

IELTS TEACHER

THE KEY  
TO IELTS  
SUCCESS

2021 edition



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BANDS 7, 8, 9

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## Chapter 1 Understanding the problem

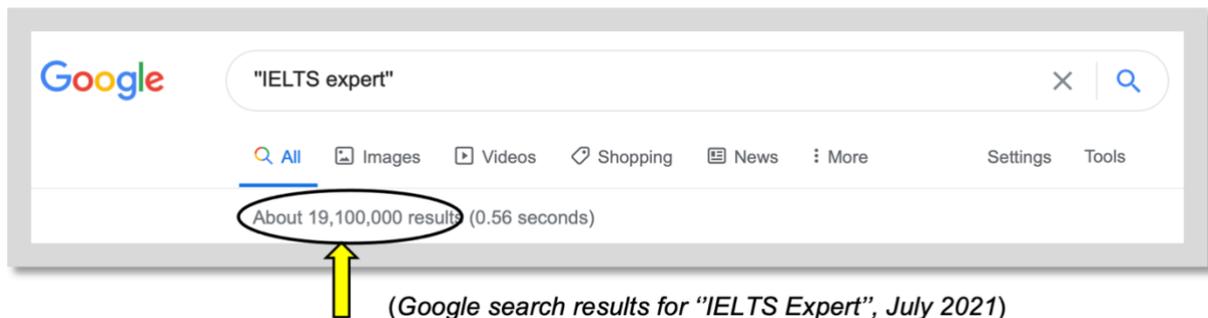
### Introduction

In 2012, I started writing my 5th IELTS preparation book, *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*, and I also began answering questions about the test on social media. I naively thought that I would advise people on how to improve their score, they would thank me, and that would be that. I had not at all anticipated that the candidates and teachers who messaged me would question my advice. This is when I realised that mine was a tiny voice in a very crowded marketplace. A forum where the loudest voices, with millions of followers, were often saying almost the opposite to me.

Exploring IELTS from the consumer's point of view over the last 5 years has given me an insight into the most common problems people face when preparing for IELTS, as well as the growing sense of confusion about the test. This book explains what I have learned in that time and contrasts this with what I know about IELTS from over 20 years' experience working with the test.

### Why is there so much confusion about IELTS?

If you google the term 'IELTS expert' you will immediately be given millions of sites to choose from. It seems reasonable to suggest that there is a direct link between the confusion about the test and the proliferation of sites offering 'expert advice'. Ironically, though we are surrounded by 'experts', it has never seemed more difficult to find genuine help.



This confusion appears to be a sign of our times, an age dominated by consumerism. Social media began as a simple communication tool but has thrived through advertising. As a result, such platforms now appear to see their users only as potential shoppers. This shift in thinking means that most 'free' information aims to grab our attention and try to sell us something.

### At 'Google University' the student is always right

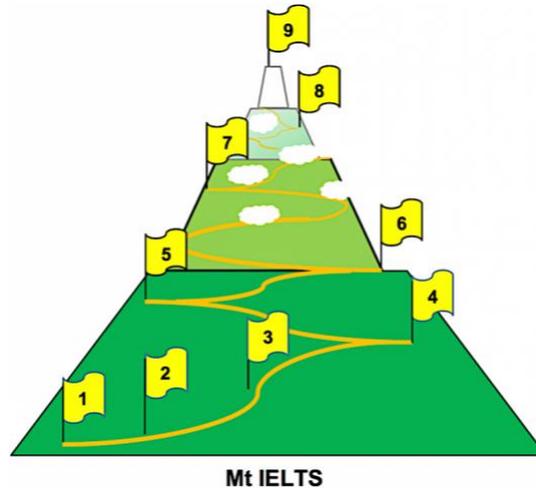
To google, you are a customer and, as the saying goes, 'the customer is always right'. Thus, if you demand a quick answer, the marketplace will respond. If a customer wants '*real test materials from recent tests*' then a download claiming to offer that will appear. Our social media 'news feed' quickly becomes filled with similar offers, and it should not be surprising that we eventually begin to believe in the idea of a quick and easy solution to a persistent problem.

We are often told that technology is becoming more 'intelligent' and 'learning' from humans through the way we use apps. So, every search 'teaches' the algorithm which magic promises might tempt you to click. As most sites are now focused on selling, surely such algorithms are learning only what consumers **want**, rather than what people actually **need**, and very little thought is given to whether or not these wishes can actually be fulfilled.

**KEY IDEA:** In my experience, most of the people who are confused about IELTS are using confusing materials that claim to be something they are not. If you are serious about IELTS and getting the score you need, you should not rely on Google University' to meet your needs.

### IELTS advantage or IELTS disadvantage?

If we compare IELTS to climbing a mountain, the journey to the top might look like this:



Many sites try to persuade you that they know some hidden secret about IELTS, something that will give you a special advantage and help you to 'jump' to the top. Some even claim to have 'actual tests' and use the fact that these materials appear different to the Cambridge test books as proof that '*Cambridge is hiding something from you*'.



Look for advice based on facts, not unrealistic marketing claims

It is little wonder that people so often ignore my small voice saying that there is no quick fix. The truth is that you can only get to the top of this mountain if you work on developing the language and skills you need to make genuine progress. As a sales pitch, this is rather weak, but that does not make it any less accurate. Trying to jump up a band is as futile as trying to jump up a mountain. In fact, rather than giving you any kind of advantage, it can work against you: you waste both time and energy, and when you land, you are in exactly the same place as before. My only proof of this is the thousands of people who have contacted me saying they feel stuck at the same band score.

### Three key problems in IELTS preparation

I have identified three key problems over the last 5 years. The first is language learning. Most people who contact me are self-study students who have never studied language at a high level before and

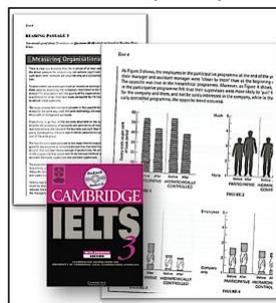
do not know how to work on or develop these skills. They are also time-poor and trying to juggle studying with work commitments. The IELTS test is expensive, so most people also want to pass it as quickly and cheaply as possible.

As is the norm nowadays, most people initially seek a solution to their problems online. With IELTS, this leads to the second key problem: the use of unreliable resources for test practice. The third issue is following the bad advice that often accompanies these materials and that promises to help you quickly reach a high level. This attempt to save time and money is a false economy because the materials and the accompanying advice do not reflect the real test, where the suggested 'tricks' do not work. Consequently, those who rely on these remain stuck at the same level, and ultimately spend more and more money re-taking the test.

This book aims to address these three issues. It will help you separate IELTS facts from IELTS fiction, recommend reliable resources, and show you how to study language at an advanced level, so you can finally achieve your IELTS goal.

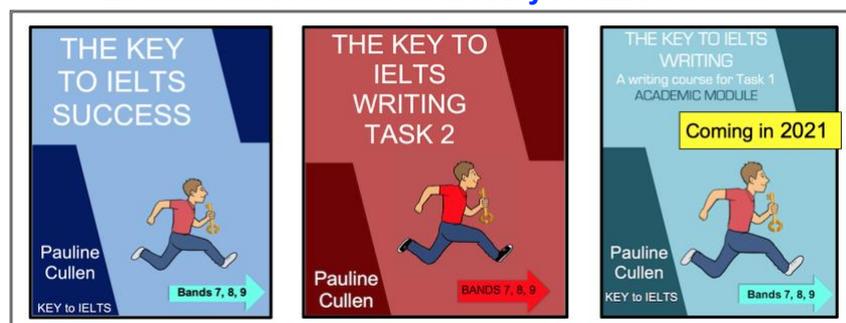
### Why is this book different from the advice found online?

What we write reflects our perspective and experiences in life. So, the experience I have had with language learning, language teaching, and test writing, all help to shape my books. I studied languages at university and qualified as a language teacher in 1985. I taught English as a Second Language until 1997 and was always drawn to teaching Cambridge exam classes. I became a Cambridge examiner in the early 1990s and taught IELTS classes when it was first introduced in Australia, in 1992. I became an IELTS examiner in 1993, and began writing test materials professionally in 1995. The image below shows my very first reading test passage.



When writing, you could say that I wear three hats: the hat of the language student, the language teacher, and the test writer. If you add this book to my other books about IELTS, or those of the writers I recommend in Chapter 10, then you will know everything that you need to know **about** and **for the real IELTS test**.

### Look for more books in the Key to IELTS Series



## Chapter 2

### Learning how to learn

#### Why is it so difficult to get the score you need in IELTS?

IELTS is a formal qualification, but it is much more than just a piece of paper. The right score acts as a key that can open the door to a new life. For those who do not achieve their target, the test represents a closed door blocking their way. IELTS has this power because many government bodies and universities rely on it as an accurate measure of English language. A high-level certificate tells the world that you have enough English to successfully study at university, or to work in a high-level professional capacity. This is why it is so important that the test is **valid**, **fair**, and **reliable**. As we will repeatedly see, it is equally important that the practice materials you use also have these qualities.

There is an interesting paradox with IELTS in that, although people take it because it is seen as the gold standard of language tests, many want to be able to get the score they need relatively easily. Clearly, if the test was easier, it would not have the status or value it currently has. If we could make gold easily, it would no longer be highly valued. Similarly, if everyone could quickly achieve band 7, the certificate would no longer open the doors you would like it to open.

#### Dealing with frustration

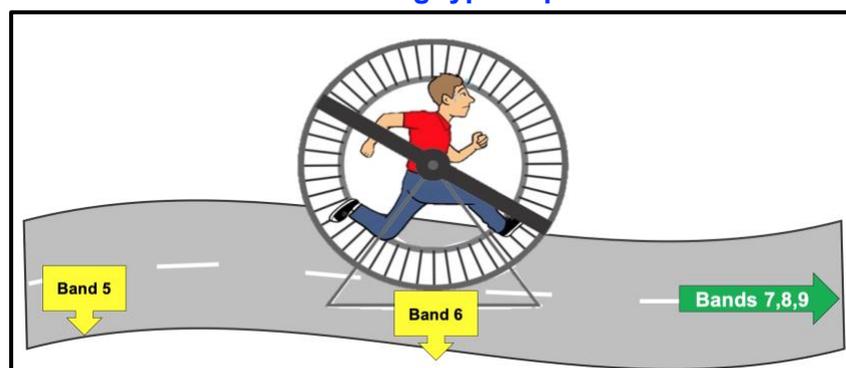
Some people take IELTS so often that they feel must eventually be rewarded with the score they need. When this does not happen, many feel tricked and frustrated. In his book *Black Box Thinking*, Matthew Syed says that, in situations like this, we have a 'deep instinct to find scapegoats' (p.13). In other words, it is natural to want to find someone or something to blame for the problem. Many people blame the test for their result; they are convinced that it must somehow be cheating them. In their minds, IELTS is the enemy, and the confusing and unfair test materials found online feed this idea. Although this mindset is understandable, it is both unhelpful and costly, because it leads people to take the test over and over in the belief that a mistake has been made and that this time they will get a different score. In my experience, most of the people who feel 'stuck' are at band 6 or 6.5.

#### How to break the cycle

It is important to see the IELTS test as an objective measuring system. If your skills have not improved, your test score will tell you that. No matter how many times you have already taken the test, it will simply measure your skills and give you a score. If you keep getting the same band score, it is important to respond to the problem in an academic way rather than taking it personally.

People often feel that, because they are practising, they *must* be getting somewhere. But the wrong type of practice keeps you stuck at the intermediate level and does not help you to advance.

**You could see the wrong type of practice like this:**



Although you are continually working, instead of moving forward, you just go around in circles. In *Black Box Thinking*, Syed refers to this idea as a ‘closed loop’, where ‘failure doesn’t lead to progress because information on errors and weaknesses is misinterpreted or ignored.’ (p.15) If you feel that you are ‘failing’ at IELTS, and blame the test, this can prevent you from addressing your problems. So, it is important to realise that a negative attitude towards the test can keep you stuck in this closed loop.

### Have you got a helpful attitude towards IELTS?

Unhelpful attitude:	Helpful attitude:
<p><i>‘I scored band 6 because:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>• I was unlucky</i></li> <li><i>• the examiner was unfriendly</i></li> <li><i>• the examiners in my country do not want us to pass’</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>‘I scored band 6.5 because I still have some problems with my writing / speaking (etc.) I’m working on those now.’</i></p>
<p><i>‘I practise with materials I find online.’</i></p>	<p><i>‘I only practise with authentic materials.’</i></p>
<p><i>‘I take the test each week – maybe next time I’ll be lucky.’</i></p>	<p><i>‘I’ve postponed my test until I feel my language skills have improved.’</i></p>
<p>(After being told how to study) <i>‘I don’t have time to do that, my test is next week.’</i></p>	<p>(After being told how to study) <i>‘Ok, I will try to do that.’</i></p>

### ‘I’m not good at writing, I’m not good at languages.’

After repeatedly failing to get the score they need, many people begin to doubt their ability to ever achieve it. This is perhaps why so many are tempted to initially look online for tricks and shortcuts. In fact, studies have shown that anyone can achieve a high level in any skill. You can read about some of this research in an excellent article from the *Harvard Business Review* called ‘The Making of an Expert’, and in another of Matthew Syed’s books called *Bounce*. One of the authors of the article is Anders Erikson, whose research into how we master a skill included the study of students at a violin school. He found that the difference between advanced violinists, intermediate violinists, and those at the lower levels, could be attributed to just one key factor: the number of hours they devoted to the right practice.

### Open loop thinking

To change from a ‘closed loop’ to an ‘open loop’, where real progress can be made, you need to first accept that there are mistakes in what you are doing, and then focus on fixing them. This book aims to help you *stop* going around in circles, *start* making genuine progress, and *finally get the score you need*. The most important piece of advice I can give you right now is this: if you have already booked another IELTS test, and the date is only a few weeks away, save your money and postpone it until you have read this book, and until you genuinely have the time to do the right type of practice and build the skills you need.

Key idea: If you continue to practise in the same way as always, you will continue to get the same result. Change your practice to see better results.

### Language Learning

When you learn a language, you are learning to **do** something, not learning facts **about** something. The different bands look deceptively close to each other, so it is not surprising that people develop unrealistic expectations about how quickly they will be able to jump from band 6 to band 7.

IELTS Band Scores	
Proficient	9
Advanced	8
	7
Intermediate	6
	5
Pre-intermediate	4
	3
Lower levels	2
	1

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the intermediate and advanced levels, which the following sport analogy may help to explain. When you first start to play a sport, it does not take long to learn the basics, and you can quickly reach a 'band 3 or 4' level. After a certain amount of time, you may even become good enough to reach a comfortable 'band 5' and play socially, or even join a 'band 6' amateur team. However, even if you continued to practise and play like this each week, you would not automatically progress to a professional level.

The reality is that most people stop making very much progress once they reach the intermediate level. Without special training, and the right focus, your level stabilises. It can feel as though your progress has plateaued, but this level is actually important in helping to consolidate your knowledge. If you are determined to reach a higher level, it is important to change something in your practice at this stage. Any sports player who wanted to become a professional would take a serious, systematic approach to building the necessary skills, and this is what you must do to achieve the advanced, professional levels of IELTS.

Key idea: IELTS bands 7, 8 and 9 should be seen as the advanced, professional levels of English language. You must change the way you approach the test, and your test practice, to achieve the higher bands.

### What is the right type of practice?

A story from my own language learning experience might help at this point. I started learning languages at high school, in England. As well as English, maths, and the sciences, I studied French, Spanish, and Latin, and did well in my O' level exams (now called GCSEs). In terms of IELTS, these exams are band 5 or 6: the intermediate level. In the last 2 years of high school, we had to choose three subjects to study at the Advanced level (Bands 7 to 8). I took French, Spanish, and English and assumed I would enjoy the same level of success as before. In my O' level classes, we had learned to speak and write about familiar topics like hobbies and family, and I rarely scored less than 10 out of 10 in any tests. But at the Advanced level, we had to read articles, listen to talks, and write essays on topics like pollution and crime, and I began to struggle.

Every week, we were given an essay to write. When the teacher handed back our essays, mine were full of red ink from her corrections and, for the first time, I was getting low marks. I approached my essay writing like this: I would look at the question, start writing about the topic, and look up words I did not know in my dictionary as I worked. Essentially, I was translating the sentences in my head from English to French. Even though I spent hours on this task, and felt I was working very hard, my low marks each week told me I was not making any progress. This continued for almost 12 months.

At the end of the year, I began studying for my exams by looking back at my essays. This is when I realised that I had repeated the same mistakes over and over again every week. One word in

particular, the word '*tambien*', was crossed out in every French essay, and in the margin, the teacher had written 'Spanish?' I was really confused when I saw this because I always said the word with a very nice French accent, not a Spanish one.

With the arrogance of youth, I even thought my teacher had made a mistake and checked the dictionary. Unfortunately, the teacher was right, '*tambien*' means 'also' in *Spanish*, not French. So, each week, for almost a year, I had been practising this word in my writing, and I had used it so often that it had become a part of my own version of French. This story is a good example of what we call 'fossilised errors.' In other words, mistakes that we practise so often that they become carved into our memory like an ancient fossil. At this point, I was still an intermediate-level learner, stuck at band 6, and I had been practising staying at that level for 12 months. In the vocabulary chapter, I will outline the changes I made to help me finally make real progress.

For teachers, an intermediate level class is very different to teaching either beginner or advanced classes. Both beginner and advanced students tend to be aware that there are gaps in their knowledge, while intermediate learners can be quite resistant to this idea. As a result, it can be a difficult stage, not only for teachers but also for students. This is because intermediate students must first *unlearn* what they feel sure they already know, which is often more difficult than learning something new.

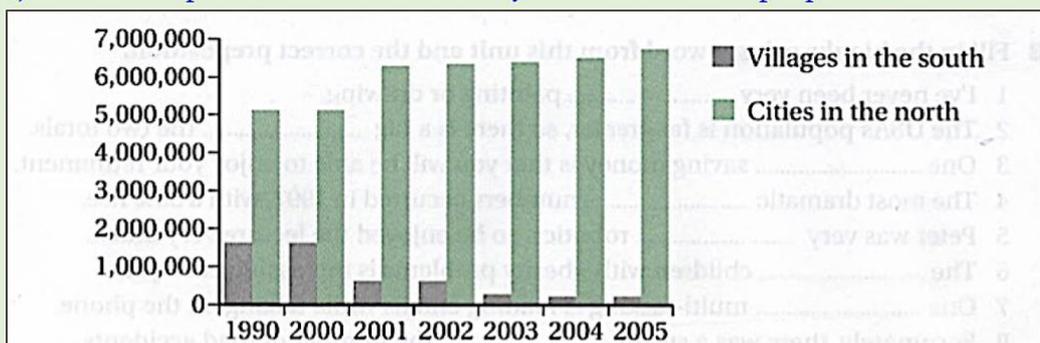
To show an intermediate level class that they **don't** know everything, teachers often use a 'Test – Teach – Test' approach. The teacher will first **test** the students to show them that they are making mistakes, **teach** the relevant language point, then **test** the students again to make sure they have understood. My [Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate](#) book takes this same approach to the most common mistakes made at bands 5 and 6 in IELTS writing.



If you want to know what fossilised errors you might have developed in English, I recommend my book 'Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate'. It deals with the most common mistakes made at the intermediate level in IELTS writing. People who use this book sometimes write to me and say 'Pauline, I think there is a mistake on page ...' In fact, they are just discovering their own fossilised errors!

Try the following exercise from Test 5, page 28 of [Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate](#) to see if you can identify any of your own 'fossilised errors' when using prepositions.

2) Find the 8 places in the text where you need to add a preposition:



The chart shows the number people moving between the villages in the south and the cities in the north in recent years. The main difference the two sets of figures is that the percentage people living in the south is decreasing steadily, while there has been a rise population figures for the northern cities. The biggest increase population in the northern cities occurred in 2001, and this corresponds with the biggest decrease the number people living in the southern village. Since 2002, the number inhabitants in both the north and the south has remained steady.

You can find the answers on my website: [www.keytoielts.com](http://www.keytoielts.com)

### Why test practice is not enough

If your IELTS preparation involves just doing tests, then you are stuck in a closed 'test – test – test' loop. In continually testing yourself, you are missing out a key stage: building the language skills that will help you to improve and progress.

In *Black Box Thinking*, Matthew Syed tells the story of famous football player David Beckham. Beckham is particularly admired for his ability to kick the ball in a way that makes it curve as it flies through the air and score a goal. He was not born with this ability, nor did he learn the skill by practising a few times a week; even more importantly, he did not acquire it by playing in football matches. Instead, as a young boy, Beckham practised this same kick day and night. He failed thousands of times, but he was very determined and kept practising until he could hit the net almost every time. 'The Making of an Expert' refers to this type of practice as 'deliberate practice', in other words, deliberately focusing on a skill you need to improve, and where you know you have a weakness. Try to see your IELTS test result as a useful tool to help you identify your areas of weakness - the areas where you now need to focus your time and effort.

Key idea: Not all practice is useful. In a 'closed loop', you are practising the same mistakes and stay at the same level. In an 'open loop', you accept your mistakes and the gaps in your knowledge and work on them in a systematic and deliberate way to improve your score.

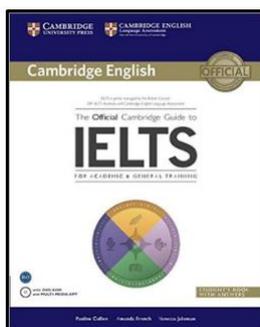
### Marginal gains

For many, reaching the higher bands in IELTS can seem like an impossible dream. To turn the dream into a reality, it may be helpful to see it in a more concrete way, for example, as a project or task that needs to be completed. According to Syed, the best way to achieve a big goal is to break it down into smaller, more manageable parts. If you can achieve a marginal gain in each of these separate parts, added together, the small gains will add up to a much greater improvement overall. If your target is a particular IELTS score, you should begin by analysing the various parts of the test so that you can separate these into smaller, more manageable steps or goals.

## What skills do I need to learn for IELTS?

As IELTS is a language test, the elements that you must break your target into are all components of language. In other words, the core skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking, and the key language building blocks of vocabulary and grammar. But if we look even more closely at the different parts of the test, and the individual test questions, we can break these broad macro skills into even smaller parts: the micro skills.

This is exactly what I did to write the skills section of *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*. I analysed each part of the test, and each of the different test questions, to identify the different micro skills being tested. The book describes and explains the skills you need to master in order to achieve the best score you can.



Although the idea that you must study language to improve your IELTS score seems a simple one, I am amazed how often this advice is ignored. This may be because many free materials do not require the range of language skills you need for IELTS, so people dismiss it as a waste of time. Many also seem to think, 'I've *already learned the language, now I just need to learn a few tricks for the test.*' Nevertheless, your current test result is telling you that you still have a language problem, so this is where your focus must be. The reality is that, if you do not acquire band 7 language skills, you will not score band 7 – this is how a *reliable* testing system works.

### **Key idea:**

You will only achieve Band 7 if you acquire band 7 language skills.

If you do not prepare for the exam by practising band 7 skills, you will remain stuck at a lower band.

To achieve band 7, you must:

1) Identify the skills needed for band 7

2) Master those skills

3) Show band 7 skills in the test

This is where the biggest problems can occur

The steps outlined on the previous page may seem straightforward, but confusion and bad advice about the test lead to problems from step 1. This means that any effort at step 2 is wasted, and step 3 is not achieved. As we will repeatedly see, one of the main reasons people fail to correctly identify the skills needed is the use of test practice materials that do not reflect the *real* test. In the next chapters, I will discuss the skills you need to show in the test, the common myths that can lead to bad advice, and the best way to approach deliberate practice in order to make genuine progress in each skill.

## Becoming an independent learner

Many of the people who contact me are self-study students, often living in places where they do not

have easy access to resources or teachers. Nevertheless, even if you are studying in an IELTS class, with expert IELTS teachers, you will only achieve a high level if you take responsibility for your own learning. At the lower levels, teachers tend to 'spoon-feed' information to their students, giving them everything they need to learn. But, at the higher levels, it is important to be an independent learner and learn more than your teacher can give you in a lesson. This book will show you how to do that.

Now that we have a broad understanding of the problem, we can begin to look in more detail at how to solve it. You will find that the same advice applies to students preparing for either the Academic or the General Training modules of the test.

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## Chapter 3 Vocabulary for IELTS

### Understanding vocabulary in IELTS

#### What type of vocabulary do you need for IELTS?

Vocabulary is so fundamental to language that it has an impact on every part of the test. I am often asked which words to learn for IELTS and the answer can only come from a careful study of the test itself. Once you understand what the test is looking for, you know what to learn, and you can start filling any gaps in your knowledge.

The IELTS test assesses your ability to successfully study at a high level, or to hold a high-level professional role. So, the language skills you need to show are the language skills required for those situations. These can be summarised as follows:

#### Academic Module

Skills needed for Academic study	Where is this tested?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding passages containing descriptive language, academic theories, and complex ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The reading test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding people talking in formal and less formal situations, and on a range of general and academic topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The listening test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describing familiar situations and explaining your own views and ideas on more general topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Speaking test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing a summary of key data or visual information</li> <li>• discussing an issue and explaining your own views and ideas in a formal written essay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing Task 1</li> <li>• Writing Task 2</li> </ul>

#### General Training Module

Skills needed for professional success	Where is this tested?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding short texts containing descriptive language, longer work- or course-related texts, and general interest passages explaining complex ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The reading test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding people talking in formal and less formal situations, and on a range of general and academic topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The listening test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describing familiar situations and explaining your own views and ideas on more general topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Speaking test</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing a formal or informal letter</li> <li>• discussing an issue and explaining your own views and ideas in a formal written essay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing Task 1</li> <li>• Writing Task 2</li> </ul>

Your band score is directly related to how well you can complete these tasks. It is your language skills, and in particular your vocabulary, that will make the tasks easy or difficult for you, and that will give you the flexibility, accuracy, and precision you need to show.

## The Academic Word List (AWL)

Dr Averil Coxhead produced a list of the most commonly used words in academic texts called the Academic Word list (AWL). The list is freely available and you can find a link in the resources chapter. However, Dr Coxhead herself says that the AWL, 'does not include words that are in the most frequent 2000 words of English.' To reach a high band, your IELTS vocabulary should be wide enough to allow you to write or talk in a precise way about any topic. This is what is referred to as 'flexibility' in the descriptors for band 7 and above. So, although it is a wonderful resource, learning the AWL alone will not be enough for IELTS, because the words related to specific topics are not included in this list.

Key idea: Your vocabulary should be wide enough to allow you to write or talk in a precise way about any topic. The words related to specific topics, are not contained in the Academic Word List (AWL).

## Common problems in IELTS vocabulary

### Active vocabulary

We can understand far more language than we are able to actively produce. So your passive vocabulary, which helps you to understand reading and listening texts, is much larger than your active vocabulary – the words you are able to produce when you are speaking and writing. A similar idea applies to native speakers: in general, we do not *actively* use all of the words in the English language.

This idea is an important one because the most common vocabulary problems I see in band 6 and 6.5 stem from an attempt to use vocabulary that a native speaker would rarely or never use. I often see old-fashioned words or phrases that I would only expect to find in legal or political documents, or literature, words such as *decry, aforementioned, bellicose, the undersigned*. I have highlighted the phrases that may be causing this problem in this extract from the public version of the band descriptors for writing.

Band	Lexical resource
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural sophisticated control of lexical features</li></ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings</li><li>• Skilfully <b>uses uncommon lexical items</b> but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation</li><li>• Produces rare errors in spelling / word formation</li></ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision</li><li>• Attempts to <b>use less common vocabulary</b> with some awareness of style and collocation</li><li>• May produce occasional errors</li></ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task</li><li>• Attempts to <b>use less common vocabulary</b> but with some inaccuracy</li><li>• Makes some errors in spelling but they do not impede communication</li></ul>

A more precise reading of the descriptors reveals that several key ideas are being ignored. To demonstrate this, answer the following questions. Write **True** if the statements agree with the

information, **False** if the statements contradict the information, or **Not Given** if there is no information on this.

1. Band 9 candidates mainly use uncommon words in their writing.
2. You must use as many uncommon words as possible to score band 7 in IELTS.

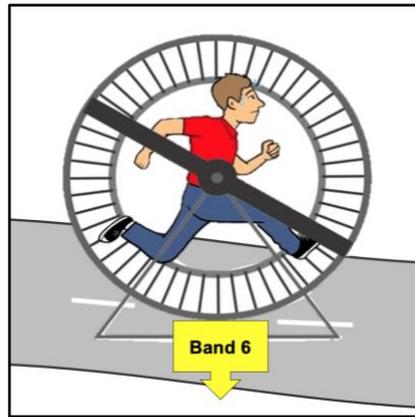
In the reading chapter, you will learn that 'Not Given' means these statements cannot be verified using this source. Both of these claims are 'Not given' in the official IELTS band descriptors, yet they reflect the most common assumptions about IELTS vocabulary. In the next image, I have highlighted key information that should not be ignored.

