. The letter should be at least 150 words in length.

The purpose of the letter can vary. The prompt might ask you to write a letter to a friend, or to someone you work with, such as a professor, a co-worker, or a classmate. You might also be asked to write a letter to someone you don't know at all, such as the manager of a bank where you have an account, or a supplier that does business with your employer.

The IELTS General Training Writing Prompt: Content and Structure

The prompts for Writing Task 1 in IELTS General Training are fairly detailed. You'll be given a specific "role play" situation. For example, you might be told that you need to write a letter to a neighbor who is making too much noise, so that you can't sleep. Or you might be asked to write a letter to your supervisor at work, asking for some extra vacation time. You could also be asked to write a business-related letter to someone that you do not know at all.

In terms of structure, each writing prompt will briefly describe the circumstances that have lead you to write the letter, the reason for writing the letter, and three things you should include in the letter. Usually, the prompt also gives you the opening greeting for the letter, so that you don't have to think of and write your own.

Sample Essay Questions for IELTS General Training Writing Task 1

Let's look at what this task actually looks like in practice. Below are three sample essay questions for the first writing task in IELTS General Training.

IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt A:

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

You are in a new apartment, into which you have moved very recently. Today, you received a £574 electricity bill in the mail. The bill is for the last six months, but you have lived in the apartment for less time than that.

Write a letter to the electricity company. In your letter

- **Explain your situation.**
- **Describe the mistake.**
- **Say what you would like the electric company to do about the mistake.**

Write at least 150 words.

You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.

Begin your letter as follows:

Dear _____,

IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt B:

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

You just moved to a new city to study at university.

Write a letter to a friend. In your letter

- **Tell your friend what subjects you are studying.**
- **Describe your campus.**
- **Invite him or her to visit you.**

Write at least 150 words.

You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.

Begin your letter as follows:

Dear _____,

IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt C:

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

Your next-door neighbor has been doing activities that make a lot of noise. This makes it hard for you to concentrate on things you need to do at home.

Write a letter to your neighbor. In your letter

- **Describe the things your neighbor is doing.**
- **Explain why the noise is a problem.**
- **Suggest ways to solve the problem.**

Write at least 150 words.

You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.

Begin your letter as follows:

Dear _____,

How to Structure Your Letter

Your letter should start with a greeting. This will almost always be the greeting suggested in the prompt. However, in rare cases, you may have to write your own greeting. In that situation, use a greeting similar to the suggested greetings found in most prompts: open your letter with “Dear,” and the name of the person to whom you are writing. If you aren’t a name, then use “Dear Sir or Madam.”

After that, you should write an opening for your letter. In the opening, you explain why you are writing the letter. From there, you can write the body of your letter.

The body of your letter will be based on the three bullet points in your General Training Writing Task 1 prompt. To see how this works, let’s review the bullet points from General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt C, which you saw above:

- **Describe the things your neighbor is doing.**
- **Explain why the noise is a problem.**
- **Suggest ways to solve the problem.**

For this prompt, in your first body paragraph, you would describe what your neighbor is doing that makes so much noise. Then in your second paragraph, you would explain the ways that the noise is making it difficult for you to do certain important things at home. The third and final body paragraph would discuss solutions. Remember that these are paragraphs in a letter, not paragraphs in an academic essay. Feel free to keep your paragraphs short—as short as just two or three sentences. Of course, longer body paragraphs are okay too, if necessary.

Once you’ve taken care of each bullet point from the prompt, you’re ready to write your closing remarks. This is the part of the letter in which you give the recipient some final thoughts. Usually this means requesting further action, or mentioning what you would like to happen next. For instance, in General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt A

above, you're asked to write a letter to a utility company that has mistakenly charged you too much money. That letter might have these closing remarks:

- *"Please send me the corrected bill as soon as you can. If you need any additional information in order to change my electricity bill, please let me know."*

Once you've finished your closing remarks, you can finally write the ending of the letter. The ending is very simple. It includes a standard English language letter-ending word or phrase, such as "Sincerely," "Cordially," "Best," "Your Friend," etc. This phrase is followed by your name.

IELTS General Training Task 1 Template and Example Letter

All of this advice on structure can be summarized in a template. The template below can guide you as you do practice letters for IELTS General Training Writing Task 1. You can also store this template in your mind for test day.

| IELTS GT Writing Task 1 Template | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Part of the letter | Content |
| Greeting | Dear _____, |
| Opening statement | Explain purpose of the letter. |
| Idea 1 | Based on bullet point 1 from the prompt. |
| Idea 2 | Based on bullet point 2 from the prompt. |
| Idea 3 | Based on bullet point 3 from the prompt. |
| Closing remarks | Final thoughts; tell the reader what you'd like them to do with the information; request further action if need be. |

| | |
|--------|--|
| Ending | Sincerely/cordially/best/etc., (your name) |
|--------|--|

Now, let's look at an example essay based on the template. We'll use *IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt B* that was first presented earlier in this section. The prompt is below. This time I've given it a header that reads "**Task 1,**" so the prompt looks exactly like one from the real exam.

Task 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

You just moved to a new city to study at university.

Write a letter to a friend. In your letter

- **Tell your friend what subjects you are studying.**
- **Describe your campus.**
- **Invite him or her to visit you.**

Write at least 150 words.

You do **NOT** need to write any addresses.

Begin your letter as follows:

Dear _____,

Essay Response:

Greeting:

Dear Anna,

Opening statement:

I hope all is well with you. I wanted you to know that I just started attending the University of Dublin.

Idea 1:

I am getting a degree in nursing, but this semester I am only taking general education classes. I have an English Writing class, a biology class that is required for the nursing programme, and a really interesting course on Irish history.

Idea 2:

The campus is beautiful. It's very green, with lots of trees, places to sit, and reflective pools. There is a nice library and student centre as well, and some of the buildings look like old castles!

Idea 3:

You really should see it for yourself. My class schedule is busy, but I will be free during winter break. My roommate will be gone for the holidays, so you could come stay with me in my dorm room, if you would like.

Closing remarks:

Let me know if you would like to visit this winter. I miss you and would love to see you. Also, what is happening in your life nowadays? I hope all is well.

Ending:

Your friend,

Grace

Different Types of Letters and Different Levels of Formality

There are three basic types of letters in IELTS General Training Writing Task 1: formal letters, semi-formal letters, and informal ones.

Remember the three example prompts I showed you above? Those prompts represent the three types of letters. One of the sample prompts requires a formal response, and one requires a semi-formal response. The remaining prompt is for an informal letter. Let's review the beginnings of each prompt. Can you tell which prompt is formal, which is semi-formal, and which is informal?

- IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt A

You are in a new apartment, into which you moved very recently. Today, you received a £574 electricity bill in the mail. The bill is for the last six months, but you have lived in the apartment for less time than that. Write a letter to the electricity company.

- IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt B

You just moved to a new city to study at university. Write a letter to a friend.

- IELTS General Training Writing Task 1, Example Prompt C

Your next-door neighbor has been doing activities that make a lot of noise. This makes it hard for you to concentrate on things you need to do at home. Write a letter to your neighbor.

You were probably able to correctly guess that Example Prompt A requires a formal letter. You don't know anyone in the electric company, or at least, you don't know who will see the letter. And you are discussing business. A business letter to a stranger should be polite and formal.

