

IELTS: A Must Read Guide to Success

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This booklet has the aim of aiding students taking the IELTS English language proficiency exam by providing study tips of proven usefulness. There are two versions of the IELTS: the Academic Version and the General Training Version. All candidates take the same Listening and Speaking modules, while the Reading and Writing modules differ in the two versions of the test. It is generally acknowledged that the reading and writing tests for the Academic Version are more difficult than those for the General Training Version owing to the differences between the two versions in the degree of intellectual and academic achievement required.

The total test duration is around 2 hours and 45 minutes for the Listening, Reading and Writing modules.

Currently there is no time limit for applicants to retake the test, and an IELTS result is usually valid for two years.

IELTS Scoring

There is no penalty for incorrect answers in sections of the test that require discreet answers.

Marking is carried out at the test centre by trained examiners whose work is closely monitored. The speaking session is recorded for monitoring and for re-marking in case of an appeal against the band score given. Results are usually available within two weeks of the test.

The IELTS provides a profile of a candidate's ability to use English. Candidates receive scores on a band scale from 1 to 9.

Overall Band Scores and scores for each sub-test (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking) are reported in whole bands or half bands. The Overall Band Score is calculated by taking the mean of the total of the four individual sub-test scores. Overall Band Scores are reported to the nearest whole or half band. For the avoidance of doubt, the following rounding convention applies; if the average across the four skills ends in .25, it is rounded up to the next half band, and if it ends in .75, it is rounded up to the next whole band. Thus, a candidate achieving 6.5 for Listening, 6.5 for Reading, 5.0 for Writing and 7.0 for Speaking would be awarded an Overall Band Score of 6.5 ($25 \div 4 = 6.25 = \text{Band } 6.5$). Likewise, a candidate achieving 4.0 for Listening, 3.5 for Reading, 4.0 for Writing and 4.0 for Speaking would be awarded an Overall Band Score of 4.0 ($15.5 \div 4 = 3.875 = \text{Band } 4.0$). On the other hand, a candidate achieving 6.5 for Listening, 6.5 for Reading, 5.5 for Writing and 6.0 for Speaking would be awarded band 6 ($24.5 \div 4 = 6.125 = \text{Band } 6$).

Different universities and fields of study require different band scores. Therefore, the tables printed in the answer key to the Cambridge tests are not particularly useful in evaluating your success. Please read the following section for a better understanding of the scoring of your answers.

Band Score Conversion Table for the IELTS

There are a total of 40 questions each in the Reading and Listening modules of the IELTS. The band scoring system used is shown below:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------|----------|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Band Score | 9.0 | 8.5 | 8.0 | 7.5 | 7.0 | 6.5 | 6.0 | 5.5 | 5.0 | 4.5 | 4.0 | 3.5 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 1.0 | 0.0 |
| Raw score | 39 — 40 | 37 — 38 | 35 — 36 | 32 — 34 | 29 — 31 | 26 — 28 | 22 — 25 | 18 — 21 | 15 — 17 | 12 — 14 | 10 — 11 | 8 – 9 | 6 – 7 | 4 – 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

This chart is merely a guide because the scores occasionally may be adjusted slightly, depending on the difficulty of the particular exam.

In the Writing Module, the maximum score is 3.6 for Report Writing and 5.4 for Essay Writing, while the Speaking module has a maximum total score of 9.