Band	Lexical resource
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses <b>a wide range of vocabulary with very natural sophisticated control</b> of lexical features</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses <b>a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings</b></li> <li>• <b>Skilfully uses uncommon lexical items</b> but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation</li> <li>• Produces rare errors in spelling / word formation</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision</b></li> <li>• <b>Attempts to use less common vocabulary with some awareness of style and collocation</b></li> <li>• May produce occasional errors</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task</li> <li>• <b>Attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy</b></li> <li>• Makes some errors in spelling but they do not impede communication</li> </ul>

As you can see, the band descriptors do not state that less common vocabulary *must* be used, though they *do* tell us that, at bands 6 and 7, candidates try to use such words. More precisely, the descriptors tell us that a band 7 candidate can do this '**with some awareness of style and collocation**', but at band 6, these words are used '**with some inaccuracy**'. It is this second phrase that most accurately describes the vocabulary I see in band 6 and 6.5 writing. Although the descriptors mention 'less common' and 'uncommon' vocabulary, this does not mean that you should use words that native speakers would rarely use.

### Band 7 – 'uses less common words with some awareness of style'

As we saw in chapter 1, there are many sites that claim they can help you to '*jump a band*,' or give you some sort of advantage. Often this is done by showing you lists of words to learn with the promise that these will 'boost your score'. According to advice like this the examiner can be very easily fooled into thinking you are a higher band. Unfortunately, the lists of words and idioms are presented out of context, and so you cannot judge whether they are appropriate to use in the test. Words like '*bellicose*' are extremely rare in English usage, so using them in IELTS means you are not showing the 'awareness of style' that is needed for band 7.



If you are putting a lot of effort into learning words that are likely to keep you at band 6, you are not only wasting time, but you are also making your IELTS journey a lot more difficult and more expensive than it needs to be. What is more, this approach to language learning means that you have only a surface-level knowledge of large quantities of words and phrases, when what is required is a deeper level understanding of how and when to use the right words.

### What does C1 – C2 mean?

When I advise people to use simpler words in their writing, they often insist that ‘complex’ words are necessary for a high score. This could come from a misunderstanding with regard to level and how language learning is measured. The Common European Framework (CEFR) is an accepted yardstick used to compare the levels of different language tests. This table compares IELTS and the CEFR scale:

CEFR		IELTS Bands
Proficient user	C2	8.5 - 9
	C1	7 - 7.5
Independent user	B2	5.5 - 6.5
	B1	4 - 5
Basic user	A2	3 - 3.5
	A1	1 - 2

You may have seen this combination of letters and numbers (A1 – C2) used in dictionaries, like this from the *Cambridge online dictionary*:

**CEFR**  
level

➔

**easy**

adjective • UK 🔊 /'i:zi/ US 🔊 /'i:zi/

easy adjective (NOT DIFFICULT)

★ **A1** needing little effort:  
*an easy exam*

This dictionary entry tells us that the word ‘easy’ can be understood by candidates at level A1, but this does *not* mean that only candidates at the A1 level will *use* it. Bands 7 to 9 are the equivalent of C1 – C2 on the CEFR scale, which some people mistakenly take to mean that, ‘*You must use C1 and C2 words to score bands 7 to 9*’. In reality, native speakers do not talk and write using *only* level C1 and C2 words, if they did, it would be almost impossible to understand them; a native speaker is

just as likely to use the word 'easy' as a candidate at the A1 level. Your language level builds up gradually as you acquire more and more vocabulary and become more and more skilled at using it to express complex ideas. Reaching the C1 – C2 level means that you have mastered the language used at levels A1 – B2 and can also understand language at C1 and C2, using it *when*, and *if*, necessary – just as native speakers do.

**'Short words are too basic'**

Another misconception about vocabulary is that you should use as many long words as possible. In fact, one site I have seen assesses their students' writing based on how many letters there are in each word in an essay, and gives feedback such as '*more syllables needed*'. Look at the following list of words. Can you guess the level of the words on the CEFR scale (A1-C2)?

Words	CEFR Level
additionally	
destruction	
household	
effective	
produce	
able	
age	
flat	
absolute	

Try to match the words to the correct level using this quiz. You will see a green tick (✓) next to each word you match correctly. You may be surprised at the answers, which you can check after the quiz.

**Answers:**

Words	CEFR Level (A1 – C2)
additionally	B2
destruction	B2
household	B2
effective	B2
produce	B1
able	C2 (when it means 'clever')
age	C2 (e.g. 'with age')
flat	C2 (e.g. in 'a flat tyre')
absolute	B2

As you can see, even 'short' words can have a high level, because it is your ability to use and combine words in a skillful way that creates levels C1 and C2, not how many letters the words contain. Thus, rather than knowing more 'long' words, candidates at the higher level have a deeper knowledge of *all* of the words they know, and are able to skillfully use them to help make their language clear and precise.

**Idioms and collocation**

I am often asked, '*Is it ok to use idioms in the writing test?*' and '*Should I use collocation in my speaking test?*' This shows a lack of understanding of what is meant by idiomatic language and

collocation, so let us begin by explaining these terms.

An idiom is a phrase that has a special meaning that cannot be guessed from the individual words alone. Some phrasal verbs are a good example of this. For example, 'turn up' can be used in an idiomatic way to mean 'arrive', which we could not guess from the words 'turn' and 'up'. Similarly, the phrase 'at the end of the day' can be used literally, to mean 'when the day ends', and idiomatically, to mean 'ultimately'. Idiomatic language can be found in any type of English, but it is a particularly common feature of informal spoken language.

It is impossible to judge from a list whether an idiom is formal enough for the writing test, very informal (perhaps too informal even for the speaking test), or so old-fashioned that it is no longer used. Thus, again we can see that simply learning lists of idioms to add to your writing or speaking will not change your band score. This will only happen if you take an advanced-level approach to your learning. You need to go beyond such lists and learn how and when it is appropriate to use idiomatic language, and then show this through your use of it in the test.

Collocation refers to words that we naturally use together. As you can imagine, this is an important part of *all* of your vocabulary, whether you are speaking or writing. At the advanced level, when you are learning a new piece of vocabulary, you should always aim to learn any other words that are commonly used alongside it. To see how this differs from idiomatic language, consider these examples:

1. 'Preparing for IELTS is *hard work*.'
2. 'Preparing for IELTS is *difficult work*.'

The first shows a good use of collocation, while the second does not (we do not naturally use the words 'difficult + work' together in this context). The meaning is clear from the words used, so this is not an example of idiomatic language. However, there are times when collocation *does* create idiomatic language. For example, in the phrase 'a heavy smoker' we cannot guess from the word 'heavy' that this means someone who smokes a lot. I recommend Michael Swan's book, *Practical English Usage*, if you would like to learn more about this (pages 243 – 244).

### [Deliberate practice for vocabulary learning](#)

At the advanced levels of language learning, when it comes to vocabulary, idioms, and collocation, it helps to see these used in a natural context so that you can understand how and when native speakers use them. Compile your own lists as you come across phrases in an IELTS reading or listening passage. And remember, you will only show a band 7 or 8 use of vocabulary when you can use this type of language accurately, at the appropriate time, and with 'an awareness of style.'

**Key idea:** In IELTS, you are not assessed on the length or complexity of your words but on the way that you use and combine them. Learn vocabulary that will help you to be flexible, accurate, and precise.

### **Is there a special list of words to learn for IELTS?**

There is no special list of words for IELTS. My two vocabulary books and apps contain words that are in the top 3000 most commonly used words as well as the most common academic words (the AWL). To help me choose the words for these books, I first compiled a list of common IELTS topics. Then, I read and listened to a wide variety of materials and made a note of the words and phrases that native speakers naturally use to discuss these topics in a serious way. I selected the words I thought would be the most useful to learn and created exercises and test materials to help you focus on them.

## Learning vocabulary from listening and reading materials

Each of my Vocabulary for IELTS books has 25 units. Rather than simply giving you lists of words to learn, each unit uses the context of IELTS reading and listening passages to teach you the most relevant vocabulary on each topic. There are exercises to help you understand how and when to use the words, and there is a clear focus on collocation. Studies have shown that, if we have to work to arrive at an answer, we are more likely to remember the information later on. This extract is from unit 1 of *Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS*. Notice how the exercises train you to think in an advanced way about learning language.

### 1 Growing up

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**2.4** A lot of words connected with families and relationships can also be used in a different context. Complete the sentences with a word from the box.

- 1 The wolf is a member of the dog .....
- 2 The company decided to ..... a new approach to staff recruitment.
- 3 The study found a strong ..... between a lack of friends and sibling rivalry.
- 4 Whether you think the price of goods is high is ..... to the amount of money you earn.
- 5 Studies have shown that stress in adulthood can be ..... to an unhappy childhood.
- 6 Good teachers identify the talents of their students and ..... them.
- 7 This evidence seems to ..... with the findings from previous studies.
- 8 I am writing in ..... to the job advertisement in yesterday's paper.

adopt	nurture	relationship
conflict	related	relative
family	relation	

**3.1** COMPOUND NOUNS Match the words in box A with the words in box B to make 10 compound nouns. You will need to use some words more than once.

<b>A</b> active    family    maternal    sibling    stable extended    immediate    physical    striking	..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....
<b>B</b> family    instinct    rivalry    upbringing gatherings    resemblance    role	..... ..... ..... .....

**3.2** 1b Think about your answers to these questions. Then listen to a student's answers and tick the phrases you hear in 3.1.

- 1 Tell me about your family.
- 2 Who are you most similar to in your family?
- 3 What do you think it takes to be a good parent?

**3.3** 1b Listen again and find the words that match these definitions.

- 1 caring and supportive .....
- 2 the emotional connection between people or places .....
- 3 similar .....
- 4 your nature or character .....
- 5 determined to an unreasonable degree .....
- 6 handed down through a family .....

**3.4** Now practise answering the questions fully. Record your answers, if possible.

**Error warning**

Note the following common errors: *I am writing in relation to/with your job advertisement.* NOT *in-relation-of-...* . *My relationship with my parents is very strong.* NOT *My-relation-with-my-parents-...*

**Vocabulary note**

Note these collocations with the word *relationship*.  
 Verbs: **build** a relationship, **develop** a relationship, **establish** a relationship, **form** a relationship, **have** a relationship  
 Adjectives: a **close** relationship, a **long-standing** relationship, a **working** relationship, a **successful** relationship  
 Prepositions: a relationship **with** someone, a relationship **between** two things or people (NOT *relationship-to-someone*)

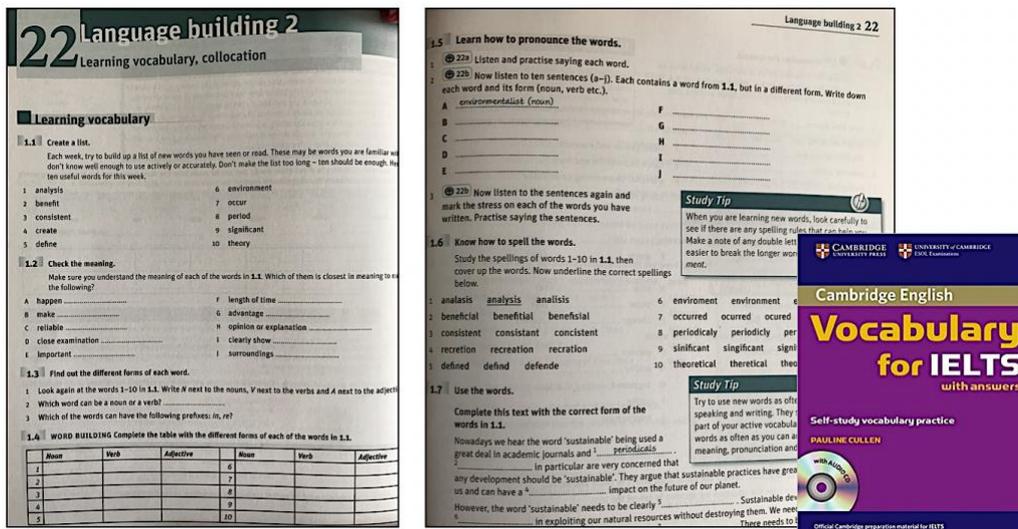
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## Building your active vocabulary

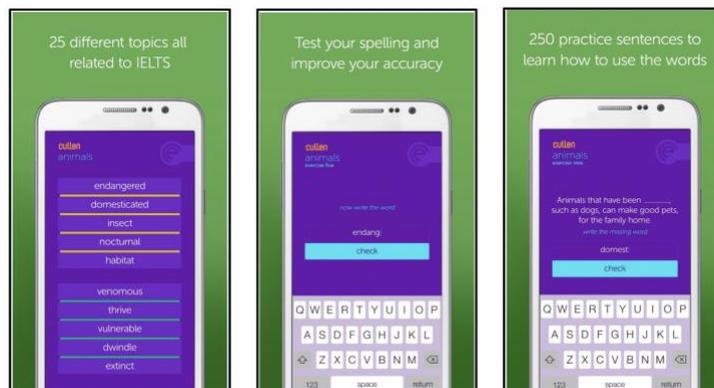
When I was a language student myself and stuck at band 6, I realised that I had stopped expanding my active vocabulary at the level of familiar topics, such as family and hobbies. As a result, I had to constantly rely on a dictionary when writing essays about more general topics like ways of dealing with crime and punishment. In order to make progress, I began to systematically learn the language that I needed to be able show in my advanced level tests, and that would allow me to discuss a wider variety of topics in a serious way.

I began by writing down the words I often had to look up when I was reading and writing. This helped to identify the gaps in my knowledge. Then, I would organise the words into topic lists, which helped me to remember them. Next, I would try to learn the words on the bus to school. I limited myself to learning about 10 words at a time, which gave me a realistic goal, and I would practise saying the words in my head as well as learning the meaning and the spelling. I also made a note of sentences containing the words, so that I had a context to help me remember any useful collocations. In this way, I learned to recognise them, say them, spell them, and use them accurately.

Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS has two units devoted to showing you how to learn vocabulary in this way.



And this is the same learning system that I used in my vocabulary teaching apps. There are ten stages teaching you the pronunciation, the meaning, the spelling, as well as practising speed reading, recognising the words when you hear them, and using the words in a sentence.



The aim of the apps is to help increase your active vocabulary and the speed that you can recall words when you need them in the test. To choose the words for each level, I drew on my experience as an examiner, and focused on the language that I know band 6 candidates struggle to produce and that candidates at band 7 and 8 can generally use with ease.

### Using context to help you remember

Learning vocabulary in the context of a reading or listening passage helps to show you the style and correct usage of a word, but it also has another benefit: it gives you a mental image that helps you recall the word when you need it. To show how this works, imagine you are writing a task 2 essay and trying to remember a word that means 'too much traffic on the roads'. To remember it, you might think back to when you used it in a previous essay, and mentally picture yourself writing it. Or, you could see yourself reading the word in a passage and looking it up in a dictionary, or watching your teacher write it on the board.

You may remember the word slowly at first, and the thoughts in your head may progress like this: '*I think it was con... something... con... con...congest...Hmm, I remember the teacher said it rhymed with 'suggestion'...congestion!*' Once you have remembered a word in this way, you will recall it a lot sooner the next time you want to use it. We can remember something more easily when we have to work at getting the answer instead of just being given the information. Studies have also shown that active use helps us to retain information. Thus, each time you *use* new words in your writing and speaking helps to carve them even more deeply into your memory. Eventually, you will be able to produce them fluently and without pausing to think. My vocabulary books and apps are based on these learning principles.

### Developing an awareness of style

Remember, to score band 7 or above, you must show an 'awareness of style and collocation'. If you are learning lists of words, you will need to do further research to find out if the 'style' of these words is relevant to IELTS. Learning lists of words alone is like a cook buying lots of herbs and spices, and then using them without first finding out if they are savoury, sweet, or spicy. The band 6.5 essays I see generally put the focus on using as many long words as possible. In fact, candidates at this level often write three words when one is enough. For example, 'The consequences of this are **devastating, calamitous and desolating.**' This is a little like our cook thinking, '*This spice tastes good, so adding more will make my dish taste even better.*' A band 8 or 9 candidate would simply write: '**The consequences of this can be devastating.**'

A further problem with learning 'complex' words is that, like a very hot spice, they tend to have an extreme effect. Using an extreme word at the wrong time makes your writing less precise. Typical words like this are 'plunge', 'soar', or 'controversial'. These words *are* 'less common', but you will only impress the examiner if you use them with an awareness of their precise meaning. In other words, if a number in the data does actually **drop suddenly and sharply** (plunge); or **rise rapidly, and impressively** (soar); or if the topic in your task 2 question does **cause very strong disagreement** among people (controversial). A skilled cook combines the right ingredients in a subtle and effective way to give a balanced flavour. Similarly, a good writer combines the right words, in the right way, to create a clear and balanced essay.

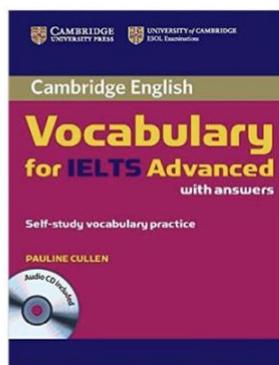
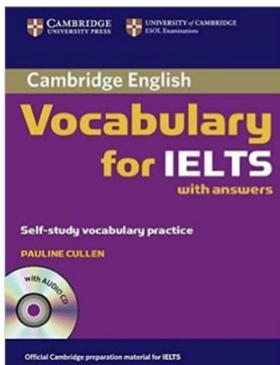
This is one situation where google *can* be your friend. To find out how and when a native speaker would use the words and phrases you are learning, type it into a search engine with quotation marks around it. If you cannot find a native speaker using the phrase in a formal or semi-formal situation, then you should not waste your time learning it. When doing this, you may need to ignore many mentions in websites aimed at teaching IELTS – if the words or phrases are not commonly used in

the real world, the tone or style are unlikely to be appropriate for the test.

### Final tips

- Don't waste time learning very informal or very technical words that have limited use. Learn words you are most likely to need to use yourself in the test – the words and phrases in my books and apps have been chosen specially for this purpose.
- Don't think about quantities, aim for a deeper meaning of the words you learn.
- Learn vocabulary in context not just from lists – pay attention when you are reading and listening and make a note of words and phrases you often notice.
- Be aware of gaps in your active vocabulary (when speaking and writing) and try to fill them – learn to pronounce and spell the words, learn collocation, and use the words or phrases in a variety of ways.
- To understand 'style', notice when and how native speakers use the words you are learning. If you cannot easily find a native speaker using the words in a formal situation, then do not waste your time learning it.
- To improve your collocation, chunk words together rather than learning them in isolation.
- Set aside a regular amount of time each day to work on vocabulary – even 5 minutes can be helpful. With my apps, you can complete 10 exercises, learning 5 new words, in this time.
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### My IELTS vocabulary books and teaching apps help build your active vocabulary



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## Chapter 4 Grammar for IELTS

### Understanding grammar in IELTS

#### How is grammar tested in IELTS?

IELTS does not have a separate paper that tests you on grammar. Nevertheless, like vocabulary, it has an impact on all parts of the test, from your ability to understand reading passages in a precise way, to your ability to explain your own ideas clearly. If we see the words that you know as your ingredients, then grammar could be compared to the 'cooking skills' that help you to alter and combine these to create meaningful sentences. It is the combination of a wide vocabulary and good grammatical skills that make your ideas clear, accurate, precise, and help you to reach a high score in IELTS.

CEFR		IELTS Bands
Proficient user	C2	8.5 - 9
	C1	7 - 7.5
Independent user	B2	5.5 - 6.5
	B1	4 - 5
Basic user	A2	3 - 3.5
	A1	1 - 2

Language at these levels is clear, accurate and precise

### Common problems

#### Creating 'complex' sentences

As with cooking, once you have a good knowledge of the basics, you can gradually develop more sophisticated skills. Just as you cannot skip basic cooking techniques to become a good chef, you cannot skip language levels A2 to B2 and jump to level C1, which is what many people try to do. The result is a confusing mix of B1 and B2 language with some learned 'complex' phrases mixed in. Success is achieved when you can consistently produce the same level of language. You cannot trick the examiner into believing you are a band 7 or 8 candidate by simply adding some 'high-level' structures to your writing. As we saw with vocabulary, it is your mastery of A1-B2 level structures that will help you achieve band 7 or above, not your attempts to use C1-C2 structures.

**Key idea:** Success is achieved when you can consistently produce the same level of language. You cannot trick the examiner into believing you are a band 7 candidate by just adding some 'high-level' structures to your writing.

#### What are complex structures?

If we look at the descriptors for Grammatical range and accuracy, we can see that candidates at bands 7 to 9 make few errors, and use a variety of complex structures. But what do we mean by 'complex structures'?

Band	Grammatical range and accuracy
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors only occur as 'slips'</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a wide range of structures</li> <li>• The majority of sentences are error-free</li> <li>• Makes only very occasional errors or appropriacies</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Uses a variety of complex structures</b></li> <li>• Produces frequent error-free sentences</li> <li>• Has good control of grammar and punctuation, but may make <b>a few errors</b></li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a mix of simple and complex structures</li> <li>• Makes some <b>errors</b> in grammar and punctuation but <b>they rarely reduce communication</b></li> </ul>

When we first learn a language, we form very basic sentences:

I like apples.

I like bananas.

I don't like oranges.

We then learn to join these together, in a simple way:

I like apples and I like bananas.

I like apples but I don't like oranges.

As we progress, we learn to express the same ideas in more complex ways:

Although I like most fruit, I don't really enjoy eating oranges.

This is now a complex sentence. Of course, in the writing test, you are not going to be asked to write about something as simple as your likes and dislikes. Instead, the topic and question will be complex, and so it will force you to write and explain much more complex ideas, like this:

*Although fresh fruit and vegetables have greater health benefits, many people would rather eat fast food.*

Candidates at bands 3 to 5 will struggle to communicate ideas like this because they have a basic knowledge of language and are most confident expressing familiar ideas. As they are limited to using words like *and*, *but*, *so*, and *because*, their sentence structures tend to be repetitive. On the other hand, at the band 7 to 9 levels, candidates can skillfully connect their ideas through the accurate use of a variety of connectors such as: *although*, *despite*, *thus*, *in contrast*, *as a result*, and *consequently*.

High-level candidates can also accurately and effectively use tenses and verbs to make it clear whether they are discussing a general fact, or a possible, probable, or hypothetical situation. They can explain the causes and possible effects of something, and they can use pronouns to link ideas without repeating key words or confusing the reader. Accuracy and clarity in discussing ideas like this will naturally create '**a variety of complex structures**'.

In the gap between these two stages, band 6 to 6.5, candidates think in a mechanical way about language. These candidates often feel frustrated because they believe they have already made a great deal of progress. One recently told me, '*You don't understand, last year I didn't even know about the conditional.*' But candidates at this level are generally unable to explain complex concepts like those listed above without thinking about the mechanics of language. In the writing chapter, I compare this to learner drivers who are still focused on the controls and pedals their feet must learn to operate. When you can focus on clearly communicating your ideas, automatically using the appropriate tenses and structures that help achieve this, then you will have achieved a high band.

## Complex + Complex = Complicated

Many of the band 6.5 examples I see contain very long sentences that sometimes run over three lines of the page. This is because people mistakenly believe you must use as many long, complex structures as possible to achieve a high band. In fact, this can lower your score, because the resulting sentences make your ideas difficult to follow. You will see an example of this in the writing task 2 chapter. As with vocabulary, your grammatical skill is not measured in quantities, or by the length of your sentences, but by your ability to explain ideas clearly and connect them together logically. This means that there is a link between grammatical accuracy, and coherence and cohesion. In other words, how easy it is for the examiner to understand and follow your ideas.

If you aim to explain complex ideas in a complex way, the result is complicated language. This is like trying to climb up the IELTS mountain while performing gymnastics; your efforts hold you back rather than helping you to climb higher. Your first priority in IELTS should always be to explain your ideas as clearly as you can, not to hide your ideas with confusing grammatical gymnastics.

**Key idea:** If you explain complex ideas using long, complex sentences, your ideas become complicated and difficult to follow. Make the examiner's job easier, not more difficult; a confused examiner means a lower score.

## Deliberate Practice for IELTS grammar

Like vocabulary, grammar plays an important role in establishing the tone and style of your writing. For the academic module, the official IELTS website tells us you must write 'in a *formal* style,' while in General training, you must be able to write in a formal, semi-formal, or informal way. Let us consider the impact grammar has in different parts of the test.

### Writing task 1

In Academic Writing Task 1, you need to summarise and describe visual information. Doing this 'in a formal style', means that your writing should be impersonal. So, it is not appropriate to use personal pronouns such as, 'We can see...' or 'I can see...' Similarly, when describing a process, you should write, '*The cereal is packed into boxes and sold*' rather than '*Someone packs the cereal into boxes and sells them.*' Be aware of tenses when describing changes over time, for example in a graph. Look at good model answers to see how tenses are used accurately in this way. Again, the **Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS** and **Common Mistakes at IELTS intermediate** have exercises to help you work on this.

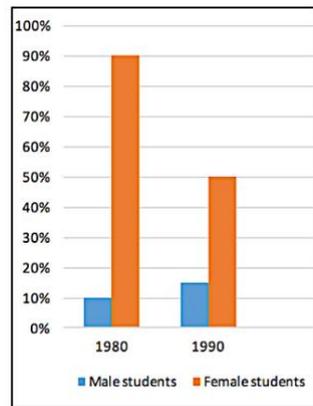
For General Training task 1 you need to write a letter. Grammar plays an important part when it comes to explaining *what happened / has happened / is happening / you would like to happen*. So GT candidates should also pay particular attention to verbs and tenses.

### Being precise

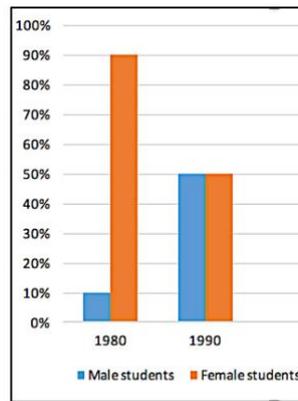
Grammar can help you to be more precise, or it can present an accuracy problem if you are not aware of the difference that even a small change in language can make. For example, consider the impact the underlined prepositions have on the meaning of the following sentences:

1. In 1980, 10% of students were male, but in 1990, this figure rose by 50%.
2. In 1980, 10% of students were male, but in 1990, this figure rose to 50%.

Can you match the sentences to the correct image (Figure A and B) below?



**Figure A**



**Figure B**

Sentence 1 matches image A. So, if you were to write this in a summary of the data in image B, then you would not be precise and accurate in the way that you describe the information. In General Training, similar grammatical problems can make your writing imprecise or confusing. Your manager would be confused if you wrote, 'Our team was extremely successful last year and sales *rose by 50% from 2%*'. Hopefully you can see from these examples that practice for GT is useful for academic students and vice versa.

### Using the correct style and tone in task 1

The verbs and tenses you use also have an impact on the tone of your writing. For example, as Academic writing task 1 must be impersonal, it is not appropriate to give advice, or your own opinions. Look at these examples and decide which one is **not** appropriate.

1. The data shows the changes the government **should make to** energy prices.
2. The data shows the changes the government **has made** to energy prices.

(Answer: Sentence 1 is giving an opinion, so is not appropriate for the Academic module.)

With General Training, it is very important to use a tone that is appropriate for the situation and the person you are addressing. Look at these examples and decide which one has the correct tone for a formal letter to your boss:

1. Give us better equipment so we can work more efficiently.
2. If employees had better equipment, we would be able to work more efficiently.

(Answer: Both sentences are grammatically correct but the first one is too direct and so less polite. The tone of the second sentence is more appropriate for a letter to your boss.)

**Key idea:** Grammar has an impact on how precise your writing is and the tone of your writing.

### Grammar and coherence

As I mentioned earlier, grammatical accuracy can also affect the coherence of your writing. Grammatical problems make the reader confused and prevent us from fully understanding an idea. Compare the following two versions of this sentence:

1. *Figure predicted rising from 2020 to 2025.* (incorrect and confusing)
2. *This figure is predicted to rise between the years 2020 and 2025.* (correct and clear)

An example from my Facebook page can help illustrate this problem further. One of my followers asked me which of the following sentences was correct:

1. *Have the third-year term started, it will no longer be too long for my commencement day to come.*
2. *Has the third-year term of bachelor degree started, it will no longer be too long for my commencement day to come.*

I was confused about the meaning, so I had to ask some more questions to check what he was trying to say. The part of the sentence I found the most confusing was: '*no longer too long for my commencement day.*' My follower explained that he was actually trying to practise using the conditional to be able to create 'complex' sentences in the writing test.