Example prompt B is pretty clearly informal. It's a personal letter, sent to a friend. No business is being discussed, and no important favors are being asked. So you can keep the language fairly informal.

Example prompt C is a little tricky. Yes, this is a letter to a neighbor. But it's a letter about a serious matter: things your neighbor is doing that you need your neighbor to *stop* doing. You want to be somewhat friendly, since your neighbor will be upset if you treat him or her like a stranger, or like someone you don't really know. But you need to be polite as well, since you are confronting your neighbor about bad behavior. Here, you need to be *semi-formal*, balancing friendliness with a firm-but-polite message.

Choose the Right Words for Each Type of Letter

These different letter types require different kinds of language. Greetings and endings are particularly different depending on how formal the letter is.

Greetings for Each Type of Letter

For greetings, the word "dear" is used regardless of formality. It's what comes after "dear" that changes with each letter type.

For a formal letter, you want to address someone by title and family name after "dear." Common formal greetings include "Dear Mr. Prestwich," "Dear Professor Lee," "Dear Kristine Kochanski," or "Dear Sir or Madam," if you don't know the name or gender of the person you're writing to. However, avoid "Dear" and a title followed by only a given name. For example, you're writing to someone named Susan Ivanova, "Dear Ms. Ivanova" and "Dear Susan Ivanova" are both acceptably formal. But "Dear Ms. Susan" would not be okay in a formal letter. And remember—in cases where the person you're writing to is a complete stranger, the tone will *always* be formal in IELTS General Training Writing Task 1.

For a semi-formal letter, using a title and family name after “dear” is also common. Titles are also okay in semi-formal letters. And in both formal and semi-formal letters, you can follow “dear” with the title and a family name, a full name (given name and family name), or a given name. So for instance, “Dear Professor Lee,” “Dear Charles Lee,” or “Dear Charles” are all potentially acceptable. Note that if you go with the given name only, you should never have a title before the given name. This simply isn’t done in English language letters.

In informal letters on the IELTS, you pretty much always follow “Dear” with someone’s given name. You’d use “Dear Charles,” “Dear Beth,” etc...

Endings for Each Type of Letter

Here, the first ending word can actually differ depending on the formality. “Flowery” closings like “cordially” and “yours faithfully” can go at the end of formal letters. Both formal and semi-formal letters can end in “sincerely.”

You might be able to put “sincerely” at the end of an informal letter as well, if you’re writing to someone you don’t know very well, but writing to them in a friendly way. For example, if you’re writing a note to a new neighbor you want to get to know better, you could use “sincerely” but take an otherwise informal tone. Generally, though, informal letters should end with “your friend” (if the letter is to a friend), or end with a short one-word closer like “yours” or “best.”

Now, let’s talk about the difference in names after the ending word. As you may have already guessed, the differences in the way you write your own name are similar to the name differences in the openings.

For a formal letter, include your title and last name (Mr. Carioca, Ms. Hong, etc...), or your full name (Jose Carioca, Shanting Hong, and so on). Mr., Ms., Mrs., and Mz. followed by a full name are acceptable in semi-formal letters too. In a semi-formal letter, you can also

use your full name with no title, or just your given name. In informal letters, always use just your given name after the ending word.

Vocabulary and Phrases for the Right Tone

In the text of your letter, you need to set the correct tone for your level of formality. As a general rule, the more formal the letter is, the more polite and “academic” your language will sound. In more formal writing, it’s also better to use *modal verbs*, words such as “would,” “could,” “should,” “might,” and “may.” These words are seen as gentle and polite, so they make any other verb seem more formal and proper.

To understand the difference, let’s compare formal, semi-formal, and informal language, as it’s used for several different purposes in Task 1 letters:

| Type of Communication | Formal | Semi-formal | Informal |
|-----------------------|--|--|-------------------------|
| greeting | Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Mr. Henshaw, Dear Professor Toman, Dear Roger Henshaw, Dear Rhonda Toman | Dear Mr. Henshaw, Dear Professor Toman, Dear Roger Henshaw, Dear Rhonda Toman, Dear Roger, Dear Rhonda | Dear Roger, Dear Rhonda |
| Opening remarks | I am writing to inform you. | I hope all is well. I’m writing because... | Hey, how’s it going? |
| expressing thanks | I would like to express gratitude for... | Thank you so much for... | Thanks for... |

| | | | |
|----------------------|---|--|---|
| making a suggestion | I think it may be best if... | I would suggest... | Why don't you... |
| making a request | I am hoping that you might consider... | I would like you to... | Please... |
| describing a problem | Unfortunately, it appears that there might be room for improvement... | I have had some trouble, because... | There's a problem... |
| closing remark | If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to ask. I look forward to our next communication. | Let me know if you have any questions, and I hope to hear from you soon. | If you've still got questions, just ask. I can't wait to see you again! |
| ending | Cordially, Yours faithfully, Sincerely | Sincerely | Sincerely, Best, Yours, Your friend |

When to Write Each Type of Letter

So when do you write a formal letter? And what kinds of Task 1 situations call for a semi-formal or informal one? To some degree, you should use your judgement. But below, I've listed some common situations for each level of formality in IELTS General Training Writing Task 1.

- *Formal situations:*
 - Writing a letter about a business or professional matter

- Writing a letter to someone you don't know
- Writing a letter to someone who has a lot of authority over you (the president of your university, the CEO of your company, etc...)
- *Semi-formal situations*
 - Writing a professional or business letter to someone who is equal to you (such as a co-worker, classmate, or neighbor)
- *Informal situations*
 - Writing a personal letter to a friend
 - Writing a professional or business letter that deals with a routine, not-so-important subject (especially if the letter is addressed to someone you're very familiar with)

And Remember, Always Read the Instructions Carefully

I have one final piece of strategy advice: always look closely at the General Training Writing Task 1 Instructions.

A careful reading of the instructions will help you understand exactly what kind of letter you need to write: formal, semi-formal, or informal. The instructions also serve as an outline for the most important information in your letter, the things that *must* be included.

One of the most common ways to lose points in the first Writing Task of IELTS General Training is to misunderstand the information. You can lose a lot of points if you take the wrong tone or don't include every key part of the letter. But if you read the prompt carefully, you can always avoid this costly mistake.

7.4 Task 2

IELTS Writing Task 2 involves composing a formal five-paragraph essay in 40 minutes. This is the second of two writing tasks on the IELTS. Let's take a close look at what you'll need to know to succeed on this difficult section. First, some practical issues:

Timing: Writing speed varies a lot from student to student. How you allocate time depends on how fast you can write. The more you practice Task 2 responses, the quicker you will become. Your goal should be to allow enough time for these three things:

- Essay planning 2–10 minutes
- Writing 25–32 minutes
- Editing 5 minutes (or more if possible)

As you practice, try very hard to cut down on the amount of time it takes to plan your responses before writing. Some students can take up to 10 minutes to brainstorm and plan. For most people, however, using 10 minutes at the beginning will take away too much time from writing and editing. I usually recommend three to five minutes of planning as a reasonable target. The more practice questions you answer, the faster you will become at generating ideas before you write.