Listening points

- 1) You will be allowed 10 minutes to transfer answers onto the answer sheet. Therefore, you should write your answers in the question booklet and then transfer them to the answer sheet. It is important to use the same method when taking sample tests since writing answers directly onto the answer sheet in order to save the questions for further use can be time-consuming and distracting, resulting in lower scores. Moreover, you must prepare yourself for the actual testing situation.
- 2) The most frequently heard accents in the IELTS are British, hence, listening to British accents, such as those heard on the BBC, is more helpful than listening to other accents, such as those on VOA. This is one of the major differences between the IELTS and the TOEFL, which features more American accents. However, it is helpful to be familiar with other accents that may sometimes be encountered in the IELTS. *Thomson Exam Essentials* and *IELTS Practice Tests Plus 2* are sample tests that provide good examples of Australian and New Zealand accents, respectively. *IELTS Testbuilder* has good examples of rather difficult listening tests with British accents.
- 3) Listen carefully to the brief instructions prior to each part to determine how many test questions you should answer in that part. Test takers who do not pay attention to this may fail to read all the test questions in the particular part before the related listening samples are played, and this omission could result in a lower score.
- 4) Try to keep two consecutive questions in mind so that, if you fail to respond to the first one, you can answer the second one while the recorded voice is still speaking.
- 5) Use the pauses in the recording to read the questions. Do not just sit there waiting.
- 6) You will not receive a mark if you misspell a word.
Listen carefully to note whether the answer word is used by the speaker in singular or plural form.
Forgetting to write a \$ sign, am or pm (for time), St. or Street, or kilograms will result in the loss of a mark.

Some words which are frequently misspelled by examinees in the IELTS Listening Module include: **tennis**, Café (not Cafet), **buffet**, **tonne** or **tonnes**, **stock** (not stuck), **seating** (vs. sitting), for example in “You are responsible for setting out **seating** in the square for the speeches”, **taught**, **drought**, **disk**, **calendar**, weather (not wheather), **cottage** (not cuttage), tutor and tutee (not tuitor and tuitee), but **tuition**, repetition (not repeatition), and **extremely**.

- 7) While reading the questions, it is helpful to identify and underline the keywords that you want to sharpen your ears to capture when you are listening to the speaker. These keywords are usually situated just before or after the gap corresponding to the missing word. *It is very important to note that often not the keyword itself but a synonym of it will be spoken, and hence you must be vigilant to grasp the synonymous word and quickly fill in the gap with the answer word (or words) heard in the recording.*
- 8) Write as completely as possible but within the limit set by the short written instruction prior to the section. For example, assume that you have to fill out a listening section with “no more than three words” and you hear “I work as one of the nine permanent staff members employed here” and the question is “In the Club, there are nine.....”. You may fail to get a mark if you write only “permanent staff” rather than “permanent staff members”. Another example is that if you hear “You could have cut the hand-outs by about a third” and you must fill out “The hand-outs could have been cut by...” with no more than three words, it is better to write “about a third” not “a third”, otherwise you may fail to get a mark.

Reading Points

- 1) The best strategy for the Reading module, in my view, is to first read all the questions and underscore the keywords. (The “List of Headings” type question is an exception.) Numbers, years, and proper nouns usually can serve as keywords. Then, look quickly at the keywords you selected and go to the first paragraph of the text, read it quickly, and scan it for the keywords. Then return to the questions and try to answer those which can be answered by the first paragraph. Then read the second paragraph and proceed in the same way. In many cases, the questions follow the order of the information in the reading passages. If you are not a sluggish reader and have a good vocabulary, you can get a high score in this way.
- 2) Use only the stated number of words in your answer or you will fail to get a mark. Hyphenated words count as a single word.
- 3) For the “List of Headings” type questions, note that the heading you choose for the paragraph must be related to the entire paragraph, not a part of it. In other words, it must summarise the **whole** paragraph. Another point is that the first, the second and the last sentences of the paragraph are usually more important to consider than the other sentences when choosing the appropriate heading.
- 4) For “TRUE, FALSE, NOT GIVEN” type questions, you must choose ‘TRUE’ if the sense of the statement is mentioned in the text, ‘FALSE’ if it is contradicted, and ‘NOT GIVEN’ if there is no statement in the text that confirms or contradicts it. It is important to note that although a statement may be true or false in your view, you must designate it as ‘NOT GIVEN’ if it has not been addressed, i.e. confirmed or contradicted, in the text at all. Therefore, if a statement is true or false in your view but its truth or falsity is not substantiated or referred to in the text, you must be very careful not to be fooled into designating it as “TRUE” or “FALSE” instead of “NOT GIVEN”.
- 5) Another useful point is that in answering questions that have a paragraph with missing words and a set of missed out, as well as unrelated, words beneath the paragraph, if your English is good enough, you may

sometimes be able to complete the text and answer the question without needing to get back to the text! This can significantly save time.