We use the conditional tense when, or if, there is a condition. In other words, when one event or action is dependent on a different event or action in the sentence. So, it would be more accurate to write: '*When the third term begins, I will not have to wait too long for my start date.*' Or, '*When the third term begins, my own start date will not be too far away.*'

The lesson to learn from this is that this person was practising for the test by writing in a 'complex way', but your examiner is looking for *clear ideas*, so that is what you should practise producing.

**Key idea:** Forcing complex grammatical structures into your writing will not help you to jump a band. Only use complex structures if they help to explain your ideas in a clear and precise way.

### Editing and correcting

The most common grammatical mistakes I see in writing task 1 relate to the use of:

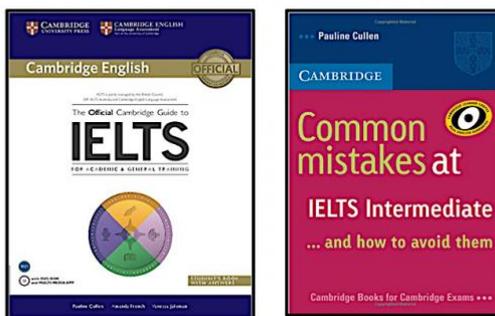
- Articles
- Tenses
- Prepositions
- Relative clauses
- Verb and subject agreement

In this quiz you will find 6 sentences with a grammatical problem from the list above. First, match the sentences to the grammatical mistakes, then correct the mistakes.

1. The chart shows that UK imported more coal in 2010 than US.
2. Number of cars on the roads has increased steadily since 1980.
3. The percentage of houses with solar power are increasing each year.
4. By 2002, the figures increased to 60% and 75% respectively.
5. The cans travel by the conveyor belt until they reach to the packing area.
6. The three countries had the most exports were China, Japan and Thailand.

You can find the answers on my website: [www.keytoielts.com/](http://www.keytoielts.com/)

Find more exercises like this in **Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate** and **The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS**.



To help develop your editing and checking skills, go back over previous task 1 answers you have written to see if you regularly make any of these mistakes.

### Grammar issues in writing task 2

When researchers describe their studies in an academic journal or paper, they generally use the passive voice (though this is now changing). The passive is used to show that the study is objective and could be repeated by any one. When it comes to writing task 2, it is important to remember that you are being asked to write in a *formal* style, you are *not* writing an academic paper. A common mistake I see is candidates using the passive inappropriately in task 2, perhaps because they are following advice that says you 'must only use the passive'.

### Using the passive appropriately in writing task 2

As we saw with academic writing task 1, the passive voice is used to remove or hide the subject of the verb. In task 2, you might use it to make a general statement, or perhaps as a useful way to avoid repeating the language in the question. Look at the following examples:

1. Many people now use social media as a news source rather than just a way to communicate with friends. (active)
2. Social media is now often used as a news source rather than just a communication tool. (passive)

Governments and businesses sometimes use the passive to show, or suggest, that the whole organisation made a certain decision. Compare these examples:

1. I have cancelled the plan to build a new cafeteria because I felt that we should spend the money on new machinery. (active)
2. The plans to build a new cafeteria have been cancelled because it was felt that the money should be spent on new machinery. (passive)

Any employee reading the first sentence would understand that the writer is responsible for these decisions. With the second sentence, the passive is used to 'hide' the subject of the verbs 'cancel', 'feel', and 'spend', so we do not know who made the decisions.

Thus, it is important to be aware that, if your task 2 question asks, 'To what extent do **you** agree or disagree?' and you write, '**It is agreed** that...' or '**It is felt** that...', then you are *not* answering the question, because the passive hides the subject of the verb. So, advice that says '**you must only use the passive**' does not apply in task 2, where you *must* tell the examiner what you think, feel, or believe. Look back at your previous task 2 answers to see if you often use the passive in this way.

**Key idea:** In Writing Task 2, if you write only in the passive, you are likely to be hiding your own views, which will lower your score in the test.

*Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate shows you how to use the passive appropriately in the writing test.*

## 20 When do I use the passive?

**1 Tick the correct sentence in each pair.**

1 a Many people have been died because of this disease.  
b Many people have died because of this disease.

2 a This data took from 2002 and 2012.  
b This data was taken from 2002 and 2012.

With active verbs we usually use the following order: subject + v  
passive when we want to put the object of the verb first: object + v  
*The teacher told the students to close their books.* = active (subj + v)  
*The students were told to close their books.* = passive (object + v)

We use the passive:

- when we want to make the object the focus of the sentence: *The school made a small profit at the school.* (the focus is on the books, not the teacher)
- ☆ Note that the verb (*were*) agrees with the object (*the books*).
- when the context tells us who carried out the action: *A law was used to protect people in this situation.* (we know that the government did it)
- when it is not important who carried out the action: *In the factory, the shoes were made and packed into boxes ready for sale.* (we do not need to know who does the packing)
- ☆ Note that we can include the 'subject' by adding *by* + the person/group: *The materials could be recycled by large manufacturers.*

**2 Correct the mistake below.**

Protective headgear should wear at all times.

Protective headgear .....

**3 Change the following sentences from active to passive. You will not need to change the tense. You will need to decide when to leave out the subject.**

1 A factory worker checks each box for quality. *Each box* .....

2 The government does not permit children under 16 to work. *Children* .....

3 The washing machine is washing your clothes at the moment. *Your clothes* .....

4 A mechanic will repair your car this afternoon. *Your car* .....

5 The agent has sold our house at last. *Our house* .....

6 Something tore the back of my coat. *The back of my coat* .....

7 The employer pays the staff more for working at the weekend. *The staff* .....

8 Burning tyres give off highly toxic chemicals. *Highly toxic chemicals* .....



**NB** This book can help you reach higher than band 6 - candidates at **ALL** levels makes these mistakes.

### Expressing your views using impersonal language

The writing task 2 band descriptors tell us that a band 7 candidate will 'present a clear position throughout'. Using grammar in an accurate and precise way can help you to do this. Let us imagine that your question contains the following view: 'Many people believe that traveling is very dangerous now.' Look at sentences 1-3 and decide if they belong in a paragraph that

- A. completely agrees with the statement
- B. partly agrees with the statement
- C. disagrees with the statement

1. If traveling **was** so risky, fewer people **would** do it.
2. **Admittedly**, traveling **alone in certain areas can be a little** risky.
3. Traveling overseas **is far too** risky nowadays.

(Answers: 1C, 2B, 3A)

Look again at the sentences and think about how the highlighted structures help to communicate the writer's position. It is important to remember that when you write *'traveling alone can be a little risky'* you are conveying your own view; the reader understands this as: *'I believe this can be a little risky.'* Similarly, when you write 'Governments must...' or 'Businesses should...' You are giving your own view about what 'must' or 'should' happen. In this way, your own view is conveyed through your use of language *throughout* your essay.

Although these examples show how language can be used to reveal your view or position, you must also clearly express your own personal conclusions and feelings about the issue you are writing about. To do this, it is perfectly acceptable to write *'I completely agree...'*, *'I feel...'*, *'I believe...'*, *'In my view...'* etc. So, although you should aim to write in a general and less personal way, you do not need to completely avoid using subject pronouns in task 2.

### Studying grammar

In 1973, when I started high school, most language teachers used what is called the audio-lingual method. This system is based on the theory that learning a language is like developing a new habit, and the best way to do that, is to repeat set phrases over and over. So, my French teacher would enter the classroom carrying a large screen, a projector, and a tape recorder. She would show us images of a cat, a dog, a monkey, and a table, and for several months the class all chanted sentences like this in French:

*The cat is under the table.*

*The monkey is on the table.*

*The dog and the cat are next to the table.*

Eventually, a chair and a tree were added for a little variety. The whole class would listen and repeat the sentences without ever seeing (or understanding) the individual words. I found this both frustrating and confusing, and I was not alone. Years later, when I was studying for my teaching diploma, I was told that children used to secretly try to write the words down, which had a terrible impact on spelling.

Next came the grammar-translation method, where we learned language by translating stories and then classical literature. The weaknesses of these two methods became very clear to me in 1982 when I arrived in France as a university student and was unable to order the coffee I like or to understand the advertisements for accommodation. Even after 9 years of studying the language, I felt like a beginner, and my first few weeks in the country were a real struggle.

### The washback effect

The gaps in my knowledge were not the fault of my teachers. When preparing for a test, you will only learn what is going to be assessed – thus, the focus of a test has an impact on your study and on classroom teaching. This is known as the washback effect of a test, and is an important consideration for test writers. In the 1970s, the language testing systems put a great deal of emphasis on grammar, translation, and classical literature. So, this is what my teachers focused on; it was the tests that I had to prepare for that were responsible for my inability to communicate in everyday situations.

Since the 1980s, the most widely used language teaching method has been the communicative approach, and the IELTS test aims to reflect this. In the communicative method of language teaching,

the main emphasis is on communication and authentic materials. This is why IELTS only measures your grammar through its impact on your ability to communicate your ideas clearly and precisely, and through your understanding of authentic materials related to academic or work-based situations. As we will see, this is a deliberate way of forcing you to learn the skills and language that your certificate will claim that you have. The materials we used to learn French in the 1970s would only have been authentic if there were monkeys on the café tables of Paris, and the advertisements in the newspaper were written in a beautiful, rhyming poetry.

### Present, Practise, Produce

Nowadays, a good language teacher will begin by finding out what their students *need* to learn (often through a speaking activity). The teacher will then **present** this new language using authentic materials, such as a reading or listening text. Then **practise** the language using controlled, task-based exercises. After that, the teacher will encourage students to **produce** the new language through classroom games and role play, in a written task, or in real situations outside of the classroom. This method is reflected in all good course books and resources, so self-study students can also benefit from this approach.

My *Cambridge Grammar for IELTS* book uses authentic IELTS materials to present new structures, and my *Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate* book first **presents** the language, then helps you to **practise** the language, and finally gives you authentic IELTS materials to encourage you to **produce** the language in the same context as in the test. If you have any course books that you completed rather quickly, or some time ago, it is a good idea to review them to be sure that you did not skip any stages. For example, if you have illegally downloaded a book, and do not have the recording, then you are missing out on 'presentation' or 'practice' – key stages of language learning.

### Staying focused

It can be difficult for self-study students to stay focused. As you work through a course book, it can help to be aware of *what* you are doing and *why*. For example, *'This exercise is about how to use 'since' and 'for'. And, the main difference is that we use 'since' with a point in time or a date. So, for example, 'I have been studying since 5:00'. And we use 'for' with a length of time, so we say, 'I have been studying for 30 minutes.' Now, I've done some practice, and next I'm going to try and produce the language in a short talk.'* Being aware of what you are doing and why, can help you stay focused and ensure you practise in a deliberate way.

### Learning through teaching

Even better, find a study partner and teach them a language point you have learned. When we shift from student to teacher, our ability to understand and remember is greatly improved. If your study partner can understand your explanation, then it is likely that you have understood the structure. If not, you may still have some work to do. Look up the structure you are practising in several different resources until you feel you understand it, and also know how and when to use it; try to notice real-world examples of the structure when you are listening and reading. After that, practise, practise, practise, and produce, produce, produce. Eventually, you will produce the structures automatically, which will make your writing less mechanical and more natural.

If you have not studied grammar for a long time, I recommend you look for Raymond Murphy's *English Grammar in Use*. There are several different levels and they are all excellent resources. Try to set aside 10-15 minutes a day to focus solely on vocabulary and grammar. You can turn this into a habit by always doing it at a set time of day, such as while traveling home.

## Beware of false friends

We often learn most about our own language when we are learning a new one. As you study, think about how the same structures work in your own language. For example, how do you:

- explain **when** something **happened** / **will happen** / **is happening now**?
- show that something **might** or **might not happen**?
- **compare two or more things**?
- **describe nouns or verbs**?
- **refer back to an idea without repeating the same words**?

Comparing English grammar with your own language can help you to understand the structures you are learning and also increase your accuracy in the test. Nevertheless, you are likely to find some 'false friends' – language that looks or sounds similar to your own language but has a different meaning or use. I often had to note false friends in French and Spanish, for example, that the Spanish word for donkey sounds similar to the French word for butter! This problem can apply to grammatical differences as well, so it is a good idea to make a list of any false friends like this as you are learning.

## 'Chunking' and grammar in speaking

In speaking, we naturally join words together rather than saying each word separately and in a robotic way. This is referred to as 'chunking', and the same idea can help you in your study of grammar. In the vocabulary chapter, we talked about collocation and learning which words naturally go together. Similarly, with grammar, it is important to learn which 'chunks' of language naturally go together to accurately form a structure.

In the last chapter, I recommended dividing words into different topics, and a similar approach can be used in grammar. For example, when learning a new verb, see it first as a piece of vocabulary, and learn the meaning. After that, see it as a grammatical component of your language, and study how to use the verb accurately in a written sentence, or when speaking. Think about different tense forms as well as prepositions and how the verb changes when it is used with another noun or another verb.

Learn these as language chunks, and group together verbs that behave in a similar way. Can you add any more examples to these lists?

### Verbs + to + infinitive

Tell someone to do something

Ask someone to do something

Force someone to do something

Persuade someone to do something

Convince someone to do something

### Verbs + infinitive

Make someone do something

Let someone do something

### Verbs + from + ing

Stop someone from doing something

Prevent someone from doing something

Organising and learning language like this will benefit both your speaking and writing. I can still remember some of my own language drills from more than 40 years ago!

## Learning grammar in context

In the previous chapter, I explained the benefits of learning vocabulary in context rather than from a list. Similarly, it is helpful to focus on grammar in the context of a reading passage to help you understand the impact it has on meaning. This aspect of grammar is something that self-study students often neglect to consider, concentrating instead on the mechanics of a structure. This is a little like learning to cook something without tasting the dish yourself. As we saw earlier, grammatical structures have an impact on tone and coherence. Thus, confusion about grammar can interfere with your ability to understand what you **read** or **hear** in a precise way, as well as your ability to **write** and **speak** in a clear, coherent way.

## Grammar and Meaning

One useful way to focus on the meaning of grammatical structures is to look back over reading test passages once you have completed them. Study one or two paragraphs and notice how the ideas are connected; underline each verb and ask yourself what tense the writer has used and why. Then think about how the different tenses affect the meaning and tone (especially the use of modals and conditionals). This will be particularly useful with reading Section 2 and 3 passages. When you are reviewing any incorrect answers, consider whether grammar played a part in your mistakes. Do the same for listening sections 3 and 4.

To make your practice even more helpful, focus on the list of five common problems I mentioned earlier, or any other problems that you have identified in your own writing. For example, if you realise that relative clauses are a particular problem for you, then try to notice them in reading passages and think about how, when, and why writers use them. Work in a systematic way, and do the same for prepositions, articles, different tenses, and so on.

## Grammar and tone

As we saw earlier, your grammar has an impact on the tone of your language. In formal writing, native speakers try to be as polite as possible and often use adverbs and modal auxiliary verbs to soften their tone and language. Look at the following two sentences and decide which one conveys the message more politely.

1. **Besides**, certain words and phrases **are** too informal for IELTS, **obviously** you should **consider** the aim of the test **when you choose** words to learn.
2. **Furthermore**, certain words and phrases **may be** too informal to use in IELTS, so **it is important to consider** the aim of the test **when choosing** words to learn.

The first sentence is more personal and direct, and has quite an aggressive tone because of the vocabulary used (*besides, obviously*). The second sentence conveys the same message but in a much softer, less direct way. I often see the words 'besides' and 'obviously' used in a way that creates an inappropriate tone for IELTS. Look back at your own writing to see if you have ever used these words in the same way as sentence 1. Both band 6 and band 8 candidates will use these words, the difference is that the band 8 candidate will use the words accurately, appropriately, and with an understanding of style and tone, while the band 6 candidate will not. This is a further reminder that simply adding 'complex' words or structures to your writing will not magically transform your score.

## What grammar points should I study?

Remember, a good teacher begins by identifying what their students *need* to learn. As a self-study student, you must try to identify the gaps in your grammatical range and accuracy. My **Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate** book covers the most frequent errors made at bands 5 and 6 in

IELTS writing, so it is a good place to start. As we will see in later chapters, it is when we are forced to *use* language that we become aware of the gaps in our knowledge: I did not know I lacked vocabulary related to accommodation until I had to find somewhere to live in France. So, pay close attention to the ideas you struggle to explain when completing less guided exercises in a course book.

As my vocabulary books present and practice language in a communicative way, rather than simply as lists, there are ample opportunities to focus on your grammar as well as your vocabulary within the books. Look at the following example from [Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced](#):

**2 Time for a change**  
Time, change

**Time**

**1.1** Answer these questions.

- 1 Has your attitude to your free time changed since you were a child? (In what way?)
- 2 What value is there in teaching history to children?
- 3 What is the best way to learn about history?
- 4 Do you think older people are more interested in the past than children are? (Why? / Why not?)
- 5 What influence do you think the past has over the present?

**1.2** Listen to two people answering the questions in 1.1. Which question are they answering?  
Speaker 1 \_\_\_\_ Speaker 2 \_\_\_\_

When using resources like this, exploit them as much as possible and revisit exercises to focus on different aspects of language. Here, you could first focus on vocabulary and note down any gaps you have. Then repeat the exercise focusing on your grammar and the ideas you struggle to explain. You can increase the range of your grammar by listening to the speakers in the recording to see how they explain similar ideas. In the next chapters, you will learn how to review your mistakes following test practice. When doing this, always try to identify any problems with grammar that caused you to get an answer wrong.

### Reading widely

You can also build up your range and your active use of grammar through wider reading. Finding a way to enjoy language is a real benefit when it comes to learning. Try to develop a sense of curiosity about language and, if possible, a keen interest in it. It can help if you read *well-written* articles, or books, about a subject you enjoy. For example, if you enjoy sport, then look for well-written books on that topic. When you find an interesting article, read it again to look at the language. Ask yourself. *'How did the writer express or connect their ideas? What language structures did they use?'* Collect sentences that appeal to you, and use them as good models. This is not to say that you should learn whole sentences to use in your essays. Instead, study the structure and then adapt it so that it becomes a natural part of your own language.

I recently read an article about a lady who lost her wedding dress when a dry-cleaning company closed down. After searching online, she finally managed to locate her dress. When I was reading, I

was struck by a sentence that neatly conveyed the importance of the discovery: 'The emotional significance of the dress far outweighed its monetary value.' Rather than learning and copying a whole sentence like this, you should look at the basic structure, try to learn it, then practise using it. So, from this sentence, you would learn: 'The ...of ... far outweighs its ...'

You can then deliberately practise by writing your own variations. Once you can confidently and accurately do this, the structure becomes part of your own language rather than a sentence you have learned. Eventually, you will be able to write sentences like this:

- *The advantages of recycling far outweigh any inconvenience the process may cause.*
- *The disadvantages of raising taxes will far outweigh any savings the government may make.*

### Fluency V accuracy

When writing, we can edit and check our work to improve accuracy, but when speaking, we do not have this luxury. As we will see in chapter 9, any gaps in your language will cause you to stumble when you try to explain something in the speaking test, which will affect your fluency. Any time you pause to think about accuracy will have a similar effect. So it is important to practise fluency in grammar as well as accuracy. Be aware when you are doing 'controlled practice', where you control the sentence and the situation to improve accuracy, and when you are doing free practice, to help produce the same language in your writing and speaking. Doing this often will help to increase your fluency, because you will eventually produce the language automatically, without pausing to think.

**Key idea:** Do controlled practice and free practice to help you accurately produce new language without pausing to think in the test.

### Staying motivated

It is very easy to find an excuse not to do something if you are not enjoying it. The less you practise, the less likely you are to make real progress, and so it is easy to lose motivation. It can help to remember that there are many different styles of learning and teaching, and what works for one person may not work for another. My advice is to explore different ways of learning to find the method that best suits you and your personality.

Unit 1 of Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced looks at the vocabulary we use to talk about character and psychology. At the end of each unit, there is some form of IELTS test practice based on the vocabulary in the unit, and at the end of unit 1, I wrote a listening section 4 talk about the different ways of learning. Listen and complete the notes, then listen again and think about whether you can use any of these ideas to help you study. You will find the recording and notes on my website: [www.keytoielts.com/](http://www.keytoielts.com/)

### Final tips

- Don't waste time learning overly complex sentence structures - you do not need to produce paragraphs like those in the reading passages to achieve a high score in the writing test.
- Learn grammar in context not just from grammar books – pay attention to how the speakers or writers link and join ideas or how they help you to follow their ideas – if you cannot do this, you may not be using good models.
- Be aware of gaps in your active use of grammar (when speaking and writing) and try to fill those gaps – make sure that, when you learn grammar, you attempt to use it yourself as often as possible.
- To help with making your position clear in your writing, notice when and how native speakers use different structures and think about how this affects tone. How does this structure help you to follow the writer's ideas or make their position clear?

- When learning verbs, chunk words together rather than learning them in isolation, so that you learn any prepositions or other verbs that are used with them.
- Set aside a regular amount of time each day to work on grammar – even 5 minutes can be helpful.
- Balance working on accuracy (correcting and editing your mistakes, or doing controlled exercises) and fluency (producing the structures in speaking and writing).

**Improve your grammatical range and accuracy with my two grammar books**



**Look out for the new second editions at the end of 2021**

## Chapter 5

### The Key to IELTS reading

#### Understanding IELTS reading

It was in trying to address questions about reading that I first discovered just how much misleading advice there is about IELTS. The vicious circle I outlined in chapter 1 is very much at work in IELTS reading; there are many '*IELTS*' reading materials to be found online that are *not* fair, valid, or reliable, yet they are taken as representative of the real test. With such materials, you are confronted with unfair reading passages, where your understanding depends on a knowledge of highly technical terms, and test questions that are either guessable, or vague and confusing. These materials are at the heart of almost every question I am asked about reading. Throughout this chapter, we will examine the *real* reading test, outline the skills you need to use in IELTS, and look at ways of developing these skills. The same skills are needed for both the General Training and Academic modules. At this stage, it is important to note that my advice here does not apply to materials that are unfair and unreliable and thus cannot be said to reflect IELTS.

**Key idea:** The same key reading skills are needed for both GT and Academic reading.

#### The importance of time in the test

The reading test has three sections and 40 questions. You have 60 minutes to complete the questions **and** transfer your answers onto a separate sheet. High-level candidates can do this within the time limit, making few mistakes, while lower-level candidates struggle. The difference comes down to language and reading skills. So, as we will see, the time limit plays an important part in the test, because it forces you to read efficiently, and use a range of reading skills.

**Key idea:** You need to answer 40 questions and transfer your answers onto a separate answer sheet within your 60-minute deadline. Only your answer sheet is marked. Build reading skills and vocabulary to improve your time and your score.

#### What are the key skills needed for IELTS reading?

To answer this question, we need to remember that IELTS aims to find out whether or not you have the skills needed for academic study, work-related training, or as part of your profession. Let us begin by looking at a real-life example of this.

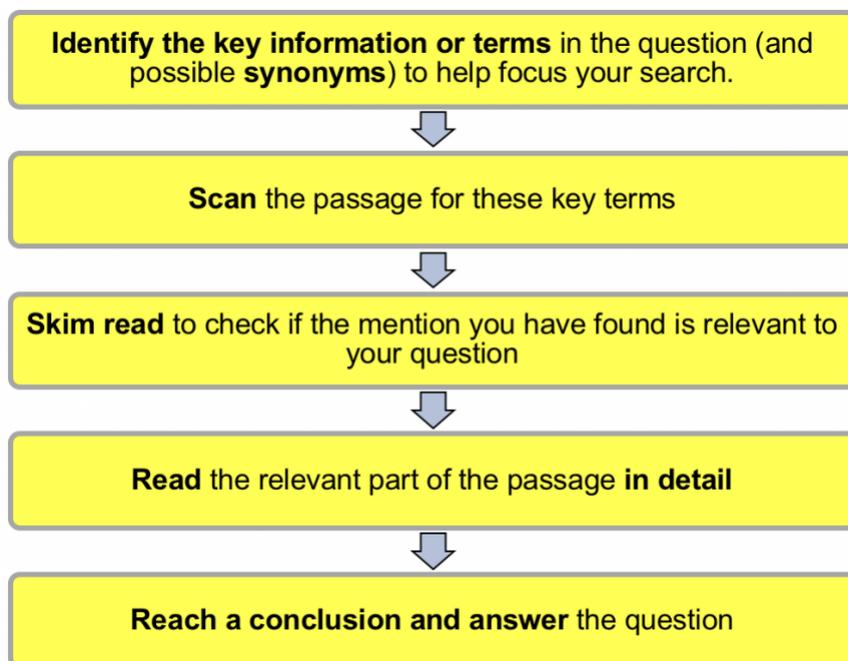
Over the last few years, several of my nieces and nephews have completed university degrees. Their subjects were wide-ranging, covering fields such as dentistry, business, engineering, and fashion, but they had one common factor: a dissertation. This involved writing a question, carrying out research, reaching a conclusion that answered their question, then writing up their findings.

One of my nieces carried out a review of clinical studies into the effectiveness of a specific treatment for gum disease. Before beginning her research, she **decided on her key terms, and** common **synonyms** for those terms. This helped to narrow down her research. Nevertheless, her initial search still resulted in a list with over 800 possible references. Clearly, no one has time to read this number of studies in detail. Furthermore, as the vast majority of the references she found were not as relevant as they first appeared, attempting to do that would have been a waste of her time.

To work efficiently, and finish her dissertation within the deadline, my niece had to use key reading skills. She had to quickly **scan** the titles to eliminate any that were duplicates or simply not useful, which left 65 studies. Next, she had to **skim read** the abstract for the remaining papers to see if they

were truly relevant to her very specific question. This left 6 studies, which she then **read in detail** to **reach a conclusion** and **answer her question**. We can see this same process in your professional life, where an employee may have to carry out research for a presentation at an important meeting or conference. The IELTS reading test mimics this process in miniature.

For each question, you must do the following:



As we will see, the more familiar you are with the language in the passages, the faster you will be able to perform each step.

### What is the difference between skimming and scanning?

To read efficiently, you need to be able to scan and skim read. In language teaching, 'scanning' means moving your eyes very quickly over a text to find a key detail, such as a word or a number. A real-world example of this is searching for a telephone number on a webpage. When we scan, we do not *read* individual words, our eyes just search for the detail, a little like trying to quickly spot a detail in a picture or photograph.

Skim reading means reading a text very quickly to get the general idea of what it is about. When skim reading, your eyes move more slowly over the text, noticing key words and phrases but without pausing to read details. So, you will not be able to answer specific questions after skim reading a text, you will only be able to give a general impression or overview of it.

### Should I read the questions or the passage first?

Remember, this is a reading test, so your main focus should always be on reading. At the start of each section, I advise you to glance quickly at the question types, just to satisfy your curiosity, then skim read the whole passage in under 3 minutes. Make sure to include the heading, subheading, and any footnotes.

Those who advise reading the questions first may do so because they have seen materials where you can guess answers without reading. But materials like this do not accurately reflect IELTS. The materials used in the *real* test are written slowly and carefully by professional test writers; it takes

12 months to write, edit, pretest, and check the real test materials to make sure that the questions are fair and the answers *cannot* be guessed.

**Key idea:** The advice in this book will only apply to test materials that are valid, fair, and reliable.

### Preparing to read

I often hear people say that skim reading the passage first is a waste of time, but doing this gives you useful background information that helps you understand the questions as you work through them. To demonstrate this, look at the following question from one of the 8 practice tests in *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*:

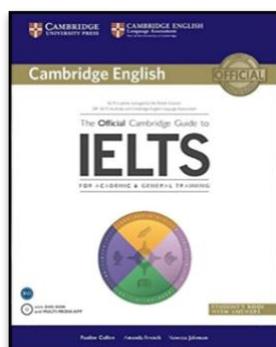
**10** When reporters in New Zealand met Shirase, they were

- A** concerned about the quality of his equipment.
- B** impressed with the design of his ship.
- C** certain he was unaware of the dangers ahead.
- D** surprised at the bravery he demonstrated.

Notice that, as with all authentic IELTS materials, **you cannot guess the answer without reading** the passage. If we had skim read the passage first, we would already have a general impression of it. We would know that Shirase was a Japanese explorer, and in 1912 he tried to reach the South Pole in a small boat, at the same time as teams from Britain and Norway. These are key words and ideas in the passage that help you get an overall impression of what it is about before reading in detail. If you now look back at the question, you will see how this sort of information helps you to understand it more quickly.