Academic/Formal Writing: The IELTS expects you to use an academic/formal writing style. This means you should use the same kind of language that you would when writing a report for work or an essay for school. Obviously, you should avoid using “slang” words. You should also write in complete sentences and use proper punctuation. Here are some additional features of academic/formal writing to keep in mind for Task 2:

Organize ideas into separate paragraphs: You will lose points if you do not divide your essay into paragraphs. In the next section of this post, I've included an IELTS

Writing Task 2 response template. The template includes the essential paragraphs you should include in your Task 2 response. Generally speaking, your essay must have an introduction paragraph, two to three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Write in complete sentences: Make sure each sentence you write has an [independent clause](#) with a subject and verb. When you write complex or compound sentences, use “connectors” like [coordinating conjunctions](#) (*and, but, so*) or [subordinating conjunctions](#) (*when, although, because*).

Avoid repetition of words and ideas: Your ideas should move from one to the next logically, and you should show off your vocabulary by avoiding redundancy (don’t repeat the same words over and over).

Avoid “slang”: The English you hear in the movies or read on social media is often inappropriate for formal writing. It is a big problem to use words like “dude” or spellings like “U” (for “you”) on the IELTS.

Thoughtful and Neutral Tone: Academic/formal writing has a very careful and thoughtful tone. It rarely sounds angry, excited, or overly certain about an idea. It is also best to avoid broad generalizations in formal/academic compositions. Here are some examples to demonstrate:

NOT ACADEMIC: I hate this idea! (Too excited/angry)

ACADEMIC: This idea has some problems to consider.

NOT ACADEMIC: Everyone is distracted by cell phones these days. (Too broad)

ACADEMIC: Many people are distracted by cell phones these days.

NOT ACADEMIC: I have the best solution to the problem. (Too certain)

ACADEMIC: I would suggest this solution to the problem.

IELTS Writing Task 2 Essay Organization and Example

In this section, we will look at the overall structure of an IELTS Writing Task 2 response. Before we get to that, however, let's take a look at a sample Task 2 question. Read it over and take a moment to think: How would you respond?

IELTS Writing Task 2 Sample Question

Parents should not pressure their children to choose a particular profession. Young people should have the freedom to choose a career path they like.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Planning Before You Write

When you first encounter an IELTS Writing Task 2 question, try to decide what perspective you will take fairly quickly. Unfortunately, the IELTS doesn't give you much time to do this. Making matters worse, it is fairly likely that you won't have strong, well-developed opinions about the topic. Don't worry. Task 2 questions are (intentionally) debatable, with no clearly "correct" answer.

Fortunately, unlike an essay you might write for work or school, *it is not important to present your true opinions on the IELTS*. Remember, the IELTS is an English language test. It is not a test of what you know about the topic of your Task 2 question. While you should present reasonable ideas in a clear and logical way, you can argue any side of the question and do well. Therefore, rather than worrying about (and spending time on)

formulating your true opinion on your Task 2 topic, ask yourself the following question instead:

“What is be the easiest way for me to answer this question?”

Can you think of some main ideas and/or examples quickly for one side of an argument? Even if these ideas don’t fully represent your perspective, just go with them on the IELTS. You don’t want to waste too much time thinking about how to express your true opinions.

Once you’ve chosen a perspective on your question, you can do some planning/brainstorming. Below are some planning notes for our sample Task 2 question (introduced above). On exam day, you won’t have a chart like this to fill in. The chart simply helps to make the information easier to read in this post. Basically, your goal in the planning phase is to come up with a main idea for each paragraph of your essay. We will discuss each of these paragraphs in more detail below the chart.

| Brainstorming and Planning: IELTS Writing Task 2 | |
|---|---|
| Parents should not pressure their children to choose a particular profession. Young people should have the freedom to choose a career path they like. To what extent do you agree or disagree? | |
| Introduction | [What is your perspective on the essay question?] I somewhat agree: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Main Point 1: Parents should not pressure kids into a specific profession. BUT |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Main Point 2: Parents should guide their children through open communication about career choices. |
| Body Paragraph 1 | <p>[Why shouldn't parents pressure their kids into a specific profession?]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Main Point 1 Paragraph: Children will be motivated by fear of disappointing parents, not internal motivation or enjoyment of their work. |
| Body Paragraph 2 | <p>[Why should parents guide their children through open communication about career choices?]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Main Point 2 Paragraph: Open communication can lead to opportunities for positive encouragement and critical feedback about a child's career choices. |

Writing Your Essay

When you've done some initial planning, you're ready to dive into writing. Let's take a closer look at how to organize your Academic Writing Task 2 response paragraph by paragraph. After you read about each paragraph, look at the sample Task 2 essay immediately below this section as an example.

The Introduction Paragraph: An introduction is a very important element of your Task 2 essay. Practicing introductions can really pay off, even if you don't follow through and write a full practice essay every time. Many students get stuck at the very beginning, not knowing how to respond to the question in the introduction. Let's look at what to do.

IELTS Writing Task 2 introductions can be short and simple. A two-sentence introduction should be your goal. There are two main parts of a Task 2 introduction to include every time:

Topic Presentation:

In this first sentence of your introduction, you simply need to paraphrase the topic described in your question prompt. In other words, find a way to accurately state the topic in your own words. Try to avoid using the same words and phrases as the prompt.

Thesis:

After presenting the topic, you need to provide your perspective on it. This is your thesis. It is a sentence that expresses the main idea of your essay. At a minimum, you need to provide a general answer to the question prompt in your thesis: “I believe that...”, or “I agree that...”. A really great thesis also introduces the main ideas of each body paragraph in a general way. Take a look at the sample essay below. Notice how the thesis introduces the main idea of both body paragraphs.

Important! You MUST answer the essay question directly in your thesis. Students sometimes lose points because their thesis does not answer the question directly enough. Read your question prompt carefully and make sure your essay will answer every part of the question.

2–3 Body Paragraphs

The next two (or if necessary, three) paragraphs of your IELTS Task 2 essay are your opportunities to explain your thesis. Each body paragraph should present ONE main point. If your question prompt includes several questions, you should write a body paragraph for each one. The main point of each body paragraph must relate directly to

your thesis statement in the introduction. Use supporting details and/or examples to explain your main point before moving on to the next body paragraph.

Conclusion

Don't spend a long time on your conclusion. A good IELTS Task 2 conclusion should be one or two sentences long. Simply *paraphrase* your thesis and main points from your body paragraphs to close out your essay. This means you should avoid using the same words, phrases, and sentence structures as your thesis statement. Definitely do not copy your thesis statement word-for-word as your conclusion.

Sample IELTS Task 2 Essay

Let's take a look at an example essay containing each of the Task 2 paragraphs described above.

Parents should not pressure their children to choose a particular profession. Young people should have the freedom to choose a career path they like.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Some parents may worry that pushing their children towards a particular career could be harmful. While I agree it is unwise to predetermine a child's profession, parents should still offer guidance through open communication.

Young people need freedom to make choices, especially when it comes to their careers. Even parents who agree with this idea may still feel some anxiety about it. Ultimately, most parents hope their children will be financially secure. Deep down, some parents may also want their children to choose prestigious careers, or jobs that will impact society in some way. These wishes are normal and not necessarily harmful, yet it can be

problematic if these desires turn into firm expectations. In such cases, the main motivation for a child becomes fear of disappointing her parents. It can lead to resentment if she spends her life doing something she doesn't enjoy. With freedom to explore, by contrast, she can take ownership of her career decisions and develop internal motivation to reach her goals.