- 6) *IELTS Testbuilder* (but not *IELTS Testbuilder 2*) has good examples of rather difficult reading tests that can be managed using the above strategies. I strongly recommend that you take the tests included in this helpful book, but first start with Cambridge tests. *Thomson Exam Essentials* has reading tests which are far more difficult than those found in the real IELTS, and I do not recommend spending time on them. It is, however, a good source of practice listening materials.

Writing Points

- 1) You need to write at least 150 words for Task 1 and 250 words for Task 2. Writing too many will take too much time, and there is a greater possibility of making mistakes. Writing too few is worse – it will cause you to lose marks. To ensure that you have written enough to fulfil the minimum word counts, average the number of words in two sentences that seem to have no more words than the other sentences, and multiply the average by the number of sentences.
- 2) Use variety to avoid repetition. Do not copy words from graphs (Task 1 Academic) or the subject (Task 2); rephrase and use synonyms instead.
- 3) Stay on topic; you will be penalized if you stray off topic.
- 4) Marks are not taken away for poor or messy writing, but write legibly.
- 5) Do not use slang. Be aware that certain expressions, such as "kids" instead of "children" and "guys" or "gals" instead of "men" or "women", also fall into the category of slang and should be avoided.
- 6) Do not use contractions in the Academic Writing tasks. In English, contractions are used in informal and less formal writing, and the Academic Writing tasks demand formal writing.
- 7) Use rich vocabulary. You have learned English for many years, and this is the time to use what you know. Stay away from over-used adjectives, such as "good" or "bad". Instead, use more dramatic, expressive words, such as "excellent", "wonderful", "superb", or "adverse", "horrible", "terrible", etc. Choose the more precise word over the more general one. This will make your language come alive, in speech or in writing, and earn you higher marks.
- 8) Prior to starting Task 1, read the subject of Task 2. This will help prepare your mind for Task 2 more quickly.
- 9) Below you will find some examples of useful expressions you can use in Task 1 to write about comparisons:

- a) “Per capita” means per person and can be used in many Task 1 essays for describing charts showing different parameters per person.
- b) Rank the data given in the charts from maximum to minimum; this will help you to compare them rapidly. Carefully examine graphs to see whether any given value is a multiple of another. If it is, then it is important to mention this.
- c) Instead of repeating “people over Y” you can write “Over Ys”. For example, “over 25s” can replace “people over 25”.
- d) Female respondents expressed greater satisfaction compared to males *at a rate of x% for women against y% for men.*
- e) A twofold/threefold/fourfold/fivefold percentage of men compared to women...(e.g. expressed satisfaction with YV programs).
- f) The value for males is double/triple/quadruple that of females.
- g) Males outnumber females by...
- h) X and then Y are the next major...(e.g. exporters or producers and so on), at z% and t% respectively.
- i) To “occupy the middle position(s)” or to “lie between these poles” can be used to describe a thing or things with values between those of other things. For example: “Brazil’s production is highest and Bolivia’s the lowest. Argentina and Iran occupy the middle positions/lie between these poles.”
- j) “In terms of”, “As regards”, “Regarding”, “As for...” or “As far as...is concerned” have the same meaning.
- k) Roughly = around = about = nearly = approximately = Just over/under.
- l) “X took the second place”, “X occupied the second place”, “X was the second largest...”, “X ranked second”, and “X rated second” are useful expressions to use in Task 1.
- m) Y followed a similar pattern (after describing the pattern of X).
- n) It rose from... to a dramatic... in....
- o) The overall trend shows, *despite some fluctuations*, increase/decrease toward the end of the period.
- p) You can use the following for description of charts:
10% → a tenth
20% → a fifth