If you struggle to skim read the whole passage in less than 3 minutes, you *may* find that reading just the first and last sentence of each paragraph will give you a general idea of what it is about. Nevertheless, skim reading is essential in the test, so it is an important skill to master.

You can learn more about skimming, scanning, and other key reading skills in *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*. I wrote the first half of the book, which coaches you in the skills needed for every part of the test, while the second half of the book contains 8 complete practice tests.



### The impact of vocabulary and grammar on reading skills

We are able to perform tasks quickly if we do them often. However, you need more than skimming and scanning practice to be able to read IELTS reading passages quickly. As the following

paragraphs show, the language itself also needs to be familiar to you. Read version 1, then version 2, as quickly as you can. Time yourself if possible.

### **Version 1**

William Perkin was born in 1883, in London, England. As a boy, he liked the arts, sciences, photography, and engineering. But when he found an old laboratory in his grandfather's home he became interested in chemistry.

While Perkin was studying chemistry in London, his teacher told him to go and listen to some talks by a famous chemist called Michael Faraday. Perkin enjoyed the talks and studied at the Royal College of Chemistry in 1853, from the age of 13.

### **Version 2**

William Henry Perkin was born on March 12, 1883, in London, England. As a boy, Perkin's curiosity prompted early interests in the arts, sciences, photography, and engineering. But it was a chance stumbling upon a run-down, yet functional, laboratory in his late grandfather's home that solidified the young man's enthusiasm for chemistry.

As a student in the City of London School, Perkin became immersed in the study of chemistry. His talent and devotion to the subject were perceived by his teacher, Thomas Hall, who encouraged him to attend a series of lectures given by eminent scientist Michael Faraday at the Royal Institution. Those speeches fired the young chemist's enthusiasm further, and he later went on to attend the Royal College of Chemistry, which he succeeded in entering in 1853, at the age of 13.

Version 2 is the opening paragraph of a reading section 1 passage from Cambridge Test book 9. Although version 1 largely contains the same information, you should have been able to read it much more quickly than the original because it contains simpler vocabulary and sentence structures, and so the language is much more familiar.

You will struggle to build up skim reading skills for the type of language and structures found in IELTS reading passages if your own language level is band 5 or lower. So, if your current IELTS reading test score is relatively low, aim to focus on learning vocabulary and grammar before you work on IELTS passages. You can still develop skim reading skills using simpler passages; the first two sections from General Training practice tests are perfect for this.

The more familiar the language is to you, the faster you will be able to read it. So, building vocabulary can help improve your reading speed. My vocabulary teaching apps have 10 exercises to help you not only learn vocabulary, but also remember the words more easily in the test. Several of the exercises are specifically aimed at improving your speed reading. The two apps teach you a total of 500 key words as well as useful synonyms for them. You can find a link to a video showing how the apps work on my website: [www.keytoielts.com/](http://www.keytoielts.com/)

## 10 exercises to help you practise and learn



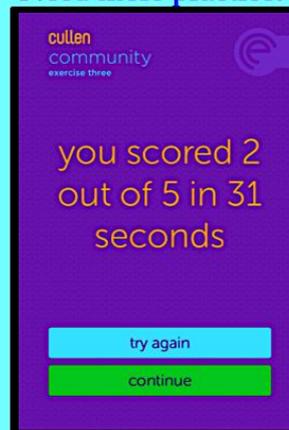
## Ex 3 - Speed read 1 How quickly can you match the words and definitions?



## Ex 4 - Speed read 2 How quickly can you match the definition to the target word?



## Need more practice?



## Try again to improve your score



**Bands 7+ and 8+ available on Google Play and iTunes app stores**

### Reading in detail

Many people struggle with time in the test because they attempt to read the passages in detail. Remember, the amount of time you are given is a deliberate way of forcing you to use a range of skills, and scanning and skim reading will help you manage your time in the test. Reading in detail is the final stage that helps you answer the questions correctly. Just as my niece did not attempt to read 800 papers for her dissertation, you should not begin by reading the whole passage in detail.

When we read each word slowly and carefully, we are reading in detail. In my experience, mistakes occur at this stage because of:

- looking for an answer in the wrong part of the passage
- misinterpreting the question
- misinterpreting the passage
- mistaking a small detail for a big idea
- trying to simply match words instead of using reading skills

These problems can be linked to a lack of reading skills, problems with vocabulary and grammar, and practising with materials that do not reflect the real test.

### The effect of grammar on reading in detail

The reading passages in the test are authentic academic, or professional texts. They contain complex ideas, which are described, explained, and discussed. You will often need to follow the development of a main idea within the passage. This requires an understanding of referencing within and between sentences. At the detailed-reading stage, language problems can interfere with your ability to do this. For example, if you struggle with the use of articles, relative clauses, or pronouns, you may not be able to see how different ideas are connected to each other, which will affect your ability to answer the questions.

### Why are there so many different question types?

A reading test with only one type of question means that your test preparation is very limited. For example, if there are only multiple-choice questions, then you only need to practise choosing an answer from a list. The different reading tasks in IELTS are a way of ensuring that the test has a positive washback effect on your studies, because they force you to use and learn a range of skills. We could see the different tasks as a way of asking:

- When did this happen?
- Where did this happen?
- What happens first / next?
- How does this work?
- How / why did they do this?
- What exactly does this mean?
- Does this mean xyz?
- Who said this?
- What is the main idea here?
- Why did the writer say this?
- What is the writer suggesting here?
- Where is this information?
- What is the cause or effect of this?

**Key idea:** The reading test questions are presented in the most logical order. Answering the questions in order will help you to read more efficiently in the test.

### Which questions are in the same order as the passage?

I often talk about IELTS being a fair test. This means that, rather than trying to trick you, the questions are organised into the most helpful and logical order possible. This is why I always advise people to answer the questions in the same order as they appear on the question paper, rather than going to a favourite question type first.

Some of the questions are in the same order as the information in the passage. These questions generally focus on the precise meaning of one part of the passage.

#### Questions that are in the same order as the passage:

- Short answer questions
- Sentence Completion
- Multiple choice questions
- True, False, Not given or Yes, No, Not given

**NB:** Although the questions in 'matching sentence endings' tasks are in the same order as the passage, I have not included them in this list because your task is to choose the correct option, and these are **not** in the same order as the passage.

### How should I answer these questions?

As the testing aim with these questions is to check that you have a precise understanding of one part of the passage, they generally contain information that will help you to quickly locate the relevant part. In other words, they force you to use your scanning skills.

To answer these questions, you should:

1. Read the question in detail and identify key terms.
2. Scan the passage for the terms (or any synonyms) – N.B you may find the same detail mentioned in more than one place.
3. Skim read each part where you found the key terms to help identify the right one.
4. Read the relevant part in detail to answer the question.

Let us see how this works in what is often seen as the most problematic question type in IELTS reading: True, False, Not Given.

### True, False, Not Given and Yes, No, Not Given

These tasks consist of a list of statements, and you must decide if they are *True*, *False* or *Not given*, based on the information in the passage. The difference between 'True, False, Not given' and 'Yes, No, Not Given', is in the passage rather than the questions. The former are used with a factual passage, while the latter are used with passages that contain the views or claims of the writer. For brevity, I will mainly refer to 'True, False, Not given' questions here, but the following advice applies to both tasks.

The confusion over these questions often occurs because of examples that do not reflect the real test. Consider this, if you were to see some puzzling maths questions that were confusing and had no clear answer, you would not immediately conclude that there is a problem in the world of mathematics. Similarly, when you find T/F/NG examples that are confusing, you should not reach a conclusion about IELTS based on these.

### What do the options 'True' and 'False' mean?

A *True* statement is one that accurately reflects the information in the passage and seems to cause little confusion. However, there is some discussion over what '*False*' means, with many people stating that a *false* statement is 'the opposite' of the information in the passage, but this idea is misleading. Very often, these statements are simply factually incorrect. For example, the passage may state that something occurred at a certain date or in a certain place, while the statement in the question gives the wrong date, place, or event. Thus, it is more accurate to say that '*False*' means incorrect, or untrue. Most importantly, we can correct a false statement, because the correct information appears in the passage.

### The confusion about 'Not Given'

The idea of 'Not Given' causes the most discussion and confusion, and there appears to be a common belief that it means searching through a passage for something that is not there. This is not true of the *real* test. If it was, the task would be frustrating and unfair, because you would waste time looking for something that does not exist. Some videos say, '*don't bother to look for Not Given answers, they're not there!*', and '*if you can't find it, then it's not given*'. If you follow this advice, when

you do find the same key terms in both the passage and the question, you will wrongly conclude, '*I found something, so it can't be Not Given, it must be either True or False.*'

Remember, these questions are in the same order as the information in the passage, and they are really asking: '*Does this mean xyz?*' So, for these questions, **you will always know** which part of the passage you must read in detail, whether the answer is *True, False, or Not given*. Once you have found a key detail in the passage that matches a key detail in the question, this simply signals that you know **where** to read in detail – it **does not** give you your answer. This is where materials that do not reflect the real test hinder your progress. These materials train you to simply match vocabulary and to stop reading once you have found a key word or synonym; such materials *discourage* you from using the skills you must develop for the real test.

IELTS is fair, valid, and reliable, and the tasks clearly reflect the purpose of the test. To help explain the validity of True, False, Not given questions, and also demonstrate how they work, I will use another dissertation example. Let us imagine that I have a nephew who is studying engineering, and he has decided to write a dissertation about the effect that building design has on climate change. He would first do some research and find some good sources of information. Then, when writing his dissertation, he would need to refer to this source material to provide support for his claims. The following image shows the source material he used to support his ideas:

**Source material**

**Urban Heat**

In 1881, Luke Howard published *The Climate of London* in which he identified an emerging problem: urban development was having a direct impact on the local weather. The early 1800s was a time of great expansion for London and Howard noticed that temperatures in the city were gradually becoming higher than those in rural areas. We now refer to these areas as Urban Heat Islands. The difference in temperature is usually greater at night and the phenomenon occurs both in winter and summer. Experts agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall brick or concrete buildings. These materials retain heat generated by the sun and release it through the night.

Here are the first few sentences of my nephew's dissertation:

**Dissertation**

**The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change**

It was Luke Howard who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.

My nephew's tutor will give him feedback on his dissertation, which will be assessed on the accuracy and reliability of the information it contains. If we check what he has written so far, we can see there are some problems. In the first sentence, my nephew made the claim that '**Luke Howard**' invented

the term 'Urban Heat Island'. Scan the source material for these key terms, then read the relevant part of the passage in detail. Does the source material support his claim?

Dissertation	Source material
<p data-bbox="247 331 750 358"><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></p> <p data-bbox="231 407 758 698">It was <b>Luke Howard</b> who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</p>	<p data-bbox="1045 336 1133 358"><u>Urban Heat</u></p> <p data-bbox="813 376 1364 869">In 1881, <b>Luke Howard</b> published The Climate of London in which he identified an emerging problem: urban development was having a direct impact on the local weather. The early 1800s was a time of great expansion for London and <b>Howard</b> noticed that temperatures in the city were gradually becoming higher than those in rural areas. We now refer to these areas as <b>Urban Heat Islands</b>. The difference in temperature is usually greater at night and the phenomenon occurs both in winter and summer. Experts agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall brick or concrete buildings. These materials retain heat generated by the sun and release it through the night.</p>

A detailed reading of this part of the passage tells us that Luke Howard was writing in 1881, and that 'we **now** refer to...Urban Heat Islands'. So, the passage tells us that this is a modern term, and was not created in the 1880s by Luke Howard. The source material tells us the statement is **incorrect**, in other words, **False**, and my nephew's tutor is likely to write this comment:

Dissertation	Tutor feedback
<p data-bbox="236 1198 813 1225"><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></p> <p data-bbox="212 1283 821 1624">It was <b>Luke Howard</b> who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this.</p>	<p data-bbox="901 1249 1390 1377"><b><i>No, he didn't! It is a modern term.</i></b></p>

Notice that we can correct a false statement; we know from the passage that this is wrong and we can say what the correct version of the statement should be.

In his second sentence, my nephew states that Luke Howard noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. To check this information, we have to first scan the source material for the part that tells us what Howard discovered about 'temperatures in the city' and 'the country' during 'different seasons'. These are key terms, but remember we also need to consider synonyms. Can you find synonyms for 'the country' and 'seasons' in the passage? When you have found these, read the relevant part of the passage in detail to check the accuracy of the second statement in the dissertation.

Dissertation	Source material
<p data-bbox="280 221 759 248"><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></p> <p data-bbox="260 311 751 589">It was Luke Howard who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. <b>He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season.</b> So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</p>	<p data-bbox="1034 226 1118 246"><u>Urban Heat</u></p> <p data-bbox="815 262 1329 730">In 1881, Luke Howard published <i>The Climate of London</i> in which he identified an emerging problem: urban development was having a direct impact on the local weather. The early 1800s was a time of great expansion for London and Howard noticed that <b>temperatures in the city were gradually becoming higher than those in rural areas.</b> We now refer to these areas as Urban Heat Islands. <b>The difference in temperature is usually greater at night and the phenomenon occurs both in winter and summer.</b> Experts agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall brick or concrete buildings. These materials retain heat generated by the sun and release it through the night.</p>

Notice that, when reading in detail, we do not stop at the key terms; we need to keep reading to trace the complete idea within the passage. The passage tells us that Howard *did* notice the difference in temperatures in cities and **rural areas**, but it is only later that we learn that this occurs in **winter and summer**, or, 'regardless of the season'. So my nephew's second statement *is* supported by this source material, which means that the passage tells us it is **True**.

Look carefully at the referencing here. For example, '**the difference in temperature**' and '**the phenomenon**' are both used to refer back to previous ideas. When you notice details like this, you know that the writer is still talking about the same idea in the question, and so you need to keep reading until the writer moves on to a new idea.

In his third sentence, my nephew states that experts have failed to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to deal with the problem of excessive heat in cities. To check this, again, we first need to scan for the key details: **experts, concrete** and **bricks**, and then read this part of the passage in detail.

Dissertation	Source material
<p data-bbox="244 1473 751 1500"><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></p> <p data-bbox="228 1570 762 1865">It was Luke Howard who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. <b>So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</b></p>	<p data-bbox="1046 1480 1134 1500"><u>Urban Heat</u></p> <p data-bbox="815 1518 1362 2016">In 1881, Luke Howard published <i>The Climate of London</i> in which he identified an emerging problem: urban development was having a direct impact on the local weather. The early 1800s was a time of great expansion for London and Howard noticed that temperatures in the city were gradually becoming higher than those in rural areas. We now refer to these areas as Urban Heat Islands. The difference in temperature is usually greater at night and the phenomenon occurs both in winter and summer. <b>Experts</b> agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall <b>brick or concrete</b> buildings. <b>These materials</b> retain heat generated by the sun and release it through the night.</p>

A detailed reading of this part of the source material tells us that my nephew has made another mistake. Although the passage *does* mention bricks and concrete, and also tells us what experts have concluded about these materials, **there is no mention here** about whether experts have tried to create heat-resistant materials, and whether or not they have succeeded in this. So, this source material cannot be used to check the information; it is possible that there have been attempts to do this, and those attempts may have failed or succeeded, but **we do not know** from this source material. My nephew's tutor would write a comment like this:

<b>Dissertation</b>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></b></p> <p>It was Luke Howard who first invented the term 'Urban Heat Island'. He noticed that city temperatures were higher than country temperatures, regardless of the season. <b>So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</b></p>	<p><b>Tutor feedback</b></p> <p style="color: red;"><b>There is no evidence to support this idea in the text. You will need to find another source to check this.</b></p>

**Key idea:** You can correct a False statement because the correct information will be written in the passage. You cannot correct a Not Given statement because you do not know if the statement is true or false.

So, my nephew's third statement is *Not given*, in other words, a claim or a fact that cannot be checked using this source material. Notice that we know exactly where to look in the passage. It is worrying if professionals or academics cannot accurately interpret the information they are reading. So, we can see the validity of *True*, *False*, *Not Given* tasks, and how they relate to academic study, or professional life. The materials I have used here actually come from page 58 of *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*. This is what it looks like in the practice test:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Urban Heat</b></p> <p><i>In 1881, Luke Howard published <i>The Climate of London</i>, in which he identified an emerging problem: urban development was having a direct impact on the local weather.</i></p> <p>The early 1800s was a time of great expansion for London and Howard noticed that temperatures in the city were gradually becoming higher than those in rural areas. We now refer to these areas as Urban Heat Islands. The difference in temperature is usually greater at night and the phenomenon occurs both in winter and summer. Experts agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall brick or concrete buildings. These materials retain heat generated by the sun and release it through the night.</p>	<p>Questions 1 – 3</p> <p><i>Do the statements agree with the information in the reading passage?</i></p> <p><i>In boxes 1 – 3 on your answer sheet, write</i></p> <p><b>TRUE</b>      <i>if the statement agrees with the information</i>  <b>FALSE</b>     <i>if the information contradicts the information</i>  <b>NOT GIVEN</b> <i>if there is no information on this</i></p> <p>1 <i>Luke Howard invented the term 'Urban Heat Island.'</i>  2 <i>City temperatures are higher than country temperatures regardless of the season.</i>  3 <i>Experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick.</i></p>
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In your test, or when practising, it may help to see the statements in the questions as facts or claims that you need to check using the source material you are given (i.e. the reading passage). Again, it is important to note that my advice here will only work with materials written by skilled test writers.

**Key idea:** On your answer sheet, you can write your answer either as letters (T, F, NG) or words (True, False Not Given). Just make sure your answer is clear.

### Common problems in IELTS reading

#### **Unhelpful examples and bad advice for True, False, Not Given**

There are hundreds of videos online about *True, False, Not given* questions. Often the videos will say, 'These are the most difficult, most confusing questions in IELTS.' Because they truly believe in this idea, the speakers produce their own confusing example as proof. This is a good example of the vicious circle I talked about in chapter 1, which I believe is responsible for a great deal of the confusion about *True, False, Not Given* questions.

Many of these videos contain examples where the 'passage' consists of one sentence and the question is a statement that very closely resembles it. A typical example looks something like this:

**Passage:** Lettuce is always eaten by people in Southland.

**Question:** Some people in Southland like to eat lettuce.

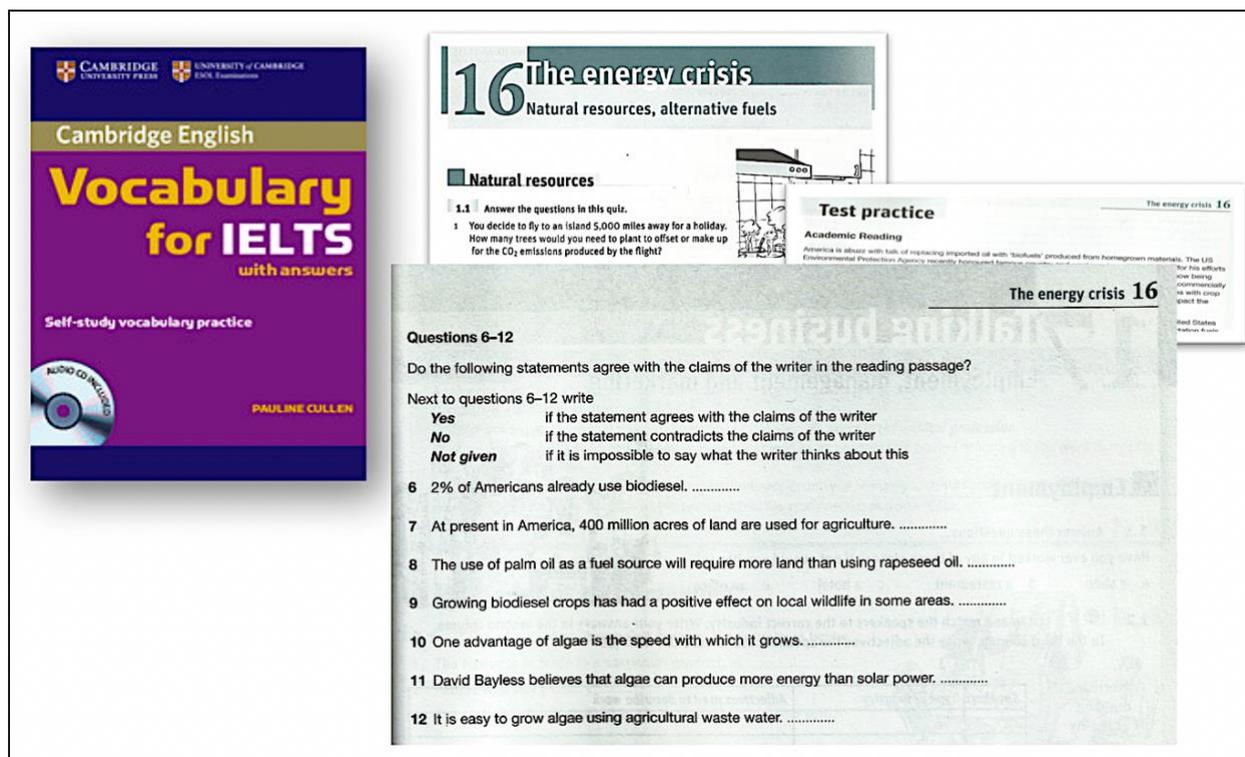
It is impossible to answer questions like this correctly because we do not have enough information to solve the logic puzzle it presents. This is not proof that '*True False Not Given questions are confusing*.' It *is* proof that test writing is a highly technical skill that takes time, and effort, and cannot be done 'live' for a video camera. The example above is *not* a valid, fair, or reliable test of reading skills, and thus it cannot be said to represent IELTS. Videos like this will simply confuse you further and will not help you to practise the scanning, skim reading, and detailed reading skills that you must master to achieve a high score in the test.

**Key idea:** Only test practice materials that are valid, fair, and reliable will help you to develop the skills you must show in the real test. If you find you are frequently confused when using certain test practice materials, it is likely they do not represent the real test.

#### **Changing authentic materials to make a point**

As well as producing their own examples, several videos take authentic materials and change them to make a point. Test writing is highly technical and even small changes can make a big difference. In some of the videos I have seen, the changes were made so that the questions became ambiguous and overly complicated, and therefore no longer suitable for use in a fair and reliable test. Furthermore, the changes remove any focus on reading skills and instead teach you to answer by simply matching vocabulary and synonyms.

The next image shows some test practice material from *Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS*. Unit 16 teaches the vocabulary related to energy, natural resources, and alternative fuels. The reading test passage at the end of the unit discusses the practicalities of the US replacing oil with biofuels and, as it is an opinion-based passage, this is a 'Yes, No, Not given' task. I have seen three separate videos that change questions 7 and 12 in this task. Let us look at the original question 7 from my book.



The part of the passage related to question 7 says:

The main source of biodiesel is plant oil derived from crops such as rapeseed. An acre of rapeseed could provide about 100 gallons of biodiesel per year. To fuel America this way would thus require 1.4 billion acres. This number is a sizeable fraction of the total US land area (2.4 billion acres) and considerably more than the 400 million acres currently under cultivation.

7. At present in America, 400 million acres of land are used for agriculture.

If we scan the passage, we can quickly find the key information and identify the relevant part to read in detail. Remember, we now need to skim read to trace *the whole idea* and see how much more of the passage we need to read in detail. If we take a closer look, we notice the sentence starts with, '**This number...**' which tells us that another number has been mentioned earlier, so we need to go further back in the passage to find this reference:

The main source of biodiesel is plant oil derived from crops such as rapeseed. An acre of rapeseed could provide about 100 gallons of biodiesel per year. To fuel America this way would thus require 1.4 billion acres. **This number** is a sizeable fraction of the total US land area (2.4 billion acres) and considerably more than the 400 million acres currently under cultivation.

If we now read this part in detail, and use our knowledge of referencing, we can see that the passage is actually telling us that 1.4 billion acres would be needed to grow enough biofuel for the US, and that this number (1.4 billion) is a lot more than 400 million, which refers to the number of acres currently being used for agriculture. So, the claim in the question agrees with the information in the passage and the correct answer here is '**Yes**'. If you stop reading once you have simply matched

the vocabulary, you are likely to see the words 'more than' and '400 million acres' and incorrectly answer 'No.' Remember, the *real* test will focus on reading skills, not simply vocabulary, so practise using materials that help you to develop those skills.

Another video took the final question in this task (number 11 in the screenshot, but number 12 in my book) and changed it into a negative statement to warn you about ways that '*IELTS questions try to trick you by using a negative in the question*'.

**Look at the last one ... number 11 ...**

Another recent effort is being carried out in San Diego by KentSeaTech Corporation. This company gained experience growing algae as a part of its aquaculture operations so was quick to respond when the California state government started looking for ways to treat the huge quantities of nutrient-laden water which runs off from adjacent farm lands. It's no real difficult feat to turn nutrients into algae,' says director of research Jon Van Gist, 'but how do you get it out of the water? This is what Van Gist and his co-workers have been trying to achieve.

8. Growing biodiesel crops has had a positive effect on local wildlife in some areas. **NO**

9. One advantage of algae is the speed with which it grows. **YES**

10. David Bayless believes that algae can produce more energy than solar power. **NOT GIVEN**

11. It is not easy to grow algae using agricultural waste water.

9:05 / 11:44

**IELTS Reading Questions 09 - Yes - No - Not given**

The original question in my book is fair and valid and simply requires you to use your skills: scanning, skim reading, and reading in detail. The change this video made means that, even if you do that, you are likely to get the question wrong, because their version created a triple negative that would confuse any candidate, whatever their level. The video-maker did this to prove a point – that the test is trying to trick you, but the real test, and authentic test practice materials, will not do that. More worryingly, the person who made the video did not admit they had changed my work, they simply presented it under my name as 'proof' of their own theory. Hopefully, this example will show you that you cannot trust materials shared online in this way because they may not be a true representation of the original.

### Following bad advice in reading

Several videos will tell you that you '*can answer 80% of the reading passages without reading*.' Any reading test where this is true cannot be called *valid* or *reliable*. So this advice is again based on test materials that do not reflect the real test and where answers can indeed be guessed based on your logic or your own knowledge. Remember, the *real* IELTS test questions force you to **read** – if your strategy is to look for tricks to avoid reading, you will not achieve a high score in the test. If you are using materials where you can guess the answers without reading, it is a mistake to believe that they will help you to improve your score.

## Reaching a faulty conclusion

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the impact that grammatical problems can have on your ability to follow ideas within a reading passage. With more discursive passages, language problems may also cause you to reach a faulty conclusion about the writer's position or tone. This can be linked to the use of modal or conditional verbs, or to misunderstanding vocabulary. Again, further problems are caused if you are using materials that encourage you to simply match words in the question and the passage. People who rely on such materials learn to scan for key words, but then answer quickly without going on to skim read further, or read in detail. To demonstrate this, look at the multiple-choice question I shared earlier, and the relevant part of the reading passage (I have added a note to help).

10 When reporters in New Zealand met Shirase, they were

- A concerned about the quality of his equipment.
- B impressed with the design of his ship.
- C certain he was unaware of the dangers ahead.
- D surprised at the bravery he demonstrated.

In New Zealand, local reporters were astonished: the ship was half the size of \*Amundsen's ship. True, it was reinforced with iron plate and extra wood, but the ship had only the feeblest engine to help force its way through ice. Few doubted Shirase's courage, but most reckoned the expedition to be ill-prepared as the Japanese had only lightweight sledges for transport across the ice, made of bamboo and wood.

\* The Norwegian team leader

One of the followers of my Facebook page asked me why option B is incorrect. Rather than using her reading skills, she had focused on matching words in the questions and the passage and decided that 'astonished' was the same as 'impressed'. *Astonished* means very surprised, but you can be astonished by something that is bad or good, while 'impressed' is only used positively; if you are impressed by something then you admire it. Thus, these two words are not exact synonyms.

In IELTS, multiple choice questions generally require a detailed reading of several sentences, or even a whole paragraph. This is not a vocabulary test, so they cannot be answered by simply matching a word in the question with its synonym. If we read this paragraph in detail, we can see that the reporters were surprised at the small size of the ship, but not in a good way. We know this from, 'but the ship had only the feeblest engine to help force its way through ice.' Even if you do not know that the word 'feeble' means weak, you should be able to understand from the tone here, and the use of the words 'but' and 'only,' that the meaning is not positive – so the reporters were clearly *not* 'impressed' by it.

We are then told that 'most reckoned the expedition to be ill-prepared,' and there was further concern about their equipment because 'the Japanese had only lightweight sledges... made of bamboo and wood.' Thus, using a combination of reading skills, and our knowledge of both grammar and vocabulary, we can see that the correct answer is A. (NB: We are only told the reporters' reaction to his ship and equipment, we do not know how they felt about Shirase, so C and D are wrong.)