However, offering a child freedom does not imply that parents should be absent. To the contrary, parents should strive to foster open communication about career decisions. If a child's aspirations do not line up with his parents' wishes, he may fear that approaching them could lead to judgement and confrontation. However, if he feels that his parents will listen carefully and maintain an open attitude, he may let down his guard and welcome their feedback. When this happens, parents can provide guidance and, importantly, even critiques of their child's plans. In this way, open communication creates opportunities for young people to benefit from their parents' wisdom and experience.

In conclusion, even though parents should avoid pressuring their children to follow specific career paths, they should not abandon the discussion. Parents should strive to create an environment where they can offer caring guidance through open communication.

IELTS Writing Task 2 Question Types

No matter what question you get for IELTS Writing Task 2, your goal should always be to *answer the question completely and directly*. Take time, every time, to read the prompt carefully and understand it fully. In Task 2, *you are always required to provide your perspective on a topic*. However, there are a variety of IELTS Writing Task 2 question types you may encounter. The charts below present the five basic IELTS Writing Task 2 question types, and offer some tips on how to organize your responses for each one.

| To what extent do you agree... | |
|---|--|
| <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>Professional athletes in popular sports like football (soccer) and basketball are overpaid.</p> <p>To what extent do you agree or disagree?</p> | |
| Organization | Tips |
| <p>You should have two or three body paragraphs.</p> <p>Each body paragraph should present ONE new reason to support the opinion you express in your thesis statement.</p> | <p>Don't argue against yourself. Each point you make should agree very clearly with the perspective you take in your thesis.</p> <p>You don't need to have a strong opinion. It is perfectly fine to have a balanced argument. In other words, you might <i>mostly</i> agree or disagree with the statement. In this case, it is usually best to write 1 or 2 body paragraphs supporting or opposing the idea from the question. Then, you can write a third paragraph explaining an exception to your argument.</p> <p>Note: Sometimes you may be asked, "What is your opinion?" for this question type instead of, "To what extent do you agree...?"</p> |

| What are some advantages and disadvantages... | |
|--|--|
| <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>An increasing number of students choose to spend time away from school to live abroad or gain some other meaningful experience before attending college. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this choice?</p> | |
| Organization | Tips |
| <p>Body Paragraph 1: Discuss advantages OR disadvantages.</p> <p>Body Paragraph 2: Discuss the opposite side—the side you didn't discuss in paragraph 1.</p> | <p>Write two longer body paragraphs for this essay: one for each side of the issue.</p> <p>You should not make a recommendation or take a side unless the directions tell you to! Simply describe the positive and negative points on both sides of the question.</p> |

| Causes and Solutions to a Problem |
|---|
| <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>These days technology performs many kinds of work that people once performed. Many workers have lost their jobs and lack the necessary training to get a new job in the new technological economy. What should be done to solve this problem?</p> |

| Organization | Tips |
|--|---|
| <p>If the question only asks for solutions...</p> <p>You should write two to three body paragraphs. Each one should focus on ONE different solution to the problem.</p> <p>If the questions asks for causes and solutions...</p> <p>You should write two body paragraphs:</p> <p>Paragraph 1: Causes of the problem</p> <p>Paragraph 2: Solutions to the problem</p> | <p>The directions will tell you whether you need to focus your essay on solutions to a problem, or whether you should discuss causes AND solutions.</p> <p>It is a good idea to “hedge” in these essays in order to maintain an academic/formal tone. “Hedging” means that you use careful language to avoid making broad generalizations, or overly confident recommendations.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>One reason this happened could be...</p> <p>I think it is possible that...</p> <p>It may work to try...</p> <p>I would suggest...</p> <p>This approach could help many people to...</p> |

| Discuss both sides (and give your opinion)... | |
|---|---|
| <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>Some people prefer to save money. Others prefer to use their money on things they will enjoy. What is the best approach towards money? Discuss both sides and give your opinion.</p> | |
| Organization | Tips |
| <p>You'll need three body paragraphs:</p> <p>Body Paragraph 1: Discuss the first "side" of the issue.</p> <p>Body Paragraph 2: Discuss the second "side" of the issue.</p> <p>Body Paragraph 3: Give your opinion.</p> | <p>In body paragraphs 1 and 2, you need to present both sides of the argument in a fair and balanced way. Don't support one side over the other in the first two paragraphs.</p> <p>When you express your opinion in the third body paragraph, you can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose one side over the other very directly. • Point out a problem or limitation to one of the sides. • Show how one side is best in one situation, while the other side is best in another situation. <p>Be careful! Sometimes you are not asked to provide your opinion. In these cases, you should simply discuss both sides of the argument and that's all!</p> |

| Thematic Questions | |
|--|--|
| <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>Many children have access to the internet and devices like smart phones, even at very young ages. Do you think this is a good trend? What rules should children follow related to internet and gadget use?</p> | |
| Organization | Tips |
| <p>You should answer each question in the prompt in its own body paragraph.</p> <p>However, you may write an extra body paragraph for one of the questions if you have more to say (or if you need to reach your word count minimum).</p> | <p>This question type is very open. You may be asked to respond in a variety of ways.</p> <p>Read the question carefully!</p> <p>There will be two to three questions related to the same theme in this question type. Simply answer each question in its own paragraph.</p> <p>Writing your thesis can be tricky for this question type. Just make sure to cover each main point that you will discuss in your body paragraphs. For example, a good thesis statement might look like this for the sample thematic question on this chart:</p> <p>Sample Thesis:</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>Given the importance of technology in every aspect of modern life, it is important that young children gain exposure to the internet and devices, provided that parents monitor their activity carefully.</p> <p>The green part of the thesis relates to the first question in the prompt. The purple part relates to the second question.</p> |
|--|---|

7.5 Scoring

As you prepare for IELTS Writing, your goal should be to focus on making improvements that will have a significant impact on your score. To accomplish this, it helps to understand the four IELTS Writing scoring categories. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Category 1: Task Achievement (Task 1 Writing) and Task Response (Task 2 Writing)

This is a measurement of how well you fulfilled the basic requirements of the two IELTS writing tasks on your exam. For instance, you will be marked down in this category if your essays fail to meet the minimum word requirement. In regards to Task 1, they're also looking for how completely you answered your question. This means General Training Task 1 letters must respond to each bullet point provided in the prompt. For Academic Task 1, you must adequately summarize the key information contained in the visuals and the prompt question.

For Task 2, your “task response” assessment will measure how well you expressed your position in response to the question prompt. Your graders will be looking for how well you organized your thoughts, and how well you used reasons and examples to support your positions.

The best way to improve your “task achievement” and “task response” scores is to master the Task 1 and Task 2 templates discussed earlier in this chapter. The purpose of these templates is to help you communicate your thoughts clearly, and with an overall structure that will help you meet the requirements of the two IELTS writing tasks.

Category 2: Grammatical Range and Accuracy

This is a measurement of your ability to use a wide range of grammatical structures without making a lot of grammatical errors.

If you have enough time (a few months or more) before you take the IELTS, consider taking an English class or investing in a good grammar book for self-study. I often recommend [this grammar book](#) to intermediate and advanced students. It offers clear grammar explanations and contains many practice exercises.