- 25% → a fourth, a quarter
 33% → a third
 50% → a half
 75% → three quarters
 95% → the vast majority, almost all
 100% → all
 22% → slightly more than a fifth
 31% → slightly less than a third
 60% → more than half
- q) Fall = decrease = drop = decline small decrease = dip
 r) Fall to/Hit the lowest point of... Hit a peak of...
 s) “To fall erratically from ... to ...” can be used to describe a fall, with some fluctuations, from ... to
 t) Increase = rise = go up = climb = pick up
 u) Leap = soar = rocket = escalate → severe increase
 v) Slump = plummet = plunge = tumble → severe decrease
 w) Stabilize = remain stable/constant/steady/unchanged = level off =
 hover = maintain the same level = reaching a plateau
 x) Dramatically, sharply, significantly, steeply, drastically → marked changes
 y) Minimally, slightly, gradually, steadily, marginally → slight changes
- 10) I do not recommend taking the Cambridge writing tests, as most of the answers provided are scored less than 9, and hence do not serve as good teaching points for candidates seeking a high score. *IELTS On Track* has one of the best examples of Task 1 essays and is highly recommended for this purpose.
- 11) For Task 2, giving examples is a good way to reach the 250-word count. An important point for Task 2 essays is that you can write about unreal, self-invented examples or research results! For example, in a Task 2 essay about the examinee's idea regarding over-expenditure on holiday celebrations by some government, a clever examinee wrote this unreal statement: “Recently, the Greek government spent around 10 billion

dollars on celebrating Greek Independence Day, while it is facing a debt burden of about 15 billion dollars to the European Union.”

Speaking Points

- 1) Wear smart clothes for the interview. Do not forget to make eye contact. If you are very stressed, take one 10 mg propranolol (Inderal) tablet one hour prior to going for the exam. It helps to relieve your anxiety and suppresses the 'body language' associated with it, which can be interpreted by the examiner as a sign of incompetence. This drug does not make you drowsy at all. It must not be taken by asthmatic individuals, otherwise it is extremely safe.
- 2) In Part 2 of the IELTS Speaking Module, you need to give a short talk, of about 1-2 minutes, on a simple topic. You are handed a card with the topic, and you have one minute to prepare your talk. You can make notes and use these notes during your monologue. Do not ask the interviewer to change the task card if the topic seems difficult. The interviewer will not change it most probably, but will receive a negative impression of your competence.
- 3) If you make a mistake in the interview, don't worry, just correct yourself and keep going.
- 4) Use descriptive words. Don't use boring words like good, bad, nice, or okay. Use exciting words that convey emotion. Practice using more descriptive words for every simple word you know – such as "thrilled" instead of "happy", or "depressed" instead of "sad".
- 5) Do not use slang.
- 6) Stay on topic. Don't change the subject or the examiner will think you have misunderstood and may give you a lower mark.
- 7) Do not forget that you can give unreal answers in the interview. For example, if you are asked to explain a recent dream but you cannot remember any dream at that moment, or if you have difficulty in describing one that you have had, you can describe a city that you have seen and say that you were there in your dream! Also, if possible, try to direct the discussion toward topics that you are more confident in speaking about. For example, if you are a medical doctor and are asked to describe an image you have seen, you can describe a chest x-ray or the

- photo of a dermatologic disease and easily speak about it using your medical knowledge and vocabulary.
- 8) Have daily discussions with friends. Take turns asking each other questions about current events and develop your ability to speak about various topics. Even if you cannot attend speaking classes, you can significantly improve your skills by thinking about different topics and discussing them to yourself.
 - 9) Practice speaking with a watch. Get an idea of how long two minutes is and approximately how much content you will have to cover.
 - 10) Do not forget that a good way to boost your speaking skill is to use a new word you have just learnt in a new sentence you have produced. This can be more helpful than just repeating the word along with its meaning, and the sentence you have seen it in. When you learn a new word, consider in what topic or subject it can be used. This will enable you to use it automatically when you face the same or a similar topic in your exam. Writing down a list of useful words relating to a topic can be helpful in both the speaking and writing sections.

References

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The author welcomes receiving readers' comments (Email: namazi_mr@yahoo.com). He does **NOT** teach IELTS.

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