Notice that, in authentic IELTS multiple choice questions, you will never find 'silly options' that you can easily dismiss. As with all questions, you must not approach the tasks as a vocabulary matching

exercise, but as an opportunity to practise and develop the key skills you need in the test: scanning, skim reading, and reading in detail.

**Key idea:** Fair, valid, and reliable IELTS test practice materials will force you to use and practise a range of reading skills. If you are using materials where you simply need to match vocabulary, you are not practising for IELTS.

### What about questions that are not in order?

For some questions, the testing focus is on **locating** the information, or selection the most appropriate information from a random list. Because of this, they cannot be in the same order as the information in the passage. These include any of the following matching questions:

#### Questions that are not in the same order as the passage:

- Matching headings
- Matching information
- Matching features

Answering questions that are not in the same order as the information in the passage requires the same skills of scanning for key information, skim reading, and reading in detail. However, while you may be able to find some of the same words used in the question, you are more likely to find several mentions of these in the passage, or to need to scan for synonyms. Thus, skim reading is much more important in these tasks because it helps you to decide *which* mention is relevant to the specific question you are answering. For these questions, the most common cause of incorrect answers is looking in the wrong part of the passage for the answer. If you struggle with these test questions, it is a good idea to limit your test practice to questions that are in the same order as the passage until you have built up your vocabulary and grammar, and mastered the skill of skim reading.

### Matching headings

Matching headings questions ask you to identify the main idea of a paragraph by choosing the correct answer from a list. The list may contain minor details, rather than main ideas, or it may contain inaccurate details and ideas. If you find these questions difficult, then you probably struggle with skim reading, and recognising the difference between a main idea and a minor detail. The following example is from unit 8 of the reading skills section of *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*, and I will use it to show a good way to approach matching headings tasks. The extract is from a General Training section 3 passage.

Headings are used to tell the reader the main idea in the paragraph. Before looking at the list of possible headings, it can be helpful to try to identify the main idea yourself. Look at the title and first paragraph, then skim read the paragraph as quickly as possible. If you had to tell a friend what this paragraph was about, what would you say?

## Banned Branding

### *Has Sao Paolo's advertising experiment worked?*

When you think of Sao Paolo, Brazil, a city of 12 million residents and the 7<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, you probably picture a gritty, sprawling metropolis, with skyscrapers rising like islands in a sea of giant billboards and neon signs. But all of that changed in 2007 when Sao Paolo became the first major city in the world to ban all outdoor advertising. The 'Clean City Law' was the brainchild of Mayor Gilberto Kassab who, in a bid to combat all forms of pollution in the city, decided to begin by tackling the most obvious – the 'visual pollution' created by billboards and signs advertising brands of all kinds. The move was hailed by writer Roberto Pompeu de Toledo as 'a rare victory of the public interest over private.'

Now look at the following 3 headings – are any of them similar to your own idea?

#### **Possible Headings:**

- i The city votes for major change
- ii How one man changed a city
- iii Professionals warn of the consequences of change

The paragraph describes how the mayor (one man) decided to clean up the city by banning all outdoor advertising, which 'changed' the 'city'. So, the correct heading would be 'How one man changed a city'. The other possible headings relate to details in the paragraph, not the main idea. For example, 'a major change' and 'the consequences' of the change. Furthermore, these are not accurate because the city did not vote and there is no mention here of professionals warning about the consequences.

Multiple choice questions also sometimes ask you to identify the main idea of a paragraph or even the whole passage. This idea can be seen in other parts of the test, such as Academic writing task 1, where you must select and report only the main ideas. Thus, the difference between a small detail and a big idea is a recurring one in IELTS, so it is very important to be able to distinguish between them. In *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*, you can find more exercises in both the reading and the writing skills units to help with this.

### **Bad advice for matching headings**

I have seen several videos claiming that, '*80% of matching headings questions can be answered from reading just the first and last sentence in each paragraph.*' I do not know where this 'data' comes from but, if you look at the first and last sentence of the paragraph above, you can see that it does not apply to authentic test materials. The only 'trick' you need to know for the real test is using the right reading skills at the right time. So you should practise with materials that also force you to do this.

### **Which questions are sometimes not in order?**

Some questions in the test take the information in the passage and put it into a different format. Questions like this may ask you to complete a summary, a flowchart, a diagram, notes, or table. Because the information is no longer in the form of a written article, the questions may not always appear in the same order as the corresponding information in the passage. For example, a notes-completion task will organise the information under **headings**, and a flowchart may put the

information into **chronological order**, while a diagram or a summary may group the information together in a way that is more logical in terms of the new format.

### Questions that may not be in the same order as the passage:

- Notes completion
- Summary completion
- Diagram completion
- Flowchart completion
- Table completion

As with all tasks, to answer these questions you need to identify key details in the question, for example labels in the diagram, or headings in the notes. Then scan the passage for those details, skim read to check you have found the right information, and read in detail to answer correctly. For some of these questions, you will have to write down words from the passage. Make sure to copy the words exactly as they appear in the passage. Do not change them, and do not make any spelling mistakes – if you do, your answer will be marked wrong; there are no half marks in the reading test.

With enough practice, using materials that reflect the *real* test, you will gradually develop the skills and language needed to improve your IELTS reading score.



**Key idea:** If you need to write a word from the passage, be careful to check the spelling and do not make any changes to the words.

### Deliberate Practice for IELTS reading

In chapter 2, I talked about the type of practice needed to make genuine progress: deliberate practice. This means identifying your weak areas and focusing on them in a structured and deliberate way. I also introduced the idea of breaking a large task down into smaller, more manageable goals, using the example of footballer David Beckham. Matthew Syed says that, as a child, ‘the little David was pretty average,’ (p.270) and it was only by persistently working on the micro skills required for football that he was able to become a master on the football pitch.

According to Syed, if a young football player practises ‘on a small pitch, touching the ball frequently’, then his skills will improve more quickly than if he practises on a full-sized football pitch (p309). Similarly, in IELTS, if you limit your practice to only doing reading tests, it will take you longer to build the skills you need. Remember, David Beckham did not achieve his skills by playing in football

matches; he developed them through the deliberate practice he did before becoming a professional player.

### Developing scanning skills

The reading test questions will often contain key details to help you quickly find the relevant part of the passage. To improve your scanning skills, take a reading test passage you have done before and look through the questions. Make a list of any key details you notice, such as a person's name, a place name, a date, or a technical term. Once you have a list of at least 4 or 5, scan the passage as quickly as possible to find the words in your list. Use a stopwatch to time yourself, and make a note of how long it takes you – try to improve on this over time.

The test questions will also often use synonyms to paraphrase the information in the passage, so, you may also need to scan for synonyms of these key terms. To build on your scanning skills, look back at your list of words from the previous exercise and think of common synonyms for them. Good examples might be words like 'scientist', 'researcher', 'year', 'country', and so on. Then, repeat the same timed-exercise scanning for these synonyms.

Under the stress of a test situation, people often find that they forget everything they have learned and revert to old habits: their fossilised errors of reading. If you regularly spend 10 to 15 minutes deliberately practising these skills, then you are more likely to remember to use them in the test.

### Developing skim reading skills

With skim reading, remember that you are not reading every word. Instead, you are only trying to get a general idea. So, after skim reading a whole passage, you may only have general impressions of the passage, such as:

- the main topic or field of study mentioned (e.g. archaeology, chemistry, a type of insect etc.)
- whether it relates to one country, one study, or several
- whether the passage is talking about past, present or future research
- whether the tone is positive, negative, or neutral

To build these skills, read a passage as quickly as possible (2 to 3 minutes), then try to recall as much information as you can. You may only be able to give one or two impressions at first, but you should gradually be able to learn more and more from quickly skim reading the passage.

### How quickly should you read?

A native speaker can skim read 100 words in 20 seconds, while a high-level, non-native speaker can usually read 100 words in 30 seconds, so this is what you should aim for. To practise, take a Section 1 reading passage (make sure you use an authentic one so that the level is right), and begin to count the words in the passage. When you reach 100, mark the place, then do the same for the next 100 words, and so on, until you have counted them all. Next, set a timer for 30 seconds and skim read the first 100 words. When your timer finishes, jump to the next mark, start the timer again, and skim read the next section. Repeat this until you get to the end of the passage. If you cannot skim read 100 words in this time, give yourself a little longer, and reduce your time with practice.

After you have completed the passage, try to write down anything at all you can remember. If you are working with a partner, tell them your general impressions, or record yourself talking about the passage. Do not expect to remember specific details – you are only trying to form a mental picture

of the passage at this stage. When skim reading the passage mentioned earlier, you might have visualised the South Pole, a team of explorers, and a ship. Visualisation like this can be very helpful in reading comprehension.

It is important to build your skills gradually, so, continue to practise with section 1 passages until you can skim read 100 words in 30 seconds. When you have achieved this, move on to section 2 passages, and so on. In this way you will make marginal gains in the skills you need to master for the test.

### How to improve your reading score

If there are problems in the test materials you are using, it is almost impossible to assess your own weaknesses, or build the skills you need. So, the first and most important step in improving your reading score is to practise using test materials that reflect the *real* test and so force you to use and learn the skills you need to master.

Rather than simply doing more and more test practice, the best way to improve your reading test score is to identify your current weak areas, and work on those. To do this, look back at previous practice tests you have done and note down the number of questions you got wrong in each section using a table like the one below. This will help to show you whether your weak areas are in a particular section or with a particular question type.

Question Type ↓	Section →	Number of incorrect answers								
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Short answer questions										
Sentence completion										
True False Not Given										
Yes No Not given										
Multiple Choice										
Matching headings										
Matching information										
Matching features										
Matching Sentence endings										
Notes completion										
Diagram completion										
Flowchart completion										
Summary completion										
Table completion										

If you are making more mistakes in sections 2 and 3, the problem is likely to be linked to language. If this is the case, stop doing test practice until you have built up your language skills. If you identify a problem with a particular question type, first, look again at the correct answers for each one and make sure you understand why your answer is wrong, and where the correct answer comes from in the passage. Try to identify any patterns. For example, do you have problems with questions that are asking, 'Why did the writer say this?' or 'What is the writer suggesting here?'

The following list of problems and solutions may also help:

<b>Problem:</b>	<b>Solution:</b>
Answering from the wrong part of the passage	Work on skim reading skills
Answering too quickly – not reading enough of the passage in detail	Work on referencing and following ideas within a passage
Mistaking a detail for a main idea	Practise skim reading and briefly summarising paragraphs
A language problem	Work on building your vocabulary and grammar
Running out of time, or not enough time to answer	Work on building your vocabulary as well as skimming and scanning skills

### Timing

The final stage of your practice (once you have mastered the language and skills you need) is to focus on timing. There are 40 questions altogether, but section 1 questions are worth the same as section 3 questions, so it is just as important to get these right. For each section, I advise you to spend 2 to 3 minutes skim reading the passage, then aim to spend 1 minute per question. You can allow a little more time for the more difficult questions in sections 2 and 3. Efficiency is the key here. So, for each question, when you have found the relevant part of the passage, write the question number in the margin. If you find it is taking too long to decide on an answer, make a best guess and leave it – if you have time you can come back to it later, using the numbers as a guide.

### Scoring Band 7 or above

To get band 7 in reading you need to score at least 30 out of 40, though you should aim for more than this when practising. This means that, even if you are band 7 or 8, there will be 5 to 10 questions on the test that are too difficult for you. Leave these for the band 9 candidates – don't waste time trying to answer them when you could be using that time to answer other questions that are at your level.

A follower of my page recently took the IELTS test but only managed to transfer half of his answers onto the separate answer sheet. All of your efforts are for nothing if you do not transfer your answers within the time. Do not let the Band 8 or 9 questions distract you from your band 7 goal.

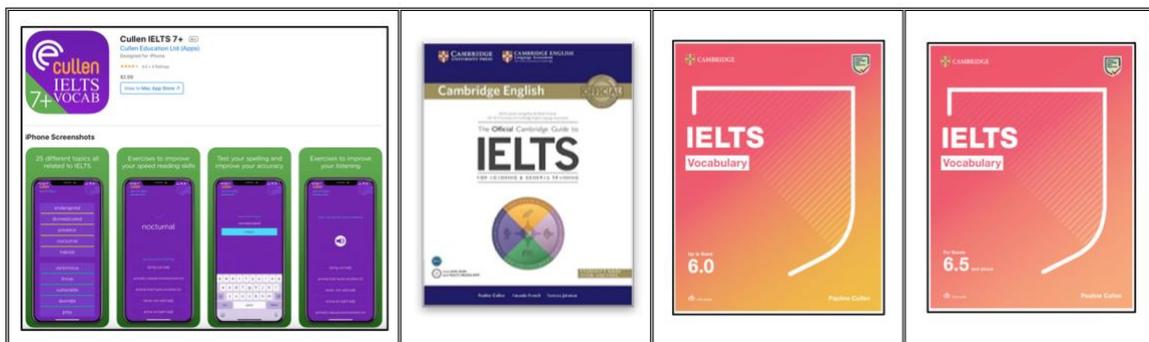
**Key idea:** All of your efforts are for nothing if you do not transfer your answers within the time limit. Do not let the band 8 or 9 questions distract you from your band 7 goal.

### Final tips

- You cannot improve your score by simply doing tests or reading widely – you must develop key reading skills.
- Use only well-written test materials so that you are forced to use and practise a range of reading skills.
- Build skills: be aware when you are practising different skills such as scanning, skim reading and reading in detail.
- Build language: try to identify any problems related to grammar or vocabulary and make sure to work on these – problems like this can also affect other parts of the test.

- When you complete a test, review your mistakes and identify the common problems you need to work on.
- If you find reading section 3 passages very difficult, improve your reading accuracy by taking as much time as you need to answer the questions – return to the same passage later and complete the same tasks within the time limit needed for the test.
- Practise regularly, even if you only have 15-20 minutes – in that time, you should be able to skim read a passage and complete at least one task. Gradually build on this until you can complete a whole section *within* 20 minutes.
- In the test, be conscious of using the skills you have practised and learned. Be aware of when you are scanning and skim reading
- Do not simply match vocabulary – skim read and use your referencing skills to follow a complete idea before you answer.
- Make sure to transfer your answers onto the separate answer sheet within the 60 minutes.

**You can build your reading skills further with my books and apps.**



## Chapter 6

### The Key to IELTS Writing task 1

#### Understanding IELTS writing

**Key idea:** If you have skipped the previous chapters hoping to find a quick fix for your writing problems then you are likely to continue to remain stuck at the same band. Go back and read Chapters 1 to 4 first to see why there is no quick fix if you want to reach band 7 or above.

#### Why is IELTS writing so difficult?

In any language, writing is the skill that takes the longest to master. We can understand more language than we can produce, and when it comes to using language, we acquire fluency and confidence in speaking a lot more quickly than in writing, quite simply because we do not write in a serious, formal way as often as we speak.

Writing requires us to explain what we think and feel. So it is very personal and some even describe it as a painful process. Many people believe that they are simply not good at writing and so look for coping strategies – ways of tackling what they see as a problem task rather than an enjoyable one. This perhaps explains why, in my experience of helping candidates over the last 5 years, I have found that people hold on very tightly to existing ideas they have about the writing test. When I *do* finally convince them to try a new approach, they go on to achieve the result they need. As you read this chapter, try to keep an open mind and remember that, with the right practice, *anyone* can achieve a high level in any skill.

**Key idea:** A follower stuck at 6.5 in writing for several years recently sent me this message:  
***'Pauline, I have achieved the impossible: Test Result is L=7.50, R=9.00, W=7.50, S=8.00, overall=8.00! Thanks for helping me all credit goes to you!'***

You may find it difficult to let go of old ideas and beliefs about IELTS, but if you try to keep an open mind as you read this book, you will eventually reach your goal.

#### What is the aim of the IELTS writing test?

As always, to fully understand what you must do in the test, we must begin by looking at what the test is designed to measure. The IELTS writing test aims to find out whether or not you have the writing skills needed for academic study and professional life. Academic and professional writing involves describing and summarising facts in an objective way, and clearly explaining your own arguments and views about serious topics.

In the academic module, it is important to remember that you are **not** being assessed on your ability to write an academic paper or dissertation. So, it is more accurate to think of the writing tasks as reflecting the general aim of science, which is often described as 'explaining the world around us'. For General Training, you must show that you can be flexible in your writing, and can operate comfortably in any scenario related to work or everyday life.

#### How is the writing test assessed?

The writing test consists of two separate tasks. Your writing task 2 answer is more important than your writing task 1 answer, in fact it is worth double the marks. To understand how this works, double

your writing task 2 score, add it to your writing task 1 score and then divide the total by 3. So, if your task 1 answer is band 7.5 and your task 2 answer is band 6, your score would be 6.5 ( $7.5 + 6 + 6 = 19.5 \div 3 = 6.5$ ).

Your IELTS examiner will assess each writing task using 4 criteria. Looking at these in detail helps us to understand what the examiner is looking for at each level. Each criterion has 9 'descriptors', which broadly describe the writing typically found at that band. The criteria that help us to understand **what you must always include in your answer** are called Task Achievement (for task 1) and Task Response (for task 2).

'Task Achievement' considers whether you have 'achieved' the task. This criterion tells us that a band 9 candidate is someone who produces an answer that 'fully satisfies *all the requirements of the task*.' So, we need to examine both the task *and* the Task Achievement criterion to understand what you must do to achieve a high score in task 1.

### [Common problems in Writing Task 1](#)

The vast majority of people who ask me for help are stuck at band 6 or 6.5 in writing and feel extremely frustrated. My experience in this area has shown me that the writing test attracts a wide range of conflicting theories and advice. It also seems that, while some attempt to write their own versions of reading tests, far more people do this with the writing test. Such materials often do not reflect the real test questions, and in my view, a great deal of the myths and misleading advice for IELTS writing stem from examples like this.

### **Academic Writing Task 1**

If we look at the instructions that accompany each task 1 question, we can see that you must '*Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.*' We are also told that you must '*Write at least 150 words.*' Looking at the descriptors for Task Achievement, gives us an even more detailed idea of what you must include in your answer. One word that appears several times is 'overview'.

### **What is an overview?**

In Task Achievement, an 'overview' is mentioned at several key points in the scale. In fact, we can see that a key difference between bands 5, 6, and 7 relates to whether an answer provides an overview (band 6) or not (band 5), and whether the overview is clear, and consists of the main trends (band 7). Clearly, it is important to learn about writing an overview when it comes to preparing for the test. The free Cambridge online dictionary defines a summary as 'a short, clear description that gives the main facts,' while an overview is defined as:



Thus, if you need to score band 7 or above, your summary must contain *a clear overview of the main trends that contains no details*. You can see an example of an overview on my website, and you can find more exercises to help you identify the main ideas and write an overview, on pages 97-99 of [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#).

**Key idea:** To score band 7 or above in academic writing task 1, your summary must contain a clear overview of the main trends, which contains no details.

### General Training Task 1

The equivalent key ideas in GT task 1 are the words 'purpose' and 'tone'. A band 7 candidate is someone who 'presents a clear purpose, with the tone consistent and appropriate,' while at band 6 the purpose is 'generally clear,' and the tone may be 'inconsistent.' In my experience, these two problems stem from not taking the time to read through the situation you are presented with in your task. The aim of this information is to help establish the tone and make your reason for writing clear. If you start your answer without carefully considering the situation, you are likely to forget certain aspects as you write, and your purpose will become unclear.

When it comes to tone, the main problems relate to using 'complex' vocabulary to try to achieve a high score. Re-read the vocabulary and grammar chapters to see how this can affect your tone and lower your score. There is also a sample answer on my website that demonstrates this.

**Key idea:** To score band 7 or above in General training writing task 1, your letter must have a clear purpose, and your tone must be appropriate and consistent.

### Using the band descriptors to help you improve

In previous chapters, I have advised seeing your current IELTS score as a useful indicator of the areas where you need to improve. In writing, the descriptors for the different bands can give you quite a detailed picture of the gap between your current level and the level you would like to achieve. It is very important for any teacher or student to become familiar with these criteria, especially if you feel that you are not making any progress in your writing. Notice how a detailed look at the descriptors helped us to understand how important your overview is in task 1.

### Running out of time in writing task 1

As with reading, the time limit is an important factor in task 1. It forces you to write a *brief* summary of only the main trends rather than a detailed description, or a letter that is just long enough to explain a situation and make your purpose clear. Those who spend more than 20 minutes on this task often lose marks because they produce an answer that is repetitive or contains too many irrelevant details. Moreover, the extra time spent on task 1 is taken from the time needed for task 2 and so has a significant impact on your overall score. If this is a problem for you, train yourself to focus only on the most important information in the question. *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* shows you how to distinguish between main trends and minor details and quickly identify and select key information.

### What structure should I use for my academic task 1 summary?

As with any formal writing, you should always begin with an introduction. However, as this is a short task, a complete paragraph is not necessary – an introductory sentence is sufficient. This sentence will 'introduce' the visual information you are given, so it will simply restate the information provided in the question in your own words. In some cases, where the visual information consists of several different elements (e.g. a chart and a table showing different information), it may be better to introduce these in two separate sentences.

Further information about what you must include and how you must structure your answer can also be found in the band descriptors. For example, the criterion for 'Coherence and cohesion' tells us that you must organise your answer into logical paragraphs to achieve a high band, while Task Achievement tells us that you must clearly present and highlight the key features in the data. Thus,

following your introduction, you should give a clear overview of the main trends and write one or two paragraphs giving the key details that illustrate and support your overview.

You cannot achieve a clear, accurate, and logically organised summary of the information (Academic), or make your tone and purpose clear (GT) without spending a few minutes studying the information and selecting the most relevant details before you begin to write. Practise doing this quickly, as often as you can, even if you do not have time to write a complete answer to a question.

### Should my overview come at the end or the beginning? Should I write a conclusion?

These are the two most frequent questions I am asked about academic writing task 1. To answer the first, there is no fixed rule about where to write your overview – it is only important that you make your overview clear. It may help to see this as a sentence that explains the main idea of your summary. It can come after your introduction or at the very end.

When it comes to a conclusion, it is important to be clear what we mean by this. The word conclusion can be used to simply mean an ending, or final part of something, and some people like to use their overview as a final point in their summary. Personally, I tend to write my own overview after the introduction, and this can be a good way to ensure you do not forget to include it. But in essay writing (such as with task 2) the word conclusion has another meaning; it means summing up your arguments and giving your own personal judgment or conclusion on a topic.

**conclusion** *noun* (JUDGMENT)

★ **B1** [C] **the opinion you have after considering all the information about something:**

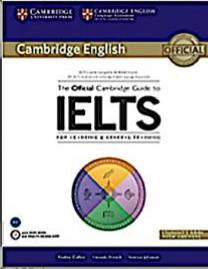
*Cambridge online dictionary*

When presenting and reporting data in academic writing task 1, it is not appropriate to write in a personal way, using personal pronouns or giving your personal views. So, you must not include this type of conclusion in academic writing task 1.

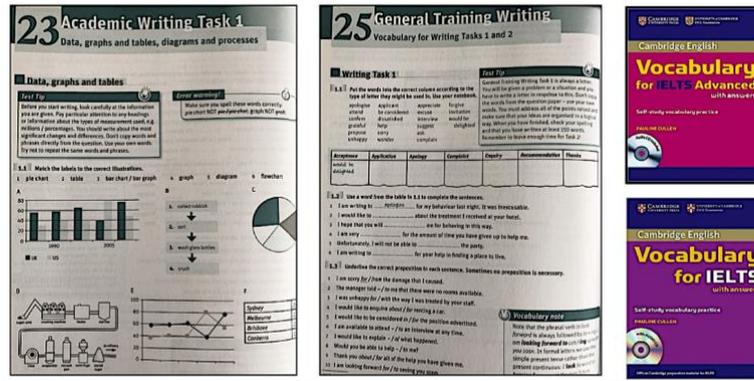
**Key idea:** You must **not** write a personal conclusion or give your own opinions about the information in your writing task 1 answer.

*The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS has 5 units helping you develop the skills needed for task 1.*

IELTS Writing		p91
<b>1 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing a chart, table or graph</b>		
1 Understanding graphs, tables and charts		
2 More complex charts		
3 Improving your Task Achievement score		
<b>2 Academic Writing Task 1 – Comparing and contrasting graphs and tables</b>		
1 Avoiding repetition		
2 Comparing and contrasting data		
3 Grammatical Accuracy – describing numbers and figures accurately		
<b>3 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing diagrams</b>		
1 Understanding a diagram		
2 Describing a process – coherence and cohesion		
3 Lexical Resource – being accurate		p108
<b>4 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing maps</b>		p110
1 Describing a map		p110
2 Describing changes in a place		p111
3 Grammatical Accuracy		p112
<b>5 General Training Writing Task 1 – A letter</b>		p113
1 Understanding the task		p113
2 Improving your score		p115
3 Checking and correcting		p117



My two vocabulary for IELTS books will teach you the *language* needed for writing task 1.



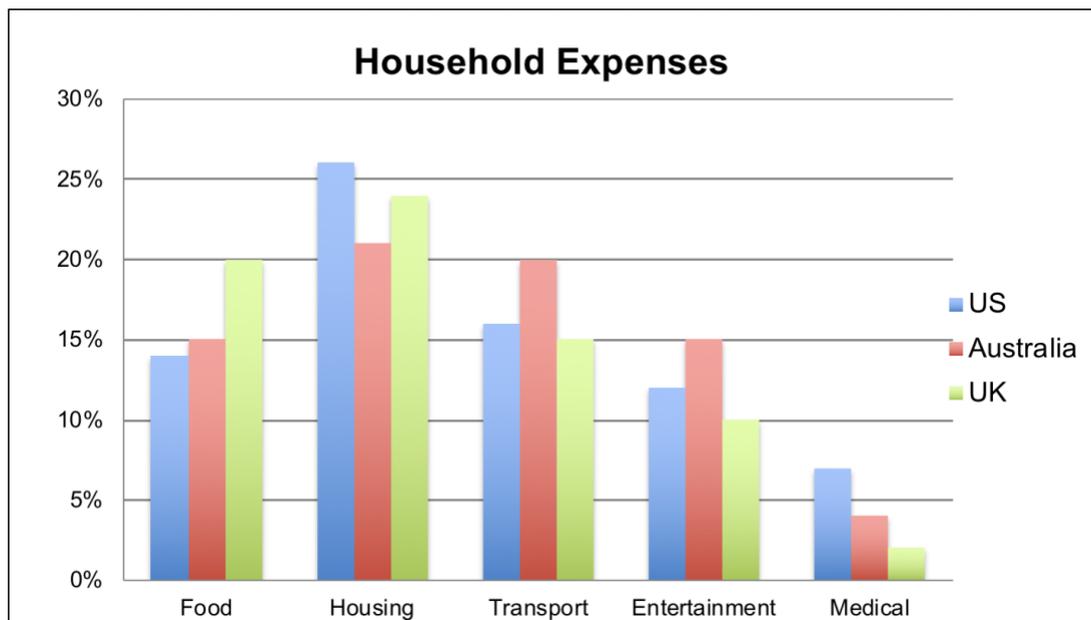
What language should I use in writing task 1?

For a more detailed explanation of the most common language problems in writing task 1, look back at chapters 3 and 4. A further note I will make here is that people often think of writing task 1 in terms of describing data, or writing a letter. However, every writing task has a topic, and it is your ability to report on that topic that is being assessed. So the same problems related to vocabulary occur in both task 1 and task 2. To demonstrate this, look at the following paragraph based on a writing task 1 exercise I set on my Facebook page.

**The chart below gives information on the percentage of the family budget typically spent on five different household expenses in the US, Australia and the UK.**

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

Write at least 150 words.



This next extract shows an attempt by one of my followers at writing an introductory sentence and an overview of the information:

The bar chart compares The American's, Australian's and British expenditure on four different household food, housing, transport, entertainment and medical.  
Overall, it can be clearly seen that the most of money is spend on housing in the three countries, while the least amount of money spend on medical.

The bar chart compares **The American's, Australian's** and British expenditure **on** **In the following four five** different **types of** household **expenses**: food, housing, transport, entertainment and medical.  
Overall, it can be clearly seen that **the most of** money is **spent** on housing in the three countries, while the least amount of money **\*is spent goes** on **\*medical expenses**.

*\* Medical is an adjective so needs a noun – the normal collocation is 'medical expenses' but saying 'money is spent on expenses' is again tautology (see above), so we would need to say 'the least amount of money goes on / goes towards medical expenses.'*

As you can see, many of the language problems relate to the vocabulary associated with money and how to write about this in a precise way. On my website, you will find further examples like this and my own sample answer for this task.