Here are some additional grammar tips to help you, even if your IELTS exam is coming up soon and you don’t have time to take a class or study a textbook!

Grammar Tip 1: Don’t use the same simple sentence structures over and over.

The next time you write a practice response, take a close look at your sentence structures. Do you use a variety of sentence patterns? English language learners often develop a habit of using forms of the “BE” verb (am, is, are, was, were) very frequently as the **main verb** of the sentence. Using “BE” verbs is not a problem (I have used many in this eBook!), but using them too often makes your writing sound very basic. Importantly,

using them repeatedly also limits your grammatical range. Using more descriptive verbs opens up many grammatical possibilities. You can use adverbs and adverbial phrases to describe an action, for example. When you use forms of “BE” as the main verb, you will mainly rely on adjectives for description.

To work on this, go back through your practice essays and try to change every sentence that includes a “BE” verb as the **main verb**. Don’t worry about sentences with “BE” auxiliary verbs like this:

“She is running.”

“Running” is the main verb of this sentence and “is” is an auxiliary. There is no need to change this.

You want to edit sentences that look like this:

“Michael is a history professor at my college.”

“Is” is the main verb of the sentence.

When you revise these sentences, don’t change the meaning of the sentence too much.

The sentence should still fit logically in your essay. This can be tough! This exercise will force you to use different sentence patterns and, importantly, more descriptive verbs and adverbs when you write. Please note—you do not need to avoid all “BE” verbs when you write for the IELTS exam. This exercise simply helps you to develop your ability to use a variety of grammatical structures.

Example:

Original sentence: Mary is an excellent teacher, so students always love taking her class.

Revised sentence: Mary teaches so well that students always love taking her class.

Grammar Tip 2: Use complex sentence structures.

On the IELTS, you need to prove that you can write advanced sentences without mistakes. Therefore, you should include some complex sentence patterns in your writing. What is a complex sentence? Complex sentences include “subordinating conjunctions,” which introduce a variety of dependent clauses in English. Look over this [review of dependent and independent clauses](#) if you need to. Below are some examples of subordinating conjunctions:

Adverbial Subordinators (there are many!):

- Even though
- Whereas
- While
- When
- Because
- Since

Adjective Clause Subordinators:

- Who
- Whom
- Which
- That
- Whose

Noun Clause Subordinators:

- What
- When
- Where
- How
- Who

A few complex sentence examples:

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Adverbial: | <u>Even though it rained all weekend</u> , we had a great time. I like playing chess <u>because it provides a mental challenge</u> . |
| Adjective: | I threw the ball to my friend, <u>who was not ready to catch it</u> . Unfortunately, I can't find pen <u>that you loaned me</u> . |
| Noun clause: | I didn't hear <u>what you said</u> . Please show me <u>how I can fill out this form correctly</u> . |

You don't want to overuse these complex structures. It's best to mix complex sentences with simpler ones for clarity.

Also, don't confuse the word "complex" with the word "long." In general, you should try to avoid very long sentences to make your writing clear and easy to understand. Having some longer sentences won't hurt you, but, again, aim for a mixture.

Grammar Tip 3: Check your verb tenses as you edit.

Spend some time reviewing verb tenses as you study. If possible, find a teacher or a native English speaker to evaluate your writing to see if you make consistent mistakes. Tense errors are a common mistake in IELTS responses. Time is very limited, making it easy to use the wrong verb forms, yet, these are mistakes that many students can easily

edit on their own. If you notice that you forget to use past tenses when writing about the past, for example, it might not mean that you need to do a full review of past tense verbs. Instead, it might mean that you need to save a little time for yourself after writing to check your work.

When you *practice* writing for the IELTS, take as much time as you need to look for errors when you're done writing. In fact, make sure you keep all your practice essays and pull them out again a week or two after you wrote them. Often, you'll find new errors and think of better ways to express the ideas in your essays.

Category 3: Lexical Resource

This is your ability to use a wide range of vocabulary correctly (without errors) and appropriately (in the proper context) in your written responses.

Studying vocabulary regularly will help you improve most in this area. Magoosh has [\(free!\) IELTS vocabulary flashcards](#) to get you started. You should try to learn 15–20 new words each day!

Beyond learning new words, however, there are a few additional steps you can take to improve your “Lexical Resource” score.

Practice Paraphrasing

As noted above, you must paraphrase the language from the question prompt and the visuals as much as possible in your Academic Task 1 responses. Taking large chunks of language directly from the question and visual will definitely lower your score.

Whenever you practice an Academic Task 1 response, make sure to study any example essays included in your practice materials. Take note of how the author paraphrases the

language in the question prompt and compare it to your own paraphrases. You can learn a lot of helpful words and phrases by studying the responses of others.

Avoid Redundancy

A second tip to boost your Lexical Resource score is to focus on avoiding redundancy in your writing. Redundancy happens when you use the same words or phrases over and over again. As noted above, there will be some key terms that you can't avoid. For example, in our example response, it was difficult to avoid the phrases "computer ownership" and "education level." Other words are much easier to replace with synonyms. For example, in Academic Task 1 responses, you will often write about numbers that "increase" or "decrease." You can boost your score by using synonyms for these terms. There are many options:

| | |
|-----------|---------|
| Rise | Fall |
| Go up | Go down |
| Jump | Decline |
| Spike | Dip |
| Skyrocket | Plummet |

If you notice that you're using the same words again and again as you practice writing Academic Task 1 responses, work on building your knowledge of synonyms and paraphrases. A [thesaurus](#) is a handy tool. However, if at all possible, try to get feedback about the new words you use from a native English speaker. Often, the synonyms you find will have a slightly different meaning or use from the word you're trying to replace. As a general rule, you should always choose a word that you know to be correct over one that you don't know well.

Category 4: Coherence and Cohesion

This is a measurement of your ability to present ideas logically and clearly. In other words, the IELTS wants to see that your ideas make sense in the order you present them and that they work together in a clear way.

Transition Words and Phrases

One of the best things you can do to improve your “Coherence and Cohesion” score is to master useful transition words. Study this [list of transition words](#) to add to your repertoire. You should learn as many of these as possible so you have a range of words and phrases from which to choose as you write. As noted in other places above, you don’t want to use the same phrases over and over again. You need to avoid redundancy with transition words as well.

Also, just like your use of complex sentences, you should not use a transition word or phrase in every sentence. Only use them when it will help you to show the relationship between ideas more clearly.

Referencing

Another aspect of your “Coherence and Cohesion” score relates to “referencing.” This is your ability to use various pronouns accurately and appropriately. For example:

I learned how to knit a sweater from my grandmother. It took a long time to learn.

“It” refers to “how to knit a sweater.”

We had a great time on holiday in Hawaii. I want to go back there!

“There” refers to “Hawaii.”

Referencing helps you to avoid redundancy because you don't mention the same nouns over and over again. It also pulls your sentences together, linking ideas and concepts. Practice using pronouns as you write and make sure to look for pronoun errors as you edit your work!

The Template

A final important aspect of your “Coherence and Cohesion” score is the overall organization of your response. Your paragraphs should be organized logically, and your ideas should progress in a clear way from one sentence to the next. This involves using transition words (discussed above), but it also relates to what we covered earlier—the Academic Task 1 Template. Mastering this template is a great way to boost your Coherence and Cohesion band score!

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Now you're ready to go and practice Academic Task 1 responses. You should practice regularly. When you do, try your best to create real test conditions. Find a time to practice when you won't be interrupted. Limit yourself very strictly to 20 minutes. Write your responses by hand.

7.6 Using Examples

You may have noticed by now that the strength of your essay, particularly Task 2, comes partly from the quality of your examples. The type of example that's best suited to your essay will depend on the topic. Let's talk about some common sources of examples you can use to support your essay thesis.

Personal Experience

Many Task 2 arguments come from personal experience, because it's your own experiences that typically shape your perspectives. You can draw on your friends' stories and your family, in addition to those things you've personally done or seen. Personal experience arguments are particularly useful in questions that deal with education, raising children, and general lifestyle questions.

"Some people would prefer to be assigned a roommate by their university, while others would prefer to choose their own roommate. Discuss both sides and give your opinion."

Famous Person or Event

You can also draw examples from well-known stories and personalities, whether they be historical or fictional. If you choose a fictional or literary example, make it clear that although it's fictional, it demonstrates something that is applicable to real life. A famous person or event may provide a good example for a Task 2 question like this:

"People were happier 100 years ago because life was simpler than it is today. To what extent do you agree or disagree?"

Knowledge of the Subject

You don't need to have any prior knowledge to answer your IELTS essay questions, but if you do know something about the topic you're given, you may want to draw on that knowledge. This is likely to be a more successful tactic than personal experiences or famous events when your question deals with a social or political issue like one of these:

"A gift (such as a camera, a soccer ball, or an animal) can contribute to a child's development. What gift would you give to help a child develop? How would it help a child develop in important ways?"

Using Examples Well

Simply having a good example isn't enough. You have to use it well in your writing. That means connecting the concrete example to the more abstract ideas—your opinion or the reasons for that opinion. Say, for instance, I am answering an IELTS Task 2 question about whether or not technology has improved modern life. This might be how I would arrange my ideas:

Main idea:

- *Technology has improved our lives.*

And then I give you a reason why I think that:

- *It has made long-distance communication better.*

Now, I can easily bring up a specific example to support that reason:

- *For instance, I live many hundreds of miles away from my parents, but I talk to them by video chat every month.*

All of that is great, but I need to make the connections between the parts. The most important thing I need to do is explain my example. Here are a couple of sentences that would help:

- *The technology behind the video chat is very new. Twenty years ago, before we had that technology, I wouldn't have been able to see my parents' faces so often. That change in technology has allowed me to communicate better with people I love even though I'm far away.*

Notice how this makes a clear connection between the specific example of video chat and the general idea of technological changes improving my life.

And of course, transition words (such as "for example" and "for instance") and referencing your previous sentences (such as "That change in technology") are very, very important for writing smoothly. Be sure to link your thoughts together!

7.7 Common Writing Difficulties

Let's look at some of common problems in student essays. I hope that you'll be able to look out for these pitfalls in your own essays so you don't make the same mistakes!

Basic Punctuation Rules

The basics can cause trouble if they're not correct. Names and the first words in sentences begin with a capital letter; very few other words do. Don't capitalize words that aren't names. "I" has to be capitalized, of course, but other pronouns do not. All sentences end with either a question mark, a period, or an exclamation point. Although these are some of the first facts we learn when we study writing, it's easy to forget about them when working on a high-stakes essay. And while it's true that a few small typos aren't likely to affect your score, consistently ignoring basic rules of mechanics can. So take extra care when proofreading your essay to be sure that you're following all the little rules.

Slow Writing

You could write three practice essays every day for a month (disclaimer: writing three essays every day is probably not the best use of your study time!) and still have trouble on the IELTS writing section. It seems sensible to spend all of your study time improving your English, but all the English knowledge in the world won't help you if you can't get your essay written and edited within the time limit. So if you already know you have trouble writing quickly, then start practicing to increase your speed. Just writing in English by hand a little bit each day can really help. Perhaps you could write a journal or

compose some notes to a friend. Practicing for 10-15 minutes a day will put you in a much better position on test day if you currently write very slowly by hand.

Using Incomplete Sentences

Writing sentence fragments and run-on sentences are some of the most common problems in IELTS essays. Using ungrammatical sentences confuses the reader, slows him/her down, and makes it much harder to understand your argument. If what makes a complete sentence is different in English than in your native language, it's a great idea to do a lot of reading to become more used to how sentences in English really work. Grammar books are a great aid, of course, but nothing is a better teacher than real world experience. Keep reading!

7.8 Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an essential part of the essay planning process. It can help you pick a topic to write about, choose which side to support in a persuasive essay, and come up with supporting details for that side. You may think of brainstorming as a group of people, such as TV script writers, sitting around a table and bouncing ideas around. And while brainstorming in a group is a great way to open all the doors and possibilities you have, brainstorming on paper by yourself can also get your creativity flowing.

There are a couple of rules to remember when brainstorming. First and most importantly, there are no bad ideas. You should at least consider everything that pops into your head, even if it doesn't support the side you plan to take or doesn't seem like a strong example. If it seems like something you could write a paragraph about, write it down, because it keeps your mind moving forward rather than stagnating. Second, keep your brainstorming topic broad. Don't choose your opinion at this point; consider every angle and possible argument. You can choose your side later, when you start to actually plan

your essay. For now, you just want to generate as many ideas as possible, putting the most interesting ones on paper.

Practicing Brainstorming

I recommend that you practice brainstorming in what Magoosh test prep expert Lucas Fink calls an “ideal-conditions essay.” Instead of sticking to the 20-30 minute time limit of the IELTS, give yourself as much time as you need. Spend two or three minutes brainstorming, then five or ten minutes planning, then write for half an hour or so, then reread, edit, and refine until the essay is as good as you think it can get. Although timed practice is essential, writing in ideal conditions will help cement proper grammar and mechanics and will help you see what you’re really capable of. Below I’ve written about a couple of brainstorming techniques you may find useful. I recommend you try all of them at least once so that you can see which one works best for you. It may be that different brainstorming styles work best for certain types of essays, and this is a great thing to know as you practice. So grab a stack of blank paper, and get started!

Mind Map

If you’re a visual learner, mind mapping will probably be a great brainstorming technique for you. Draw a circle in the middle of your paper and write your prompt in it. Then draw lines coming out of the circle, like a sun. At the end of each line, write a statement or argument that relates to the central prompt. Draw lines coming off of each of these statements, and write supporting details and examples on those lines. Continue doing this until you’ve exhausted all the possibilities you can think of for the topic.

Free-writing

Free-writing is a great technique if you draw a blank—that is, if you have no idea what to write about. Even in the middle of writing practice essays, a mini-free-writing session can help you recover from writer’s block. To free-write, write your prompt or central question

in a document, then start writing whatever you think about. Keep typing at all times—if you don't know what to write, then write about how you don't know what to write. If your mind wanders, then write that your mind has wandered, then try to get back on track. It will probably feel stupid and unproductive at first, but there's a reason that some teachers call free-writing "writing the mind alive": after a few minutes of free-writing, you'll find that your ideas are much clearer, it's easier for you to focus on the topic, and you'll have at least a couple of solid arguments and examples written down, which, for the IELTS, is all you need.