### Copying words from the question

In task 1, you are given a lot of information in the question. In your answer, you must use your own words whenever possible. Nevertheless, some key words do not have commonly used synonyms. For example, if you are given information about an island, or a hospital, then you would need to use these same words in your answer. Similarly, do not worry about replacing words like 'chart', or 'table', which appear in the question because they are the most natural words to use. Rather than replacing **every** word in the question, it is better to simply rephrase it. You can do this by changing the word order, or by making changes such as replacing a verb with a noun. Look at the following extract from one of the 8 practice tests at the end of *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* (p.283):

***The maps below show the village of Stokeford in 1930 and in 2010.***

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

We cannot rewrite this without using some of the same words, but we can express the information in a different way, like this: *The two maps show how a village called Stokeford changed between 1930 and 2010.*

A common problem in academic task 1 is people trying to avoid using the verb 'show', but if you look for synonyms you will find that many of the alternatives are not always appropriate:

### Show and Tell

**Display** = place things in a place where they can easily be seen

**Demonstrate** = show how something is done (e.g. How to use a machine; prove something to be true (e.g. in a study))

**Indicate** = shows that something is true (used to draw a conclusion about data)

**Reflect** = show an attitude (i.e. Act like a mirror)

**Reveal** = make people aware of something

**Provide** = give; supply

**Present** = give – used formally

**Represent** = stand in the place of (i.e. is a symbol of)

**Signify** = mean

**Tell** = give information (N.B. it needs an object – i.e. 'tell someone something')

### Example sentences:

The chart **shows** the number and gender of students in both part-time and full-time education in Britain in three time periods.

The chart **tells us** the number and gender of students in both part-time and full-time education in Britain in three time periods.

### *How the other words are used:*

The books were carefully **displayed** on a table.

The results **demonstrate** the need for further research.

These figures **indicate** that more funding is needed.

The protests in the street **reflected** the growing anger towards the government.

The survey **revealed** that fewer teenagers are planning on going to university than 10 years ago.

The lecturer **provided** us with a copy of his recent research.

In the chart, each line **represents** a different type of transport.

The dramatic increase in unemployment **signified** the start of the recession.

## Deliberate practice for IELTS writing task 1

As with all practice, you should divide your time between free practice (to help you learn and develop language skills) and timed practice (to be sure you can complete the task effectively in the test). Again, good course books will help you to do this.

### **Academic Task 1**

When practising for academic writing task 1, many people focus on describing data and numbers. However, it is also important to focus on tenses and how to accurately describe changes over time. These might be changes in data, or changes in a geographical area or a building.

You can also practise identifying the main trends or patterns using the following technique. Find a writing task 1 question and record yourself describing only the main trends in no more than two or three sentences. You must not give any specific details, such as percentages or numbers. Ask a friend to listen to the recording and draw what you have described. If their drawing shows the most important points or patterns, then you have done a good job of identifying the main trends. If you don't have a partner to work with, listen to the recording yourself a few weeks later to see if you can recreate the main trends using only your description. Repeat the exercise until you are happy with the result. Finally, write an overview of the main trends you described.

Use this same idea to help complete the task and practise the language needed to accurately describe visual information. To do that, record yourself again, but this time describe the information in enough detail for your partner (or your future self) to recreate the information almost exactly. If your partner is confused at any point, then your language may not be precise enough. This can be a good way to identify gaps in your language. Finally, select the most important details to support

your overview, then write out your summary in full. Work on it over several days if necessary, so that you can practise being accurate and precise, rather than only practising writing quickly, and under exam conditions.

### General training Task 1

When practising for GT task 1, you need to think about tone, an important consideration in Task achievement. The tone of your language is also linked to 'an awareness of style' and is one of the ways you can demonstrate a deeper knowledge of the language you have learned. To help get this right, visualise a real person when you write. If you need to write a letter to someone you know, think of a member of your own family, or a good friend. Similarly, when you need to write a work-related formal, or semi-formal letter, imagine you are writing to someone you know at work or university. Seeing yourself as writing to a real person can help keep your tone consistent throughout your letter.

For more practice, when you have finished one type of letter, write another letter changing the tone. For example, if you have to write a letter to complain about a hotel or restaurant, when you have finished, write another letter to a good friend telling them about the same problem. Record yourself reading your letter aloud. Do you think your tone is consistent and appropriate for the situation? *Listening* to your writing in this way can help to identify many problems.

### Final tips

- Use good model answers – be wary of models you find online that claim to be a high band.
- Use only well-written test materials so that you are forced to use and practise the right skills and language for the real test.
- Build language: be aware of language gaps that you have, such as when you struggle to explain something, then aim to fill those gaps.
- When you complete a task, review it a few days later – this can help you to spot mistakes
- Work with a friend – it is easier to spot mistakes in someone else's writing
- Read your answers aloud, this can help you see where your language is repetitive or where there are language problems.
- Identify your common problems and work on these.
- Practise planning and thinking, not just writing.
- Practise regularly, even if you only have 15-20 minutes – in that time, you should be able to complete a task or review a previous task.
- In the test, do not spend more than 20 minutes on this task – task 2 is much more important and needs 40 minutes.

**Look out for my Key to IELTS Writing Task 1 books towards the end of 2021**



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## Chapter 7

# The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2

### Understanding writing task 2

#### The aim of writing task 2

As writing task 2 is worth double the marks of task 1, it deserves special attention, and I have found that the greatest debates centre around this task. A high-level IELTS certificate tells the world that you are able to write about any topic in a serious way; writing task 2 aims to find out whether this can be said about **your** writing. Looking in more detail at the instructions for the task, as well as the criteria for Task response, and Coherence and cohesion, we can elaborate on this broad idea and state the following:

- You will be given a topic and a question (these two elements make up ‘the task’).
- Your response must be at least 250 words long, and must be a formal essay.
- In your essay, you must discuss the topic and present an argument that clearly explains your position on the issues raised in the question/s.
- Your ideas must be organised into logical paragraphs, and each paragraph should contain one central idea.
- Your ideas must be explained and supported, and you can use your own knowledge and experience to do that.

These details are readily available, yet many people tell me this is not enough information. They would actually like these broad ideas to be much narrower, making preparation for the test easier. However, any description of task 2 **must** be broad in order to force you to study a wide range of language and develop the skills your certificate will say that you have. In other words, the way that we describe this task has to be broad to ensure that you do the right preparation for the test. Therefore, while more detailed descriptions might seem convenient, they will not accurately describe the *real* test. As we shall see, it is the attempts to describe the task in a much more limited way that cause a great deal of confusion and, I believe, also keep people stuck below band 7.

### Common problems in IELTS writing task 2

Over the past 5 years, I have spent a lot of time trying to understand why people remain stuck at band 6.5 in writing. I have looked at hundreds of essays at this level, and answered many queries about the task, which has helped me to identify several key problems, many of which relate to Task response.

#### Misunderstanding the task

Task 2 will always have one or two statements followed by one or two questions. It is important to note that both of these together make up your ‘task’. The statements perform several key functions. Firstly, they help to clearly define the topic you must discuss. Too often people reach a hasty decision about the topic, or see it in very broad terms, thinking: ‘*Right, so the topic is technology.*’ In reality, your task will be much more specific, such as ‘the impact that email communication has had on work life’ or ‘the effect that smart phones have on the social life of young people.’ So, it is very important to read the initial statements carefully and fully understand the issue you need to discuss. Sometimes these sentences contain examples to help you and ensure the meaning is clear, so pay close attention to this.

Secondly, the initial statements give you something to react to and form an opinion on. If you ignore these statements, or dismiss them as merely 'background information', you are likely to lose marks in Task response. The idea that the initial statements can be ignored is likely to come from examples people have seen that do not reflect the real test. I first began to realise this was a problem several years ago, when people stuck at band 6.5 would send me essays for feedback. I noticed that their essays were often off-topic, or were rambling and confusing. When I asked to see the question they had used, in every case the task was found online.

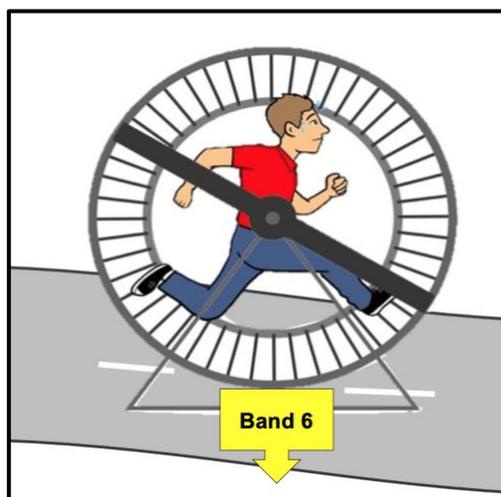
Many of these tasks are confusing or unfair, and require specialist knowledge. For example, a statement that mentions university courses '*being offered through the internet*' followed by a question asking you to discuss '*the benefits of online teaching*' leads to confusion about whether you should write about studying online or about teaching. A candidate with no teaching experience would then struggle in trying to write about this.

The problem is further exacerbated when websites exaggerate such issues to promote their advice. One site suggests you learn sentences to help deal with IELTS task 2 questions that are '*ridiculously obscure*.' They then provide a suitable example to support this idea – a question full of complex terminology that can only be answered if you have a specialist knowledge of western political history from the last 30 years. Such questions are not a *fair, valid, and reliable* test of English, and as such they cannot be said to represent IELTS.

The answers produced in response to confusing questions are generally also confusing and unclear. I have also found that when students attempt to write about a topic they have no experience of, they produce writing that is repetitive and rambling, because they struggle for ideas. If you rely on materials like this for your test practice, you will practise ignoring part of the question and writing in a confusing, repetitive way. As this image from my website shows, you are effectively practising writing at band 6:

Task response	
Band 6	Band 7
<p><i>This is what you are doing wrong.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses all parts of the task, although <b>some parts may be more fully covered than others.</b></li> <li>presents a relevant position, although <b>the conclusions may be unclear or repetitive.</b></li> <li>presents relevant main ideas, but <b>some may be inadequately developed / unclear</b></li> </ol>	<p><i>This is what you must do.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses <b>all parts of the task.</b></li> <li><b>presents a clear position throughout</b> the response.</li> <li>presents, <b>extends and supports main ideas</b>, but there may be a tendency to overgeneralize and/or supporting ideas may lack focus.</li> </ol>

**In my experience, many candidates are working very hard to stay at band 6 in writing. The wrong type of practice and following bad advice will keep you there.**



**It is important to see your task like this**

This statement defines the **very specific topic you must discuss in a balanced way in your answer**. It gives you something to write about and to respond to.

<b>Both of these together make up your task</b>	<p><i>More and more universities now have online courses and as a result, many students are spending less time in the classroom.</i></p> <p><i>Do the benefits of this development outweigh the disadvantages?</i></p>
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This question helps show you how to approach **giving your position on the very specific topic you have been given**.

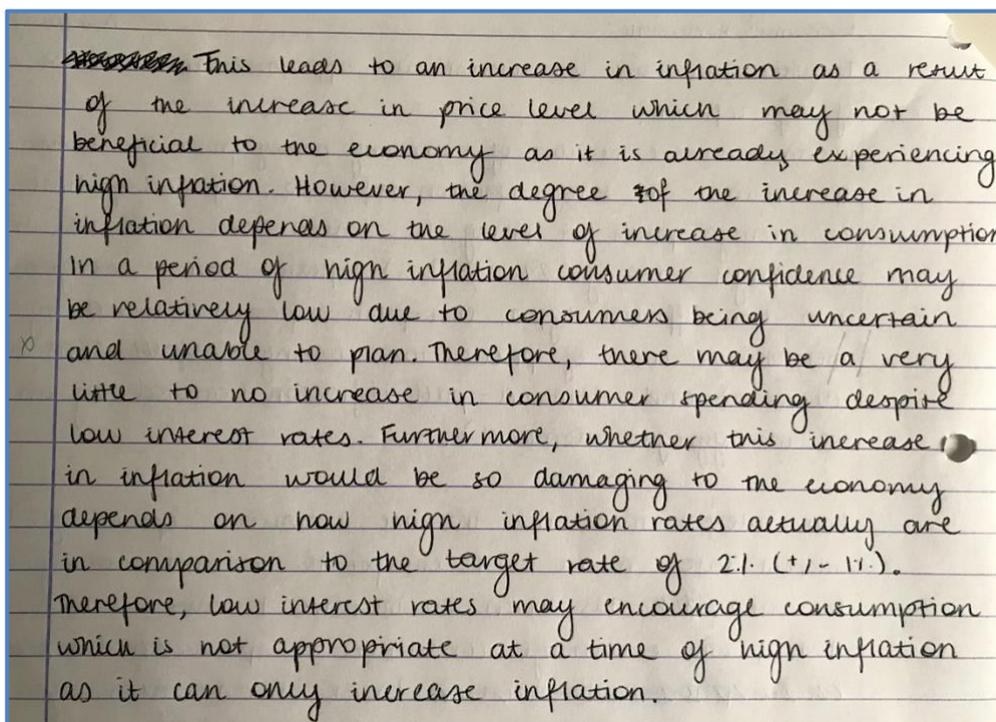
In the task I have written above, you can see that the initial statement relates to something you would have experience of, or would be able to imagine, and so is a fair and valid topic for discussion. The question also makes it very clear what your focus should be, and is clearly linked to the statement. Always use authentic test materials to ensure you are doing the right practice for the test.

### **Why do we only have 40 minutes?**

Remember, the aim of this test is to show that you have the writing skills needed for university study or in your career. This means you need to develop the same writing skills that a native-speaker acquires in the final years at high school. To demonstrate this, I will refer to my daughter, who at the time of writing is preparing for her A' level exams. One of her subjects is Economics, for which she will have to write several essays during a 2-hour exam.

When she first started to write these essays, she had similar problems to those I described in chapter 4, when I was struggling with my French. Though writing in her native tongue, she still had to develop the skills needed to produce a clear, effective essay. Interestingly, many of her early problems reflected those I see in non-native speaker writing; she would write long, rambling sentences; she would repeat the same cohesive devices over and over; and she sometimes wrote without showing any understanding of what she had written. Her aim initially was to simply get the task finished, and to fill several pages with writing.

Over this last year of continual practice, her writing has improved enormously. Now, when I look at her essays, I can only see one or two slips. In exam situations, she can write an essay of 4 pages in 40 minutes. She can produce 2 of these long essays, as well as several shorter ones, within the 2-hour exam. My daughter could not do this at the start of her course. She can only now do this because she has deliberately practised and developed the skills she needs and, perhaps even more importantly, because she knows what she is writing about. This last point is a key idea when it comes to your own preparation. To give you some idea of her writing level, here is an extract from her most recent essay based on this topic: 'How appropriate are low interest rates at a time of high inflation?'



~~Therefore~~ This leads to an increase in inflation as a result of the increase in price level which may not be beneficial to the economy as it is already experiencing high inflation. However, the degree of the increase in inflation depends on the level of increase in consumption. In a period of high inflation consumer confidence may be relatively low due to consumers being uncertain and unable to plan. Therefore, there may be a very little to no increase in consumer spending despite low interest rates. Furthermore, whether this increase in inflation would be so damaging to the economy depends on how high inflation rates actually are in comparison to the target rate of 2% (+1-1%). Therefore, low interest rates may encourage consumption which is not appropriate at a time of high inflation as it can only increase inflation.

It is important to note that this is part of a 4-page essay about economic policy, and so is much longer, and far more technical than any essay you will ever be asked to write in IELTS. I am merely sharing it here to show that, in comparison, writing a 250-word essay on a much more accessible topic, in the same amount of time, is actually not such a big task. You may notice from this that native-speaker writers also struggle to use commas accurately. It is also worth noting that native speakers who need to take IELTS for immigration purposes, and who have not studied subjects at an advanced level that require essay-writing skills like this, also struggle with IELTS writing task 2.

### Responding to 'different types' of questions

As we saw in earlier chapters of this book, there are a lot of myths and claims to be found online about how IELTS works. The following table shows a list of claims about task 2 that I was recently asked to verify. The first three in the list relate to the idea of how to answer specific question 'types', which is one of the ways in which people have tried to give a much narrower definition of task 2.

### Common claims about IELTS Writing

1	'Some say that the question types 'do you agree/disagree?' and 'Is this a positive or negative development?' <b>we should only agree with one side of the argument and never discuss the other side.</b>
2	In the question type 'to what extent do you agree/disagree' people say we can consider both sides of the argument <b>as the question states this phrase 'to what extent'</b>
3	In the question 'discuss both sides and give your opinion' <b>some say you should explain your opinion separately in the third body paragraph.</b>
4	' <b>There is no need to summarize your main points when writing the thesis statement, in other words, just mention your stance and write there are some reasons behind that.</b> ' <b>But other examiners say that in order to get band 7+, you have to summarize the two main points in the thesis.</b>
5	Some of the examiners/teachers say that when it comes to the question 'discuss both views and give your opinion' <b>we should write our opinion in a separate paragraph as well as in the introduction and the conclusion. Others, however, say that it's sufficient just to state your opinion in the introductory paragraph as well as the conclusion paragraph.</b>
6	One of my teachers told me that, to make a paragraph, <b>you should develop 2-3 ideas with explanations and real-life examples at the end of each idea.</b> I'm confused because we cannot give 3 examples for 3 ideas in one paragraph. It sounds too much to me.
7	Others say it's not good to write an outline sentence like "This essay will discuss..." <b>they claim that the examiners hate such sentences!</b>

I have been told many times by people outside of the test that there are 4 (sometimes even 6) question 'types'. They then tell me that each 'type' must only be answered in a specific way. Some people take this idea even further by creating a formula, or a template, that can be neatly applied to answer each 'type'. The vast majority of the band 6 or 6.5 answers I see are written by people following this idea.

The idea of different answers for different types of question is so pervasive that some people think I was hiding something by not including it in [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#). And one teacher made the following complaint to me about some model answers in a book by Vanessa Jakeman – a true IELTS expert, and a wonderful mentor to me in my early years of test writing. The teacher's complaint was that Vanessa's book contains '**answers to opinion essays that would lose marks in Task response because they are discussion essays.**' This comment is based on myths about IELTS, and shows just how confused this issue has become. Clearly, on the issue of writing, both teachers and students now feel that they do not know which resources they can and cannot trust.

You will not find any mention of '**opinion essays**' or '**discussions essays**', and you will not find sample answers that support the notion of how different '**types**' of question '**must be answered**' in the [Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#), the Cambridge Practice Test books, the official IELTS website, or indeed in any books written by real IELTS experts. This is because **these ideas only exist outside of the test.**

In fact, in spite of working on the test for over 20 years myself, I am still not completely sure what people outside of the test actually mean when they distinguish between a 'discussion essay,' an

'argument essay,' and an 'opinion essay'. I can only say that, in my view, this sort of labelling is responsible for a great deal of confusion about the test, and is a key reason why candidates fail to reach a higher band, even after many attempts.

Writing task 2 should be seen very simply as a discursive essay in which you must make your own ideas and position clear; in other words, an essay which requires a careful blend of both objective discussion and opinion.

**Key idea:** There are no special 'types' of essay questions in IELTS. Task 2 is a discursive essay in which you must discuss an issue and make your own position clear.

### Opinion and discussion

As far as I can tell, there appears to be a common misconception that some questions are asking you to write '*an opinion essay*', in which I am told that, '*You must only write about the view you agree with*' or, '*You must only argue in favour of one side.*' This is not at all true. Questions such as 'To what extent do you agree or disagree?' are merely asking you to consider the issue you are given, discuss it in a logical way, and make the extent of your position on it clear. In other words, show whether your position is strong agreement, strong disagreement, or something between the two.

Just as with all task 2 questions, in doing this, you must also discuss the issues raised in the question. We know this because the Task response criterion makes it very clear. Arguing in favour of the side you believe in does not mean that you '*should never discuss the other side of the issues raised*'. When two different opinions are given in the question, you *must* discuss both equally to achieve band 7 in Task response. Mistakenly believing you must only discuss the one you agree with causes candidates to remain stuck at band 6 because, in their essay, some parts of the question are '**more fully covered than others.**' (Band 6 Task response).

A similar problem occurs with the essay type referred to as, '*a discussion essay*.' For these, I am frequently told that, '*You must not give your opinion*'. This idea is even more problematic and keeps people stuck at band 6 because they do not '**present a clear position throughout the response**' (Band 7 Task response). This idea of making your position clear throughout your essay is a key one, and creates many problems at band 6. Even those who identify the task as '*an opinion essay*,' and dutifully follow the 'rules' they have been given, often then fail to make their position clear *throughout*. It is important to point out you will not achieve this by simply writing your opinion in the introduction, and in the conclusion, and in a body paragraph (which is suggested by claims 3 and 5 in the previous table).

Your position is made clear, or unclear, through your argument and your language. Reread the chapters on Vocabulary and Grammar to understand how your language affects this. Remember, this is a test of how skillfully you can use language, and how clearly and precisely you can discuss a complex issue, and express your own ideas on it.

### But there are different questions, so why can't we label them?

The main issue with labelling essays in this way is that candidates then read the question and mentally change it to fit the 'labels' and 'rules' they have learned. Thus, instead of thinking, '**I must discuss everything in this topic and make my own position clear,**' their thinking is, '*I must write a discussion essay and I must not give my opinion,*' or '*I must write an opinion essay and I must only discuss the part of the question I agree with – I should ignore the rest.*' Both of these are incorrect and **will lower your score.**

Let me clarify this by saying that, if I were teaching a weekly IELTS writing class, I would make sure to cover a variety of language and topics as well as a variety of test questions. Students need practice in answering a range of questions so that they are forced to learn a range of language skills. This would include learning how to:

- discuss the problems associated with an issue and suggest possible solutions
- discuss and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of something
- discuss one or two opinions on a topic and give their own opinion
- discuss the possible causes of a problem and the effect it has

However, I would never state that each of these *must* or *can only* be answered in a certain way, as this simply is not true.

**Key idea:** In every test, aim to discuss the very specific issue you are given in a balanced way, while making your own position on that issue clear.

### The thesis statement and a focus on 'form'

Writing is very personal, and it is important to develop your own style and voice, while also adhering to the normal conventions of formal essay writing. However, such conventions vary between different English-speaking countries. Thus, the US and Canadian approach differs to that of the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. As IELTS is an *international* test, all of these different approaches are accepted. This idea helps to answer the many questions I am asked about where to write your opinion, or your 'thesis statement.'

I tend to avoid using terms like 'thesis statement' in my explanations, quite simply because I do not find them helpful. Language like this can lead to confusion unless there is a common understanding of what a term like this means. However, as so many people ask me about thesis statements, I feel that it is important to clarify the issue.

The idea of what a thesis statement is, how it should be used, and where it should appear, varies between the US and the UK, between different academic institutions, and even between different academics *within* institutions (in the resources chapter you can find a reference to a discussion about this).

When it comes to IELTS candidates, many appear to see a thesis statement very narrowly as '*the sentence that gives your opinion.*' In fact, it is much broader than this. A thesis statement is a sentence that can be used to do any of the following: state your main 'thesis' (i.e. the idea you will prove, or persuade the reader of, in your body paragraphs), help to control the ideas within your essay, and reflect the opinion or judgment that you have made.

**Key idea:**

A thesis statement can be used to:

- state the main idea of a piece of writing
- help control the ideas in your writing
- reflect an opinion or judgment that you have made

The conventions on where to write your thesis statement vary from country to country.

To illustrate the idea further, my thesis statement for this book would be: '*IELTS test materials that do not accurately reflect the test can interfere with test preparation, and can limit a student's chance of success in the test.*' This is a judgment I have made after careful thought and deliberation, it is also a controlling idea running throughout the chapters of this book, and it is based on my knowledge

of the test and my personal experience of dealing with people's questions on social media. It is an argument I have made, explained, and tried to prove throughout the chapters of this book. This is how a thesis statement should function. In fact, it may help to see your thesis statement as similar to your overview statement in task 1 – giving an overview of your argument and position.

If you were writing a dissertation as part of your university course, your lecturers would give you advice about how and where to write your thesis statement. I believe that in the US, the convention is to write this in your introduction, while some lecturers in the UK say that they prefer to see it at the end, to show that this is a judgment made after careful examination. I often present my own thesis statements in my conclusion for this same reason. As you can see, there is no single international standard for this, it is a matter of style and preference.

Your IELTS teacher may follow one particular style, and this is fine, whether that style is to state your thesis in the introduction, or the conclusion, or both. As far as Task response is concerned, it simply matters that you develop an argument, reach a clear conclusion, and make your position clear *throughout* your essay – **a thesis statement alone will not achieve this**.

When it comes to the form of your essay, the conventions that apply in all English-speaking countries are as follows:

- begin with an introduction that briefly introduces the topic
- write 2 or 3 body paragraphs that present, and explain your main points
- finish with a conclusion that summarises your main points, and makes your position clear.

It is important to point out that the number of paragraphs needed cannot be dictated or predicted; it is dependent on only one thing: your ideas in response to the question you are given on the day.

**Key idea:**

The structure for every task 2 essay should be:

- **an introduction** that briefly introduces the topic you will discuss
- **2 or 3 body paragraphs** that present a clear argument and explain your main points
- **a conclusion** that summarises your main points, and makes your position clear.

NB – the number of paragraphs needed **is dependent on your ideas** on the day.

Those who follow strict guidelines, such as how many ideas, examples, or sentences there should be in each paragraph, or where to write your thesis statement, tend to think only of the mechanics of writing. They think in terms of quantities instead of communicating ideas. As a result, far too often, the opinion or thesis statements I see in an introduction do not reflect the arguments and ideas that then appear in the body paragraphs. In fact, very often the 'thesis statement' presents the opposite of what the body paragraphs argue, and the conclusion then states.

This is a common problem at band 6 where candidates 'often present a relevant position although the conclusions may become unclear.' Thus, these statements take the 'form' of a thesis statement, but they do not perform its 'function.' In IELTS, **what you write matters** much more than the number of sentences or words in a paragraph. The fact that Task response comes first in the band descriptors should signal this very clearly.

**Key idea:** In IELTS, **what you write matters** much more than the number of sentences or words in a paragraph.

Time and again, I see candidates paying little attention to what they are writing. Like my daughter at the start of her course, their main aim is simply to complete the task. There is an added problem in that many focus too much on trying to please or impress the examiner. A follower from Iran recently sent me 4 thesis statements asking me to tell him, 'Which would the examiner prefer?' I was told that the statements were written based on conflicting advice given by 'very famous IELTS websites'. (NB, if you believe that fame is an important indicator of how reliable IELTS information is, then I recommend that you read chapter 1 again.)

#### Thesis statements based on 'popular IELTS advice'.

1. I agree with this view **due to the reasons** that online learning is inexpensive and can be more convenient than **the** classroom-based learning.
2. I agree with the view that online learning should be encouraged for two reasons.
3. Two problems have arisen as result of this; first, it has contributed to the destruction of **the** natural habitats **and** has **impacted the** air quality. However, there are some solutions to counter such issues.
4. There are two major problems related to this; however, there are solutions **to tackle** them.

*Can you correct the language problems in red? You will find the answers on my website.*

#### Introducing your essay

In assessing the statements above, we must consider that these were all written as part of an introduction. Thus, we need to consider not only whether these sentences explain the writer's thesis but also whether they help to *introduce* the essay to the reader. Sentences 1, 2 and 4 certainly appear to do this. However, I would change the end of sentence 2 to 'for *several* reasons,' or 'for two *important* reasons.' (The first is less definite, and the second to indicate why there are only two reasons given in the essay).

Nevertheless, all of these are simply sentences unless they perform the function of a thesis statement, which is to reflect the main ideas within the whole essay. Consequently, they can only be labelled 'thesis statements,' and judged as such, in the context of a whole essay, and only then if the 'reasons' or 'problems' mentioned in the body paragraphs actually match this information.

Example 3 is based on the claim that, '***in order to get band 7+, you have to summarize the two main points in the thesis.***' This is *not* how language assessment works – your examiner is looking at your overall argument, not ticking boxes in this way. As we have seen, adding an extra 'magic ingredient' will never 'boost' your score. While skilled native speaker writers may be able to achieve this, I see many examples where candidates have tried to follow this advice and produced a mini body paragraph rather than an introductory one. This is then followed by body paragraphs that simply repeat the same argument and same ideas. Attempting to cram too many ideas into your introduction can therefore create problems in paragraphing (Coherence and cohesion), the development of your ideas, and repetition (Task response.) These problems will *lower*, not raise, your overall score.

Your introduction should introduce the topic to your reader. I often think the reader should be able to work out the topic you were given from reading your introduction alone, without the need to look back at the test question. Look through your previous essays to see if you can recreate the main gist of the test question just from reading your introductions.

**Key idea:** Remember, there is only one correct approach to every IELTS writing task 2 question: to write an essay that will meet the Task response criterion.