In Your Head

On your actual IELTS essays, you won't want to spend time brainstorming then planning as two separate stages. Instead, it's better to combine them. There are two ways to do that. First, you might simply spend ~30 seconds or a minute thinking about the topic before you write down a plan. Imagine this like a free-writing exercise without the writing: you want to think as freely and as randomly as possible. The other way to do this is to start writing immediately as you brainstorm, then cross off (or erase) the ideas that you aren't going to use. In that method, the crossing off is the "planning" step.

7.9 Using Transitions and Structure

Even a well thought out essay with great arguments and support can score low if it lacks "flow." You need to connect your ideas in a way that guides the reader through your essay. In addition to making your argument seem stronger to the reader, good use of transitions and structure will just make your essay more pleasant to read. Let's talk about how you can use structure and transitions to make your essay as convincing as possible.

Structure

Your essay should begin by engaging the reader (making them care about what you have to say) and stating your thesis. After that, you need to support your thesis with specific examples, details, and information intended to inform and/or convince the reader. Finally, you need to restate your thesis and tell the reader why it matters. On the paragraph level, transitions can be used to smooth your writing out and make the jump from one paragraph to the next less jarring.

Transitions

To decide what transition to use in a given situation, first look at your essay as a whole. How is it organized? If you present arguments that build on each other, use transitions listed under “Similarity” below. Or maybe you present one idea and then the opposite opinion. If so, you will find that transition words of contrast help. And if you list your examples, transition words of sequence will make this relationship clear.

Common Transitions

SIMILARITY: similarly, like, as, likewise, in the same way, in addition, plus

CONTRAST: nevertheless, yet, still, on the other hand, despite, although

TIME/LISTING: First, second, etc...; next, then; at first; after that; currently; simultaneously

EMPHASIS: actually, even, indeed, especially, in fact

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, finally, therefore, thus

Practice

You can practice some of these words by combining each pair of sentences below; you can change the order of the sentences or rephrase them slightly if you want. How many

different transitions can you use for each pair? How does the choice of transition affect the meaning of the sentence?

- My family has always lived in the same house. We travel often.
- Most people who have pets prefer either dogs or cats. I have a pet elephant.
- I study anthropology. My sister is interested in anthropology.
- We built a raft. We went on an adventure.

7.10 Varying Sentence Types

Here, we're going to take an even closer look at the most important grammatical feature of top-scoring IELTS Writing: sentence variety! Below, we'll review some of the sentence types we discussed in section 7.5. We'll also look at the specific ways that good sentence variety can get you a top IELTS score...as well as the ways that poor sentence variety can cause you to score poorly.

Clauses: The Building Blocks of Sentences

In 7.5, we looked at the role of clauses in more complicated English sentences. But clauses are also at the heart of simple sentences. Actually, *all* sentences are made up of clauses. In fact, a clause might be an entire sentence by itself. There are two types of clauses: dependent and independent. The difference is simple: independent clauses have a subject and a verb, and they express a complete thought. Dependent clauses don't express a complete thought. Often, dependent clauses begin with a subordinating conjunction, which is a word that makes the sentence not a complete thought. Let's look at some examples.

Here are some independent clauses:

- The dog chased the elephant.

- Nothing could be better than this!

And here are some dependent clauses:

- If the dog catches the elephant
- Because I heard this exciting news

As you can see, the dependent clauses are incomplete; they cannot stand alone as sentences, whereas independent clauses can.

Why Do Clauses Matter?

English sentences come in four basic structures. We categorize them based on how they use dependent and independent clauses. In order to understand the structures, we must understand the pieces. Clauses are the most important pieces.

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is exactly one independent clause. So the sentences I wrote as examples of independent clauses are also perfect examples of simple sentences:

- The dog chased the elephant.
- Nothing could be better than this!

Compound Sentences

A compound sentence combines two independent clauses, so it will have at least two subjects and two verbs. The two clauses must be joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions include “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” and “so.”

Examples:

- The elephant was minding its own business, and the dog decided to chase it.

(The elephant was minding its own business. The dog decided to chase it.)

- The elephant was much larger, but it ran away.

(The elephant was much larger. It ran away.)

- The dog knew that the elephant was weak, so he decided to see how far the elephant could run.

(The dog knew that the elephant was weak. He decided to see how far the elephant could run.)

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence is created by combining an independent clause with a dependent clause. You can do this using a subordinating conjunction (after, although, because, while, when, if, until, whether, etc.). In the following examples, I've marked the dependent clause with (DC) and the independent clause with (IC).

- As the elephant grew tired (DC), the dog became more excited (IC).
- I went outside to investigate (IC) after I heard terrible noises in the yard (DC).

Compound-Complex Sentences

Compound-complex sentences, as you might have guessed, contain at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause.

- Imagine my surprise (IC) when I stepped outside (DC) and I saw my beloved pet elephant acting scared of a tiny dog (IC)!

(Note that the second independent clause is actually a PART of the dependent starting with "when." It is compound, but acts as one dependent clause.)

- Although I thought it was a bit funny (DC), I wanted to help the elephant (IC), but when my dog bit me (DC), I gave up and went back inside (IC).

(In this case, the second independent clause that starts with "but" also contains a dependent clause that starts with "when." Meanwhile, the first independent clause starting with "I wanted" has a dependent clause attached to it, starting with "although." Similar to how a dependent clause can contain an independent clause, the reverse is also possible: an independent clause can contain a dependent clause.

Why This Matters in IELTS Writing

Part of your score in IELTS Writing will be based on your use of a variety of language. And you need truly excellent sentence variety if you want a good chance at the 7-9 band score range.

So what does this variety look like? While all grammar forms are important, IELTS Writing places greater emphasis on complicated sentences. To get a top IELTS Writing score, you want frequent complex sentences, compound sentences, and complex-compound sentences.

Simple sentences still have a place in upper-band IELTS Writing, though. Simpler grammar patterns are good when you need to summarize something briefly or make a short transitional statement. Moreover, sometimes a simple sentence is just the most elegant way to write something, while a more complicated sentence can seem awkward and wordy.

Not only will varying your written sentences demonstrate your command of advanced grammar, but it will also make your IELTS writings much more interesting to read.

So build those skills in IELTS Writing sentence variety. Practice breaking complicated sentences into simple ones and combining simple sentences into complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences. This will help you develop proper flexibility and

confidence in written English grammar. Once you've mastered the mechanics of how each sentence type is formed, you can use them to give your writing a boost.

If you are limited just to simple grammar in your IELTS Writing, your score will likely fall into bands 4 or 5. These scores are seldom acceptable to organizations that use the IELTS. So you really do need to learn sentence variety if you want a qualifying IELTS score.

For a closer look at grammar and its impact on your IELTS Writing score, carefully read the "Grammatical Range and Accuracy" column in [the official IELTS Writing Band descriptors](#).

How Strong IELTS Writing Grammar Can Help You on the Rest of the Exam

IELTS Writing is the most grammatically demanding section of the test. Because of this, the Writing section gives you a great opportunity to build grammar skills.

This can help you in the other sections of the IELTS too. Really, a good command of English sentence variety will boost your whole-test score. Fluent English grammar helps your IELTS Reading comprehension, for instance. With strong grammar skills, you are less likely to get "lost" when you read the longer, more complicated sentences in IELTS passages. Grammar fluency and confidence helps you understand IELTS Listening tracks with greater confidence and ease too.

Last but certainly not least, IELTS Speaking has grammar requirements similar to those of the Writing section. For more details on the importance of sentence variety in Speaking, see [the official Speaking rubric on IELTS.org](#).

7.11 Pacing Strategies

Free Your Mind Up

It can be tricky to think of something to write about when you're under a lot of pressure. But on the IELTS, you really do need to think fast. Generally, the most important part is to decide on an answer quickly, and then consider every thought you have. Even if an idea seems ridiculous at first, don't reject it. At least, don't reject it immediately. A ridiculous idea can often turn into a very good one if given a little bit of time and thought. Welcome any idea, and brainstorm as freely as possible. Don't get stuck on one path, looking for one idea or reason that you can't find. Explore all paths.

This can seem time consuming at first, but if you brainstorm well in the beginning you'll have a better basis to write your essay on, and that will save you time in total.

Have a Formula Prepared

The essays on the IELTS are pretty predictable. Although it's not a good idea to use exactly the same format with no regard to the natural flow of your argument, it's very possible to slightly adapt the essay format to suit your question. When you get to the test, you'll be so experienced at writing short essays in this way that you won't have to stop and think about what to say next.

Study Synonyms and Multiple Ways of Expressing the Same Idea (Paraphrasing)

You can lose a lot of time trying to think of the exact word or phrase that you want. It's a terrible feeling to need "the perfect word" and not be able to remember it, but it's important to keep moving. Avoid falling into this trap by learning new vocabulary through synonyms and equivalent expressions. You'll remember synonyms most easily if you collect them gradually, as you encounter them in life, but sometimes there isn't time for this. In that case, you can check out a thesaurus to get more ideas for words to learn. Be

aware, though, that thesauruses are easy to abuse. Don't copy and learn every single word in a list, since some of them will carry specific meanings that you don't intend or will be for very different contexts. Instead, when writing, use the thesaurus to find words that you recognize but couldn't remember. If you decide to learn totally new words from a thesaurus, be sure that you look them up to get exact definitions and example sentences.

Stick to Your Guidelines

Break your essay down into several parts and give each part a time limit. For instance, you may spend 2 minutes planning your Task 2 Essay, 33 minutes writing it, and 5 minutes revising it. Of course, you don't have to follow these guidelines precisely—if you finish planning early or need 30 extra seconds to complete your last thought, then feel free to do so. Just be sure that the advantage you gain is worth the time it takes. Don't sacrifice all of your editing time for a third body paragraph that you don't need, for example.

7.12 How to Improve Your Writing Skills

For a lot of people, writing is the least rewarding skill to study. Unlike reading and listening, it's not easy to track your progress, and the way that we practice writing tends to be pretty dry and boring. I'm going to try to correct this by offering some ways on how to practice writing for the IELTS, and how to make this practice more rewarding, and hopefully even enjoyable.

Read Other People's Essays

You're probably already reading a lot of nonfiction to prepare for the reading section of the test. Unfortunately, the material you're probably reading may not be the most helpful material from which to study writing. After all, if you can already write like a professional, why are you even reading this post? You can get a better feel for what the IELTS

requires—and also get inside the test scorers’ heads—by reading other student work. *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* is a great resource: it not only includes sample essays, but also grades them and tells you why each essay received the grade that it did.

Learn to Pre-Write

You won’t have time to create a full-fledged outline during the test itself, but it’s definitely a good idea to spend a few minutes sketching out the structure of your essay before you start writing. I suggest that you practice outlining in two ways: first of all, find a writing topic and outline it instead of writing a full essay. This is a skill you can perfect through repetition. Don’t write the essay—just move on and plan the next prompt! You can also take existing essays or articles and use them to create an outline. Then you can look at how the author structured their work, and decide what you like or dislike about it.

Summarize Everything

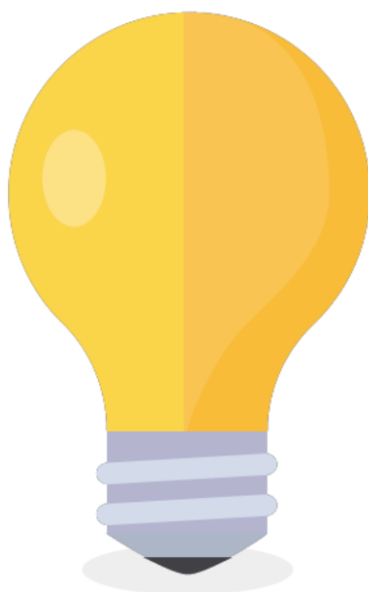
Okay, so maybe you won’t actually summarize everything that you hear or read, but you should do this as often as possible. In order to improve your reading and listening skills, you should be reading in English and listening to native speakers (in lectures, podcasts, documentaries, etc.) regularly. If you’re at home or by a computer, take about ten minutes afterward to summarize what you read or heard. If you wrote an outline, too, that’s even better—you’re practicing several different IELTS skills all in one exercise.

No Tutor? No Problem!

One of the major barriers to practicing writing is that you can’t really assess your own writing. Some people solve this problem by hiring a private tutor, but there are other solutions if that’s not your style. Do you have friends who are studying your native language? If so, see if they’re interested in a language swap. Not only will this allow you both to get help from a native speaker (and one that you like talking to!), but also you can

help each other stay on track by encouraging each other to write a set number of essays each week. If you don't have that kind of resource, try using a website like lang-8.com, which provides a network for language learners and native speakers to correct each other's writing.

8: Additional Resources



8.1 Study Plans

Whether you're planning to study for a long time, or you've waited until the last minute, adding some structure to your IELTS study plan will help to keep you organized and on track. Planning out a study schedule is the key first step in scoring well on the IELTS.

To help take the guesswork out of all of this, we've created some schedules to help you get started:

- [One-Week Study Schedule](#)
- [One-Month Study Schedule](#)

8.2 Vocabulary Resources

Learning vocabulary helps with every aspect of the exam—Speaking, Reading, Listening, and Writing! So, you should make some time in your schedule to work on your vocabulary. Here is a resource that can help:

- [Free Vocabulary Flashcards](#)

8.3 IELTS Books and Resources

There are many IELTS review books on the market that promise to give you “the key” to acing the IELTS. That's a big promise! And while it's true that many of these books provide excellent strategies and tips for IELTS success, the real “key” to acing the IELTS is experience with English learned through repeated practice.

So, which books provide the best resources, the best strategies, and the best practice?

Check out our book reviews and recommendations to find the IELTS books that are right for you:

- [Best IELTS Books and Resources](#)

9: Study Hard. Be Confident.

Do Your Best!

This is the end of this IELTS eBook. If you've made it this far in the text, then you've already put hours into your IELTS preparation. You should continue by completing as many practice questions as you can before exam day. This is the best way to master and retain the skills and strategies you learned in this book.

Understandably, many students feel nervous about the IELTS exam. It is certainly a challenging test. But it's very likely that you have been studying English for many years leading up to this point. By preparing for the exam with resources like this eBook, and continuing to develop your English skills, you are putting yourself in the position to do your best. Walk into your exam center with your head held high, ready to meet this challenge!

Good luck!



THE END

If you liked this eBook, sign up for [Magoosh IELTS](https://www.magoosh.com/ielts).

Prep smart, go far. Enjoy the ride.

Happy Studying!