### A lack of position

People stuck at band 6 often ask me, 'Is it better to agree or disagree with the question?' This question reveals another key problem at this level: many candidates begin writing without having a clear idea of their own opinion. People asking this question are really saying 'Tell me what my opinion should be! Tell me what to think!' You will not succeed in making your position clear throughout your essay if you do not actually know what your position is before you begin writing. This is closely linked to the next problem: a lack of ideas.

**Key idea:** You will not succeed in making your position clear throughout your essay if you do not actually know what your position is before you begin writing.

### A lack of ideas

People often go into the test with a mental tool chest full of useful sentence openers like this: 'One of the main reasons why ...xyz...' or 'One of the main advantages associated with ...' Some people even learn a complete 'template' of phrases and, during the test, they simply complete the sentences based on the topic in the question. These are sometimes referred to as ways to write a 'topic sentence.' There is a danger that terms such as this become a form of shorthand or jargon, often used without thinking about the larger meaning they encompass.

**jargon**

noun [U] · UK 🇬🇧 /ˈdʒɑː.ɡən/ US 🇺🇸 /ˈdʒɑːr.ɡən/ USUALLY DISAPPROVING

★ C1 special words and phrases that are used by particular groups of people, especially in their work:

military/legal/computer jargon

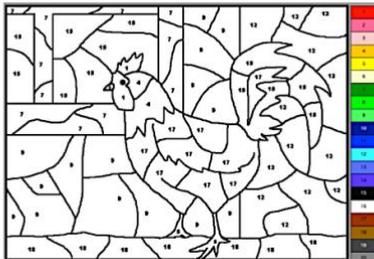
Again, as a teacher, I find the term 'topic sentence' unhelpful; unless the term is really understood, it is only as useful as saying 'write an idea.' As we saw with thesis statements, the resulting sentences often do not present 'the main idea of the paragraph', and so do not perform their promised function. In fact, I generally find that there is a distinct *lack* of ideas in many band 6 or 6.5 essays that I see. This is probably because of the use of pre-learned phrases, like those above, which candidates use without fully understanding, and which give them a false sense of having written something meaningful; they simply help to fill the page with writing.

The origin of these templates is perhaps teaching exercises commonly used to help students at bands 4 and 5 to get started in their writing. At the lower levels, it is useful to present students with a paragraph template to help them learn how to explain and connect ideas in a controlled way. The 'template' acts as a framework for the students' sentences, but in the context of IELTS, such phrases act as a controlling set of tracks that your essay must then follow. Writing in this way means you cannot respond naturally to the task you are given on the day, you can only respond mechanically and unnaturally.

Clearly, any test that could be mastered using a learned template like this would not be a reliable one. Time and again, I have seen that using a fixed approach to answering question 'types', as well as set phrases from a 'template', results in answers that do not respond to the test question, which is a common factor in band 6.5 writing. A fixed approach like this is a little like entering art competitions using the same paint-by-numbers template when the theme you are given varies each

time.

### Do not take a paint-by-numbers approach to your essay writing



If your approach to the writing test is to focus on quantities (e.g. how many paragraphs / sentences / ideas / examples you write), structure (e.g. where to put your thesis statement or opinion), and using set phrases to begin your 'topic sentences,' then you are thinking mechanically rather than thinking of ideas to write about, and you are likely to stay stuck at band 6 or 6.5.

**Key idea:** If you want to achieve band 7 or above, you **must** think of ideas first, before thinking of the language you need to express those ideas. Using a formula means you cannot write in a flexible way and respond appropriately to the task you are given.

### Repetitive writing

When candidates write without thinking first, the result is often very repetitive. To show this, look at the following task 2 question I posted on my Facebook page. The question has two opinions (shown in yellow and green). Look at the introduction and first body paragraph produced by one of my followers. I have corrected the main language problems to allow us to focus only on ideas, and used colours to show the repetition.

Writing task 2 question:

**Some people believe that anyone can learn to play music or sport well. However, others believe that people must be born with talents like these.**

**Discuss both these views and give your own opinion.**

Introduction and first paragraph from a band 6 response:

People sometimes try to enhance their skills in hobbies such as playing a musical instrument. **Some people argue that, through a combination of training and practice, anyone could reach a professional level in hobbies like this, while others believe that innate talent is required to achieve true mastery of such skills.**

**On one side of the argument, some people are of the opinion that high achievers in any field have reached that level because of their hard work and the training they received. This means that, the more practice people have in any skill, and the more training they get, the higher the level they will reach. Clearly, supporters of this idea rule out the role of genetics and inherited talents as the main factor determining who becomes highly-skilled, and they believe that only hard work is required.**

In his introduction, the candidate restates the question, which is exactly what you must do in the test. However, the first body paragraph also does this, which means that there is no progression, or 'development' of ideas.

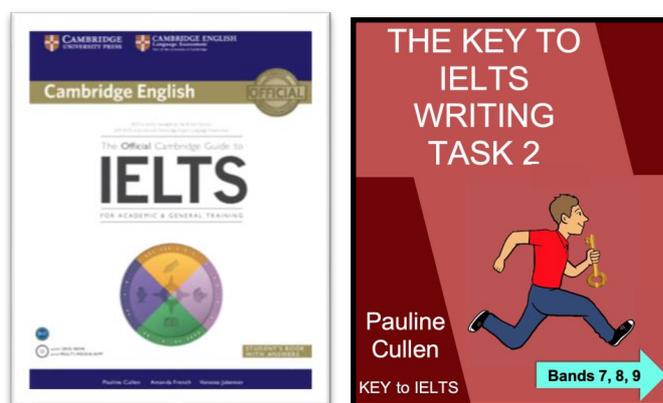
The idea of 'development' is another key word in the band descriptors. A band 9 response is described as 'fully developed', band 8 is 'well-developed.' Although the word itself does not appear in the band 7 descriptor, we do know that 'a clear position' is presented throughout, and that the main ideas are 'presented, extended and supported' at this level. At band 6, the main ideas are 'relevant' but may be 'inadequately developed', so we can assume that, **to achieve band 7, your ideas must be adequately developed**. This means that, from your first body paragraph onwards, you should be presenting, extending, and supporting **your own ideas and views** on this topic. Writing is thinking we can see, if you do not think before you write, there is no development to see in your writing.

**Key idea:** To achieve band 7 or above, you must present, extend, and support **your ideas and views** on the topic you are given. Writing is thinking we can see, if you do not think before you write, there is nothing to see.

### Understanding the role that culture plays in writing

Of course, this repetition may not only be due to a lack of ideas, culture can also play a part here. In some cultures, when writing a discursive essay, the convention is to discuss the issue in a circular way, coming back to the same key ideas repeatedly. But in IELTS, you must learn to present an argument in a linear way, with a clear progression from one idea to the next, until a logical conclusion is reached. A further problem can occur if your education did not train you to be an independent learner, encouraged to question ideas.

Think for a moment about how you would write an essay in your own language – would you talk *around* the topic, or would you present a logical, linear argument? If the former is true, then you need to not only focus on language learning, but also on training yourself to write essays differently. In **The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS**, there are 3 chapters showing you how to develop an argument in a linear way like this. My second book in this series, **The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2**, has 20 lessons and takes you step by step through this process, from thinking, to planning, and then writing. As well as exercises, there are 16 model essays and I show you how to turn band 6.5 writing into band 8-9 writing.



### The 'scope' sentence: *'This essay will analyse ...'*

The seventh claim in the table we looked at earlier mentions a sentence I often see (and cross out) that begins like this: *'This essay will analyse this issue by...'* Some people refer to these as 'scope' sentences. Writing such sentences in your introduction may be a US convention, or it may be that this trend has come from EAP study, though I suspect that, in IELTS essays they are often used to add words rather than meaning to an essay.

Personally, I would only expect to write something like this in the introduction to a very long document, such as a dissertation, or in the abstract of a research paper, where the use of the word 'analyse' would be accurate. These sentences serve as a guide to the reader and are used to signal the scope of the document, so that the reader can decide whether the contents are relevant or of interest to them. Your examiner does not need to be encouraged to read all the way through your essay in this way. As far as I am concerned, they are unnecessary in an essay of 250 words, especially as they reveal nothing of your ability to explain your ideas, which is what the examiner is looking for evidence of. As such, I view them as a waste of 13 or more words that you could use more effectively in another part of your essay to help develop or support your argument.

### Inventing examples

As we have seen, the test aims to find out if you have the writing skills needed to undertake higher education, or work in a professional capacity and, it must cater for candidates from all fields. As you cannot be aware of formal studies or facts related to every possible topic that can occur in the test, you are not expected to use academic references, or hard evidence, to support your ideas. This is why the instructions tell you that you may '*include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.*'

Naturally, there is a small chance that, among the millions who take the test each year, one or two candidates may have carried out research that is relevant to the very specific question you are given on the day. Such candidates might choose to refer to this in their essays, but this would not provide any special 'boost' to their score, nor would this give them a special advantage over the candidates *without* this knowledge. Given how rare this must be, it is surprising just how many statistics I see in practice essays.

Here are two examples:

*For instance, a survey done at London Grammar School in 2014 reported that 95% of students of grade four said...*

*A survey done by the British Food Authority in 2014 revealed that 80% of the customers at fast food restaurants belong to the ages between fourteen and seventeen.*

When you attempt to create facts like this, you add an extra, unnecessary step to the writing process: the ability to invent feasible statistics and official bodies related to the topic you are given. Perhaps to save time in the test, people appear to learn these beforehand and then force them to fit into an essay topic. As a result, they generally do not add relevant support to their ideas, and so do not help to show band 7 skills. Remember the key point from my daughter's writing: she can now write more effectively, more fluently, and more accurately, because **she is writing about what she knows.**

### Using personal examples

Other common examples involve family members or friends, so I see many sentences that begin like this: 'For example, my uncle / my cousin / a friend of mine...' If you do happen to think of an example from your own experience, or that of someone you know, then it is fine to use that to help explain or support an idea. However, again, examples like this work best when they are *authentic*; if they are invented, simply because you believe you must provide one example in each paragraph, they are generally not effective. If you do not have experience related to the question, then there are other ways to support your ideas.

To demonstrate this idea of using an example to 'support' your ideas, look at the following extract from a recent essay I received and my comment on the example.

Most professionals have to demonstrate relevant work experience when applying for jobs. Because of this, courses in fields such as engineering generally include some practical training, usually in the final year of university, in order to give new graduates an idea of the practical skills needed in their profession, because there are many more challenges in real life than academic life. For example, a post-graduate civil engineer with weak practical skills will have a much lower chance of finding a job compared to a graduate with great practical skills.

This example does not support your previous idea – it is an example of why a graduate with practical experience is more likely to get a job – it is not related to the idea that the courses you have mentioned have a practical element.

Here is my version of the example (notice a change I also made in the way the information is organised to make this more logical and easier to follow):

There are many more challenges in real life than academic life, so most graduates have to demonstrate relevant work experience when applying for jobs. Because of this, courses in fields such as engineering generally include some practical training, usually in the final year of university, in order to give new graduates an idea of the practical skills needed in their profession. For example, a post-graduate civil engineer would usually have spent at least 6 months working on engineering projects as part of their course.

Now the example helps to support the previous idea and to also helps to develop the main argument: that practical experience is important.

**Key idea:** Don't invent statistics. Only give a concrete example if it is relevant and helps develop your ideas. Write about what you know.

### I am a doctor, can I use medical examples?

A large number of the people I help are trained doctors. Even if they don't tell me this initially, it usually becomes clear through the examples they use in their writing. A common problem I see is the overuse of medical language. It often seems as though they are trying to show how broad their medical knowledge is, rather than focusing on answering the question they are given. The following paragraph is a good example of that. I wrote and shared this task on my Facebook page to help everyone practise using examples:

***Many people believe that playing video games is a waste of time and can even have a negative effect on the health of players.***

***To what extent do you agree or disagree?***

Along with this task, I posted a video showing how a friend of my family in Australia is recovering the use of his legs through the innovative use of virtual reality. I encouraged my followers to write a

paragraph disagreeing with the view in the question, and to use the story in the video as an example. The following paragraph shows one of the attempts:

**Original version, with errors shown:**

The use of virtual reality can give positive effect for treating, re-shaping and re-framing people self-limiting beliefs in battling difficulties of physical handicap and problems such as paralysis. This videos games helps the perception of the mind to have good detailed perception of positive pictures of having conquered events like walking, running and climbing. Because of this, it signals the neurons to have physical impulses of movements, which then stimulates the endorphins that will boost positive emotions to the person. Thus, this kind of medical practice can dramatically improve the conditions of people who have issues in physical movements and mental blocks of doing so.

**Corrected, less technical Version:**

The use of virtual reality has been shown to have a positive effect when treating people who are paralysed, or who have a physical handicap. Such video games help the mind to form a realistic, mental image showing the person successfully walking, running and even climbing. These virtual movements stimulate the brain, which then produces the impulses necessary for real movement. This has a further positive effect in that it stimulates the production of endorphins, making the person feel happier. Thus, we could argue that video games can actually serve a very useful purpose and are not always detrimental to our health.

Although the writer has used high-level vocabulary, the sentence structures and descriptions are overly complex, and cause confusion for the reader. In the vocabulary chapter, I mentioned that you should avoid using 3 words when one would be better, and there is an example of this in the first sentence. Reread chapter 3 if you have forgotten this important point.

For doctors, or anyone using their specialist knowledge in the writing test, there is a tendency for their examples to be overly technical, and to distract the writer from the issue they are discussing. As a result, their ideas gradually move further and further away from the very specific topic in the question. In the example above, what began as an example to support the idea that video games can be beneficial, ended as an explanation of medical theory and practice. This is how what can initially seem to be an advantage can become a disadvantage. Always remember to focus on the question, and make sure to explain your ideas clearly, as though you are writing to a non-specialist.

**Key idea:** If you are a doctor or a specialist in your field, remember to explain your ideas clearly, as though you are writing to someone who knows nothing about your field. Do not let your specialist knowledge distract you from the specific question you are given.

### Misunderstanding the level of bands 7 to 9

Many websites give advice about how to achieve a high score in IELTS but seem confused about what the different band levels mean, or how writing assessment works. It is important to understand that a band 8 or 9 certificate is not a qualification that allows you to assess band 8 or 9 language. To further understand the problem, let us consider an example from a website that promises to show you how to reach band 8. I was sent the link by a follower of my Facebook page, who wanted to know if the advice being given was accurate.

The website tries to demonstrate the difference between band 6 and band 8 using this example:

According to the website, this is 'Band 6' writing:

*Teenagers who play computer-based games can reap several benefits.*

And they claim that the 'Band 8' version would look like this:

*Audio and visual games which are designed to be played on the computer immensely positively affect teenage gamers, both refining their life skills such as problem solving, critical thinking as well as interpersonal communication and enhancing their intellectual development.*

Advice like this leads to a belief that you can manufacture band 7 or band 8 writing by adding complex structures and words to your sentences. In fact, the so-called 'Band 8' sentence is a very good example of the problems I see almost daily in band 6.5 writing, while there is no reason that the 'Band 6' sentence would not be found within a Band 9 essay. If we assess the language used in the 'band 6' example, we can see that the phrase 'computer-based games' and 'reap the benefits' show a good awareness of style, and a natural use of advanced level vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, the 'Band 8' version has several problems: 'gamers' is rather informal in tone, the grammar and structures used are much less natural than the shorter version, and there are problems with coherence and cohesion.

As we saw in the vocabulary and grammar chapters, a comparison of the most common features of band 6-6.5 language and band 9 language looks like this:

<b>Band 6 or 6.5 language:</b>	<b>Band 9 language:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is extreme (e.g. plunge, soar)</li><li>• is imprecise (see above)</li><li>• contains as many long sentences and words as possible</li><li>• <b>is more difficult to understand</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is less extreme (rise, fall)</li><li>• is more precise (see above)</li><li>• naturally uses either short or long sentences and words</li><li>• <b>is easier to understand</b></li></ul>

If we look more closely at the 'Band 8' sentence, we can see why sentences like this create confusion for the reader, and actually ensure a band 6.5 score. Below, I have highlighted the main idea in the sentence. Notice how many other ideas have been added in between.

*Audio and visual games which are designed to be played on the computer immensely positively affect teenage gamers, both refining their life skills such as problem solving, critical thinking as well as interpersonal communication and enhancing their intellectual development. (39 words)*

These extra ideas interfere with communication and make it difficult to follow the main idea being presented (a good definition of band 6 coherence and cohesion problems). The message is made particularly difficult to follow through the use of so many different connectors in one sentence: *and, which, both, such as, as well as, and*. A band 8 or 9 candidate would express the same ideas in a much simpler, clearer way, as follows: *Computer-based games can have a very positive effect on teenagers. They can help them to develop important life-skills, like problem-solving, and also aid in their intellectual development.*

Compare '*audio and visual games which are designed to be played on the computer*' with the shorter and much more natural '*computer-based games.*' Rather than 'boosting' your score, adding unnecessary words and structures will lower it as they make your language unnatural and your ideas unclear. Remember, your examiner is looking for clear communication of ideas, not long, complex sentences. Band 8 cannot be *manufactured* by adding extra words and connectors; it must be *demonstrated* through a skillful band 8 use of language.

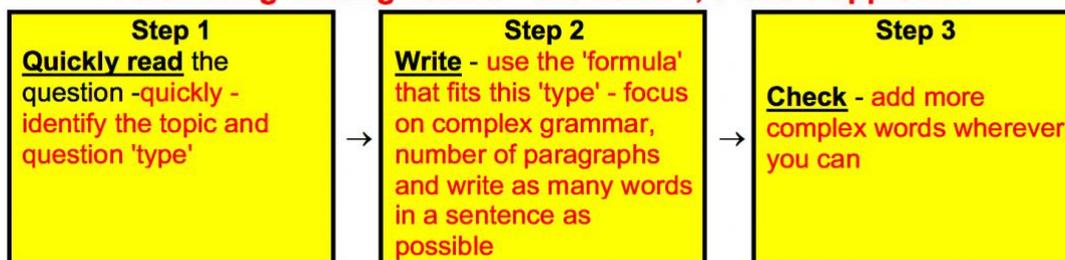
Your main priority in writing should always be to **communicate your ideas clearly**. In my experience, when candidates focus on writing long sentences and using long words, the result is always confusion, poor communication, and band 6 or 6.5.

**Key idea:** Essays written by high-level candidates are not complex and difficult to read. These candidates achieve a high band because their ideas are clear, relevant, and easy to follow.

### Deliberate practise for IELTS writing task 2

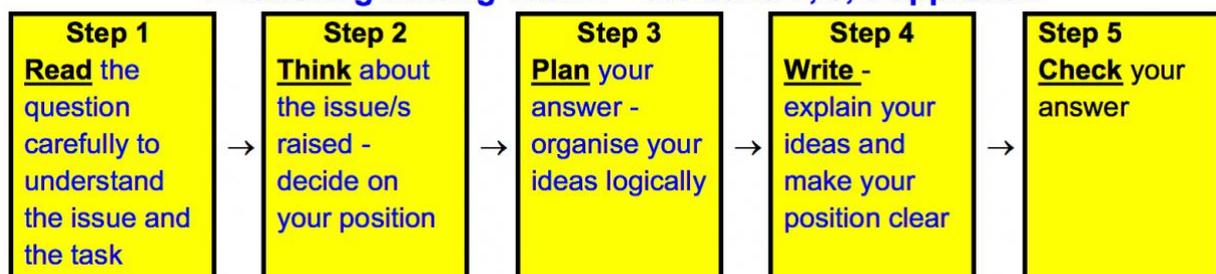
Writing an essay is a process, and candidates at Bands 6 and below tend to see that process as follows:

#### Answering Writing Task 2 – the band 4, 5 and 6 approach



However, at the higher bands, candidates have mastered a different strategy:

#### Answering Writing Task 2 – the band 7, 8, 9 approach



In order to achieve band 7, 8, or 9, you need to train yourself to follow this same approach. As we saw with reading skills, it helps to break down a large task into smaller, more manageable goals. With writing task 2, you can do this by deliberately practising each of the steps above so that you can perform them automatically and relatively quickly in the test. Think of this as improving your fluency in writing. Again, *The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2* offers plenty of practice with this. There are also 4 chapters of *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* showing you how to complete each of these stages. The chapters show you how to plan, organise, write, and check your essay, and guide you carefully through these steps using a sample essay. Your preparation for the test should include practice of each of these different stages. Let us look at them one by one.

### Stage 1 – Reading and understanding the question

Train yourself to stop and think carefully about what the test question means. Too often people miss a key idea in the question and the result is a lower score in Task response; do not make a quick decision about the topic, or see it too broadly. In an essay I saw recently in answer to a question about increasing anti-social behavior in young people, instead of writing about playing music too loudly, or destroying property, the writer had written about young people being shy or not wanting to socialise. He had missed the fact that there was an example given in the question to help make the topic clear. One way to avoid this is to find a partner and discuss a question before you begin writing. Seeing the topic and the question from another person's point of view can be very helpful in forming ideas and opinions.

### Stage 2 – Developing thinking skills and getting ideas

According to famous author Stephen King, if you don't read, then 'you don't have tools to write.' This neatly sums up the link between reading and writing. Reading will give you ideas as well as language, so read widely on topics that are relevant to IELTS. Through doing this, you will learn what other people think and feel about different issues. In the resources chapter, I recommend several non-fiction books that are excellent resources for building ideas and language in this way.

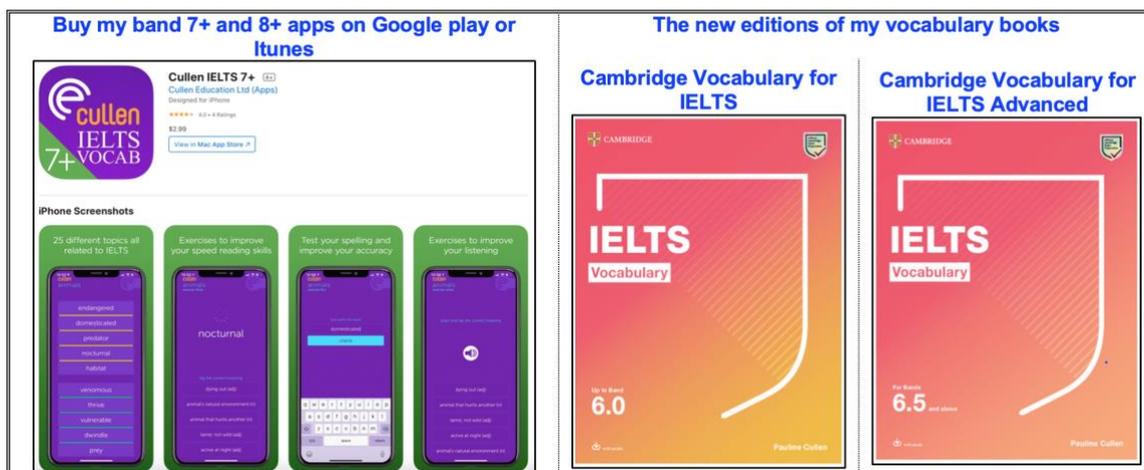
Look in particular for articles or books that present a position on a topic. As you read, think about the writer's position. If you can explain what the writer believes, then they have made their position clear. Look back at the text again to see how they did this. Think about whether it was through the choice of vocabulary or through the use of grammatical structures. Always keep a notebook next to you, and make a special note of any words or phrases that you think were especially effective so that you can try to use them yourself in your own practice. When you note these down, write the complete sentence out as well. This will not only show you how to use such phrases accurately, but it will also give you a context to help you remember the phrase when you need it.

Next, think about how you feel about the issue yourself. Do you agree with the writer? Can you see a counterargument? Would the same attitude or way of thinking work in your own town, city, or country? This is how you can develop your own position on a topic and the way you should also approach the thinking stage in the test. Train yourself to think on a small scale at first, then build up to a larger scale. Like this:

How does this issue affect:

- me and my family and friends?
- my town or city?
- my country?
- the world, or society in general?

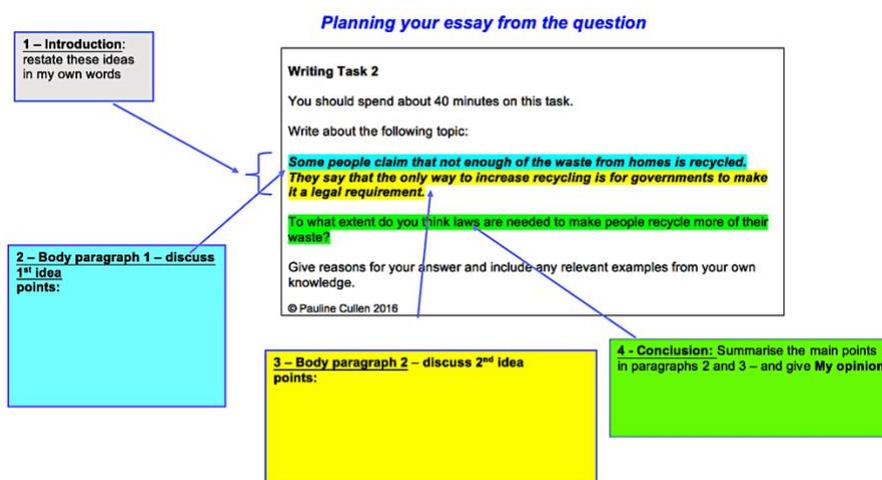
Remember, *what* you write matters much more than *the amount* you write. With my daughter's writing, she can only now produce long essays in a timed situation because she knows her subject: *she is now writing about what she knows*. This is what you must also aim to do. I will be teaching you how to think, plan, and write, as well as giving lots of practical exercises in my book: ***The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2***. And you can find all of the topics relevant to IELTS in my two Vocabulary books and apps.



The only way to do this type of thinking quickly in the test is to get into a habit of doing it often with a wide range of topics. With practice, you should find it easier to think of relevant ideas within the first few minutes of the test. Once you have your ideas, you must then learn to organise them logically and communicate them clearly.

### Stage 3 – Developing planning skills

People often ignore my advice about writing a plan and remain stuck at band 6.5; if you need band 7 or above, **you cannot afford to write without a clear plan**. The most common excuse I hear is *'I don't have time to plan.'* In the first edition of this book, I recommended a quick method of planning using the essay question you are given on the day that looked like this:



When I began writing models for my **Key to IELTS Writing Task 2** book, I realised that there are problems with using this type of planning. Although it does remind you to **cover every part of the question in a logical, balanced way**, and also ensures that you **complete the task**, it will not help you to develop enough ideas to produce a clear argument within the 40 minutes you have. It is also likely to only benefit those with very advanced writing skills. I realised this when I tried to write model answers myself within the time limit.

### Sample answers and model answers

It is important to see the writing task answers in textbooks as a 'sample' rather than a 'model'. The distinction is an important one: a 'model' sets a standard that students can learn from, while a sample answer often does not.

Sample answers produced by professional writers tend to result in a level of English that goes beyond the scope of the test, a level I think of as the 'invisible band 10.' These answers are written in the comfort of the writer's home, perhaps in several drafts. If an answer is too long, the writer has time to edit and cut. Before publication, the finished product may also be checked and edited by more professionals, all of which can result in a rather nuanced and subtle response to the task that is closer to a reading passage. Understandably, this process does not produce the same results as an individual candidate writing in a timed test situation. Because of this, in my view, the test book sample answers often don't serve as useful models for the classroom. Furthermore, although there are many sample answers online that claim to be band 9, the majority of those I have seen actually show band 6 skills in Task response and Coherence and cohesion. Although there are plenty of 'sample answers,' good 'model answers' are scarce.

### How is The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2 different?

In my book, I set out to produce model answers that set the right standard for the test but that were also helpful in terms of your learning. These models have been produced using a 40-minute time limit so that they reflect what a band 9 candidate can realistically produce in IELTS. It was very surprised to find that I had to change the way I normally plan in order to achieve band 9 Task response and Coherence and cohesion within the time limit. Whether working on a computer or on paper, without the right planning, my efforts were often problematic in terms of these criteria and I needed more time to fix them. The truth is that teachers and professional writers seldom practise what we preach. As a result, we don't always appreciate the problems associated with successfully completing the task in exam conditions. This is something I have tried to address throughout this course.

### Changing the way you plan

In *The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2*, I developed a way of planning that helped me to consistently achieve band 9 in my models in the time limit. The book teaches you this way of planning and shows you step by step how to apply this way of thinking to every style of question. Making a change like this can feel difficult and time consuming at first. However, I found that, with practice, this type of planning helped me to write more quickly. A key idea to learn from this is that planning *is* writing.

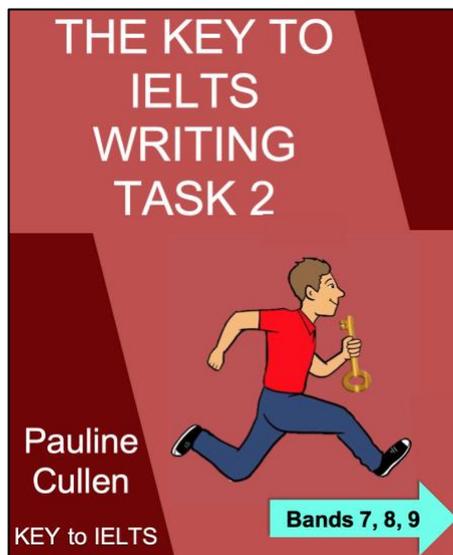
**Key idea:** Don't see planning as a waste of your time in the test. Planning well helps you to write well and will improve your score. Planning *is* writing

To check if you are planning enough at the moment, look back at one or two essays you wrote in the past. If possible, these should not be recent. You can also do this exercise with a friend and look at each other's essays. Looking only at your answer, try to write recreate the question, then write out a plan or map of your main ideas and answer the following questions:

- Does your answer reflect the specific issue raised in the question? (Look at the introduction and conclusion – can you recreate the test question using them?)
- Are there any parts of the question that **you did not** discuss?
- Did you repeat the same idea/s within a paragraph?
- Did you repeat the same idea/s in different paragraphs?
- Did you include ideas that are **not** relevant or **not directly connected** to the issue raised in the question?
- Did you gradually move away from the issue in the question?
- Did you explain your ideas well? (can you understand the points you were trying to make?)

These are all common problems when you do not plan your argument well enough before writing.

They affect both your Task response and your Coherence and cohesion score. To achieve a good score in Coherence and cohesion, your ideas must be logically organised into clear paragraphs. See your paragraphs as a 'map' that the reader uses to follow your argument. Try planning a new answer that does achieve the bullet points listed about then rewrite your essay until you are satisfied with your Task response and your coherence and cohesion. If you are not confident that you can do this, then my Writing Task 2 book will help you.



#### **Stage 4 - Writing your essay – the missing link in IELTS writing**

Stephen King says: 'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut.' It is important to build your writing skills up gradually. This means working on writing sentences, then paragraphs, then complete essays. Practising by writing a paragraph is especially useful as you need to think about how to explain and connect your ideas. Let us look at how to construct a paragraph.

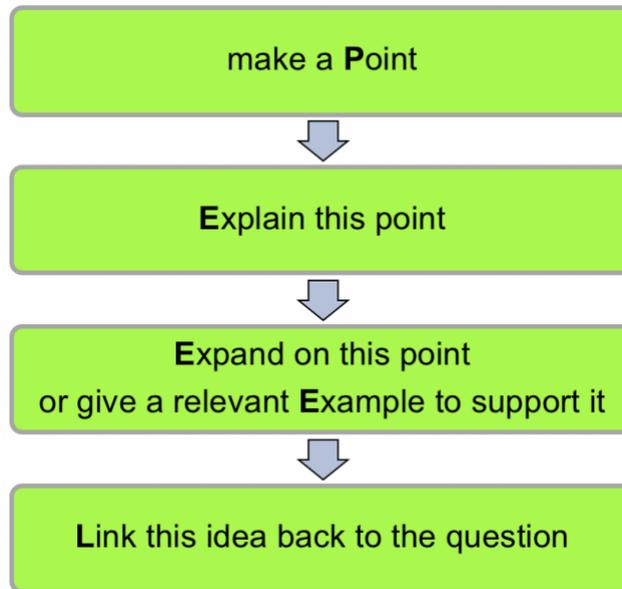
Each paragraph should focus on one main idea. This idea should be presented, explained, and supported (you can use an example to do this if you can think of a relevant one). Each idea should be clearly linked to the question – this is important as it shows that you are 'responding' to the 'task' you are given, which is measured in Task response. Remember also that you must present and develop an argument, and that this should follow a logical, linear path, not a circular one.

In the earlier sections, I advised against using set phrases as a 'template' when writing your essay. Nevertheless, when training yourself to write in a linear way, a broader version of this idea can help. With my daughter's economics essays, she has been taught to structure each paragraph in a certain way to ensure that she meets the criteria used to assess her exam. The structure she has been taught to follow is: 'Point, explanation, example, evaluation, example, link'. The resulting paragraphs are extremely long, and the focus of *her* test is not on language but on showing an understanding of key concepts in economics. Nevertheless, there is something to be learned here.

In IELTS, you are not being asked to evaluate an academic approach or theory, so we can shorten the above structure to: Point, explanation, example, link'. I would also suggest this variation: Point, explanation, expand, link. I particularly like the use of the word 'Point' to suggest that you must begin your paragraph by making a point. As we saw earlier, some band 6.5 essays simply repeat the same ideas as the question. The points you make in your essay will be new, and will be based on your own response to the question. Also notice that, with the earlier example of a 'complex' sentence that claimed to be band 8, the writer was making a point, explaining it, and giving examples within the

same sentence. Thus, writing in a 'complex way' not only affects the reader's ability to follow your ideas, but also has an impact on the clear, linear development of your paragraphs.

This flow chart shows what each body paragraph should aim to do:



This final linking idea is an important one as it explains why your point is relevant to your question. Look back at my daughter's writing to see how her last sentence linked back to the question. In IELTS writing, I often think of this as 'the missing link,' as it is usually missing from band 6 or 6.5 answers. Without it, a paragraph feels unfinished or incomplete – the reader isn't sure what the paragraph is aiming to show, or how it fits within your essay.

The final sentence of our earlier example about medical language illustrates this nicely. The candidate finished his paragraph with: *'Thus, this kind of medical practice can dramatically improve the conditions of people who have issues in physical movements and mental blocks of doing so.'* This sentence revealed that he had moved away from the topic, which was about whether there are only disadvantages to the use of computer games, and so his sentence is not relevant to the question. In my version, I made the relevance very clear by linking it back to the question: *'Thus, we could argue that video games can actually serve a very useful purpose and are not always detrimental to our health.'*

To practise linking in this way, look back at your previous essays and the final sentence in each body paragraph. Did you clearly link each paragraph to the question? If not, change your final sentences to make the link clear. If you cannot do this, it is possible that the ideas within your paragraph are not relevant to the question.

### **Mechanical writing**

It is important to note that this approach should not be seen as a quick 'trick' that will suddenly 'boost' your score. What I am suggesting is easy to say but requires a skilful use of language to carry out effectively. Language and skills that you will only develop over time, and with deliberate practice. I would also like to add a word of caution here, and again state that writing in this way should be seen as a training exercise, a little like using training wheels while you gain confidence when learning to ride a bike. See it as a way to train yourself to write in a logical and linear way. Do not simply follow this as a set structure or the result will be writing that is 'mechanical.'

Driving a car is perhaps a more accurate analogy here. When you first learn to drive a manual car, your feet have to learn to perform new functions. One foot must press down on the accelerator or brake as needed, while the other operates the clutch. Skilled drivers operate the pedals without thinking about them at all, but learner drivers struggle with this, and have to really focus on these basic actions. The car will often jerk or hop, and their driving is not smooth. After a lot of practice, these moves become automatic, and the car travels smoothly. Once this stage is reached, the driver no longer has to think about their feet, but can instead focus on where they are going and react to the conditions on the road.

So, practise using the P.E.E.L structure until it becomes natural for you and you can do it without thinking. Then, during the test, you will be able to write smoothly, focus on where your argument is going, and adapt your language to the specific question you are given on the day. For those aiming for a band 8 or 9 score, you need to develop this skill even further so that your response is more natural. To help, look at sample answers in the Cambridge Practice test books and try to identify any of the following in each paragraph: the main point; a further explanation of this point; an idea used to support the point; how the point is linked to the question. You will notice that a skilled native-speaker writer can do this in a very natural and subtle way, and this is the skill you should aim to develop to achieve band 9.

**Key idea:** The key steps in each paragraph you write are: 1) make a point, 2) explain and support it, 3) expand on it, and 4) show how it links to the question.

Practise your writing on a daily basis if you can, even 15 minutes can help. Write a paragraph where you make a point, explain or expand on the point, and then link the point back to the question. A good place to start is by going back over your old essays and rewriting paragraphs. If you can, show your paragraph to a friend. Explain what each sentence is doing, and how it is linked to the question. The more often you do this, the more quickly it will become automatic and natural for you. Remember, only authentic writing task questions will force you to use the skills you must show in the test. Do not be tempted to think 'I have finished all of the Cambridge practice tests, so I will look for writing tasks online.' Such tasks are often written to support a personal view about different 'types' of question.

Similarly, you should not make the mistake of thinking that the tasks shared as 'actual' questions from recent tests are 'authentic'. Instead, it is more useful to review previous tasks you have done and try to write them from a different point of view. For example, if your first answer agreed with the views in the question, write another answer that is neutral or that disagrees. Remember, as we saw with David Beckham, repetition and deliberate practice are key elements in achieving a high level in any skill.

Another useful exercise is to look at questions typically asked in Part 3 of the speaking test and use these as prompts to write practice paragraphs. When studying language at an advanced level, it is important to see that different skills are linked. We have already seen the benefit of reading widely, and in the chapters about listening and speaking you will see how these skills also have an impact on your writing.

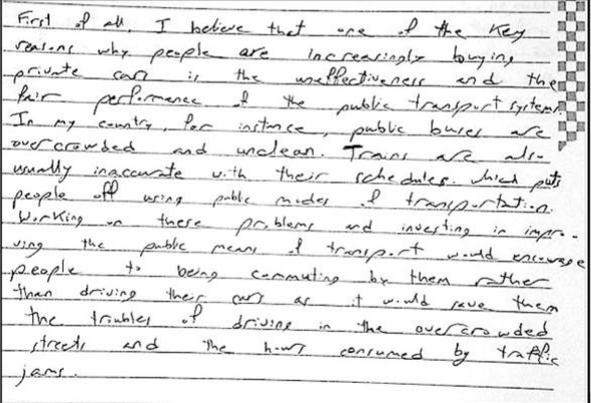
### Stage 5 - Checking your essay

Aim to leave a few minutes at the end of your test to check your essay. *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*, as well as *Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate* give you lots of practice with this. At this stage, you should also check that your handwriting is clear. The following images from my website show common problems caused by writing too quickly. Make sure you are aware

of your own handwriting problems so that you can focus on these.

**Common Handwriting Problems**

*Make sure you practise your handwriting often so that you can avoid making these common mistakes. Look at the handwritten sample on and the typed version below then read the analysis of the problems on the next page.*

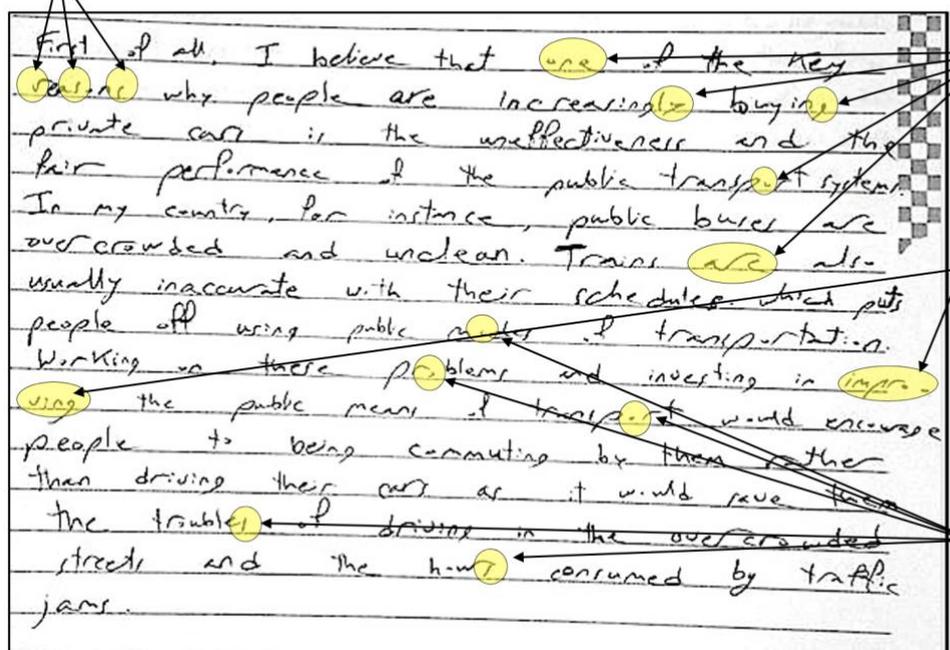
Original	Typed version
	First of all, I believe that one of the key reasons why people are increasingly buying private cars is the ineffectiveness and the fair performance of the public transport system. In my country, for instance, public buses are overcrowded and unclean. Trains are also usually inaccurate with their schedules, which puts people off using public modes of transportation. Working on these problems and investing in improving the public means of transport would encourage people to being commuting by them rather than driving their cars as it would save them the troubles of driving in the overcrowded streets and the hours consumed by traffic jams.

**1) Letters that are too similar:** the 's' and 'r' in 'reasons' look the same.

**2) Incomplete letters:** e.g. 'a' and 'o' are left open at the top, so both look like 'u'. The word 'one' looks the same as 'are' because the 'n' is not complete, and 'y' looks like 'g'.

**3) Starting a word at the end of a line:** If your handwriting is poor, it can be difficult to decipher individual letters and notice the dash (-) that is used to indicate a word is not finished. I initially thought these were two words and was confused about why the word 'sing' appeared in this paragraph.

**4) As the writer speeds up, problems become worse:** 'o' has changed from a possible 'u' to a possible 'i', and the letter 's' is almost a straight line, so could look like the letter 'l'.



Clear paragraphs are very important in your essay. In some handwritten essays it is difficult to see where one paragraph ends and another begins. To help make this clear, leave a line between each paragraph. Do not rely on indenting the first word, which may signal the start of a new paragraph clearly enough.

It is very difficult to spot mistakes in your own writing because our brain will often compensate and correct what we see. You can find a discussion about this in the writing skills chapter of **Cambridge Advanced Vocabulary for IELTS**. To overcome this problem, it helps to work with a partner. We tend to be much more critical of someone else's work, so it is much easier to identify problems this

way. When editing, you may find the following ideas helpful:

- 1) Focus only one problem area at a time (e.g. only verbs or only articles).
- 2) Do not edit your essay immediately, leave it for a day before you look at it again.
- 3) Ask yourself the following questions about your answer:
  - a. Did I complete the task?
  - b. Are my paragraphs clear?
  - c. Are my conclusions clear and supported by my ideas?
- 4) Keep a score of how many corrections you need to make in your common problem areas – aim to reduce this score over time.

Look back at the grammar chapter to help identify common problems you have and vary the way you deal with these to help you stay motivated. Focus on the fossilised errors you know you have, such as the use of articles, plural or singular nouns, or typical spelling mistakes you make. Again, [\*Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate\*](#) can help with this.

A good way to help work on your cohesion and repetition in your language is to read your essay aloud. Record yourself if you can, you may be surprised what errors you can identify this way. If you stumble when trying to read a sentence this can be a good indicator of a writing problem. Once you are more confident in your writing, practise doing this in your head, so that you can use the same checking technique in the test.

### Managing your Time in the writing test

As we have seen, it is very important to balance your time between task 1 and task 2. Writing task 2 is worth **double** the marks of task 1, which is why you need *double* the amount of time for your answer. Many people tell me that they begin with task 2 in order to make sure they do not become too engrossed in their task 1 answer and steal too much time from task 2.

To save time when it comes to counting your words, practise writing on the same type of lined paper that you will get in the test. This will help to show you what 150 and 250 words looks like in your own handwriting. Look back at your essays and count how many words you normally write on each line – find the average and use this as a guide in the test. For example, if you generally write about 10 words per line, you will need to write 15 complete lines for task 1 and 25 complete lines for task 2 (do not count any partial lines, e.g. at the end of a paragraph). Do this several times to make sure you are meeting the target number and adjust your average if necessary. Still count your words if you have time, just to be on the safe side.

### Final tips

- Use good model answers – be wary of models you find online that claim to be a high band.
- Use only well-written test materials so that you are forced to use and practise the right skills and language for the real test.
- Build language: be aware of language gaps that you have, such as when you struggle to explain something, then aim to fill those gaps – good course books will help you do that.
- When you complete a task, review it a few days later – this can help you to spot mistakes.
- Work with a friend – it is easier to spot mistakes in someone else's writing.
- Read your answers aloud, this can help you see where your language is repetitive or where there are language problems.
- Identify your common problems and work on these.
- Read widely on a variety of topics to help get ideas.

- Practise planning and thinking, not just writing.
- Practise regularly, even if you only have 15-20 minutes – in that time, you should be able to:
  - read a question and plan your answer
  - write an introduction and a conclusion
  - write a body paragraph
  - edit and check an essay to improve it
  - look back through previous essays to try to improve them
- In your test, spend 40 minutes on this task.
- Think about the question and plan before you write so that you can make sure your ideas are balanced, relevant, and organised logically.
- Make sure you support your ideas by explaining what you mean and giving reasons and examples.
- Aim to write clearly – don't try to write in a complex way.
- Don't write as much as possible – write at least 250 but not more than 300 words, and only as much as you need to write to fully answer the question.

### Use my IELTS preparation books to help focus on writing task 2

**THE KEY TO IELTS WRITING TASK 2**

Pauline Cullen  
KEY to IELTS

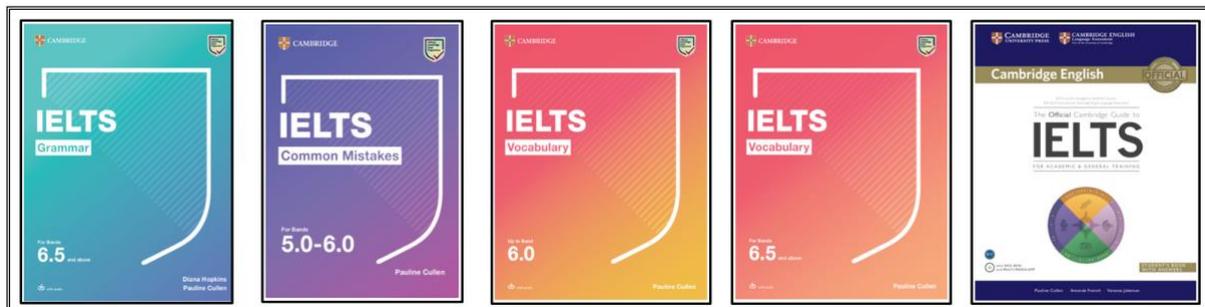
Bands 7, 8, 9

Go to: [www.keytoielts.com/](http://www.keytoielts.com/)  
Or scan the code:

My writing task 2 course helps you make real progress in the writing test. It has 16 model essays and takes you step by step through the thinking, planning and writing process. Up to 5 people can share it!

'I have reached Lesson 3 of "The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2" book and I started to understand reasons why I am still stuck at 6.5. If you truly want to improve your writing, buy this book.'

### These books help you focus on language and skills for all parts of the test



## Chapter 8

# The Key to IELTS Listening

### Understanding the listening test

#### How is listening tested in IELTS?

The official IELTS website gives the following information about the listening test:

IELTS Listening description	
<b>Paper format</b>	<p>There are four sections with ten questions each. The questions are designed so that the answers appear in the order they are heard in the audio.</p> <p>The first two sections deal with situations set in everyday social contexts. In Section 1, there is a conversation between two speakers (for example, a conversation about travel arrangements), and in Section 2, there is a monologue in (for example, a speech about local facilities). The final two sections deal with situations set in educational and training contexts. In Section 3, there is a conversation between two main speakers (for example, two university students in discussion, perhaps guided by a tutor), and in Section 4, there is a monologue on an academic subject.</p> <p>The recordings are heard only once. They include a range of accents, including British, Australian, New Zealand, American and Canadian.</p>

Notice the following key features:

- **Sections 1 and 2** are set in everyday social contexts (i.e. they are **not academic**)
- The accents you hear will include British, Australian, New Zealand, American, and Canadian (i.e. **all native speakers** of English)
- The recording will be heard **once only**
- The questions are designed so that the answers appear in the order they are heard in the recording (i.e. the questions are written carefully to ensure **you can answer the questions after listening to the information only once.**)

We can divide the types of questions used in the listening test into two categories: objective (where you choose the correct letter from a list) and productive (where you need to write down words or numbers that you hear.) Examples of productive tasks are any of the completion tasks, such as notes-completion or table-completion. The official IELTS website also tells us that these types of tasks will focus on '**the main points which a listener would naturally record in this situation,**' (NB. in this context, the word 'record' means 'to note down'.) If the resources you are using do not reflect **all** of this information, then you are using materials that do not reflect the real test.

#### How is listening ability tested?

Up until the 1970s, dictation was a common testing tool in many exams. I will discuss the benefits of dictation later, but in terms of assessing listening comprehension, it has clear limitations: the ability to write down what you hear does not always indicate that you can understand it. So, in order to assess understanding, the IELTS listening test questions paraphrase the information you hear. *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* shows how this works in detail, and you will find many examples in authentic listening test materials to help you practise further.

#### What makes the listening test reliable and fair?

For a test to be reliable and effective in assessing your listening ability, the questions **must** force you to listen. As this is a test where you will hear the recording only once, to be a *fair* test, it must also be possible to answer the questions *while* you are listening. To achieve this, the questions, and any other information in the task, will guide you through the recording in a logical way.

So, although the questions will paraphrase what you hear, there will also be key words that help you keep track while you are listening. These might be names of people, places, or theories, or they might be dates. These words act as landmarks so that you do not lose your way, and are an important feature to look for in your practice materials. If you are using practice materials where the recording is a sea of complex language from which you simply need to listen out for the same words and phrases used in the question, then you are not practising the skills needed for IELTS.

### **Can watching movies and TV help develop IELTS listening skills?**

People often ask me if they should watch movies and television shows to improve their listening. The first problem is that these rely on visual information to get across their message. But there is a further problem in that the vast majority of these programmes do not reflect the type of language used in the test. In IELTS, you will hear people having serious conversations, or giving a talk on a serious topic. So, it is difficult to see how popular films, featuring very informal language, can help with this. Not only will this language not appear in the test, but you may also lose marks if you use it inappropriately.

### **What about Ted talks?**

TED talks can be a useful resource, but they should be used with discretion. Firstly, some of these talks rely on visual information, such as slides or an animation. Secondly, in my experience, these talks vary considerably in terms of their suitability and the extent to which they can help non-native speakers learn English. When giving a talk like this, a speaker must always consider their audience. Naturally, the TED speakers address their talk specifically to the people sitting in the auditorium in front of them. If that audience consists of native speakers who are experts in the same field, then the speaker will talk rapidly and confidently about their subject. This means that many of these talks are difficult to follow for non-native speakers and non-experts, both in terms of the speed of delivery and the technical language used. So, do not be concerned if you struggle to follow talks like this.

### **Isn't listening section 4 like a TED talk?**

I have given many conference talks about IELTS, and also hosted webinars where I had to talk at length to a very large audience that I could not see, and who could not see me. The preparation for these two types of talk is very different. When speaking to a live audience, I use PowerPoint slides and talk to the audience directly, without referring to notes or a script. I can see the audience and how they react, so I can see if they are struggling to follow an idea, and can explain it further or repeat the information. What is more, at the end of the talk, the audience can ask questions to check anything that was unclear.

However, when delivering an important talk to a very large audience, speakers use notes or a prepared script. This is especially important when the message must be heard clearly and the audience cannot ask questions. This is a good comparison for what happens in IELTS listening: the candidates are the very large 'audience' who cannot ask questions, and it is very important that they can follow the information, so it must be conveyed very clearly and without confusion. All of this has an impact on how the test is written, and is the reason the talks and conversations are carefully scripted by skilled writers.

### **Common Problems in IELTS listening**

In my experience, there are two main problems in preparing for IELTS listening: the use of materials that do not reflect the real test, and a lack of awareness of how to develop the listening skills needed in the test. As we saw with reading, the first of these problems has an impact on the second.

### **Listening test materials**

It is worth repeating that any test materials you use to help prepare for the listening test must reflect all of the key features of the *real* test. These are the characteristics that help to create a listening test that is *valid*, *fair* and *reliable*, and where there is one clear answer to each question. Practising with materials where the

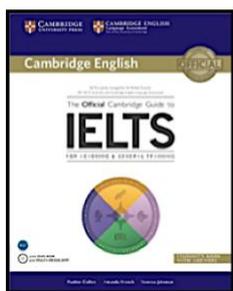
questions cannot be answered when listening only once means that people become frustrated and confused about how to improve their listening ability and their score.

The main listening problem people tell me about is listening and answering at the same time, particularly in section 3 and 4 multiple choice, and notes-completion tasks. As we will see, there are ways to help with these problems, but they rely on the use of listening materials and questions that are as fair, valid, and reliable as the real test. If you are using materials that appear much more difficult than those in the Cambridge test practice books, and where you often feel lost, you should not conclude that the test has changed and become more difficult. Instead, you should take this as a clear sign that the materials you are using do not reflect the real test, which is increasingly likely. In the resources chapter, you will find more information about this.

### Deliberate practice for listening

While it is readily accepted that you need to develop reading and writing skills, there appears to be an expectation that, to prepare for listening, you simply need to press 'play' and begin answering questions. If you look at the contents page for the 8 listening skills chapters in [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#), you will see that many of these focus on the different micro skills and processes involved in listening. For example, the importance of the context you are given, distinguishing between the different speakers, and identifying their different attitudes and opinions. But it is also important to realise that you need to train yourself to listen.

## The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS – Listening skills section



### IELTS Listening skills

#### 1 Getting ready to listen

- 1 Understanding the context
- 2 Using the correct spelling
- 3 Writing numbers

#### 2 Following a conversation

- 1 Identifying the speakers
- 2 Identifying function
- 3 Understanding categories

#### 3 Recognising paraphrase

- 1 Identifying distractors
- 2 Recognising paraphrase
- 3 Selecting from a list

#### 4 Places and directions

- 1 Describing a place
- 2 Following directions
- 3 Labelling a map

#### 5 Listening for actions and processes

- 1 Understanding mechanical parts
- 2 Describing an action or process
- 3 Describing a process

#### 6 Attitude and opinion

- 1 Identifying attitudes and opinions
- 2 Persuading and suggesting
- 3 Reaching a decision

#### 7 Following a lecture or talk

- 1 Identifying main ideas
- 2 Understanding how ideas are connected
- 3 Understanding an explanation

#### 8 Contrasting ideas

- 1 Signposting words
- 2 Comparing and contrasting ideas
- 3 Using notes to follow a talk

### Active listening

When reading in everyday life, we generally pay close attention to the words and ideas on the page. As we have seen, to improve your IELTS reading score, you need to learn how to scan and skim read; in other words, to read *without* focusing on every word. Almost the opposite occurs in listening. In normal situations, we learn to tune out music and conversations around us when we are studying or working. However, in the test, you need to *always* listen with close attention, so this is something you need to train yourself to do.

### Learning to listen

As we saw in earlier chapters, it helps to break each skill down into smaller, micro skills and then deliberately practise these. Below are some exercises to help you do this with listening. The exercises will work best with listening materials that reflect the *real* test: materials that are fair, valid, and reliable, and they are a good way of exploiting the excellent resources you already have. The exercises build up gradually, and you can use

them to develop your skills, or simply as a warm-up activity before doing test practice. Begin working with section 1 and 2 listening passages until you are comfortably scoring almost 100% in these parts of the test.

## Exercises to develop listening skills

### 1 Listen and say

When we listen for any length of time, we tend to gradually stop paying attention. Knowing that you will need to *repeat* the information you hear trains you to stay focused and actively listen. This exercise also helps to develop your ability to recall what you have heard.

Listen to a very short extract and repeat what you hear. Listen several times if necessary, then check with the tapescript to make sure you got it right. As your skills develop, do the same with longer extracts (complete sentences if possible) and gradually move on to section 3 and 4 recordings. You will find this more difficult with the higher-level recordings, where both the information and the language are more complex.

If you struggle to do this, it may be because your brain is not 'decoding' what you hear. In other words, your brain hears a chunk of language and cannot separate this into the individual words being used. You will understand this problem better when we look at chunking in the speaking chapter. If you find this exercise too difficult, go back and work with passages from sections 1 and 2 again, and build up your skills more gradually, or you can experiment with slowing down the recording. However, this may also be a sign that you need to focus on building your vocabulary and grammar skills first.

### 2 Listen and explain

Listen to a slightly longer extract and then try to give the same information in your own words. This helps to test how much you understand. If you do not have a study partner to work with, record yourself and listen again later to see how accurately you were able to explain the information. Gradually increase the length of the extracts you use to see how much of the information you are able to recall and summarise in this way.

### 3 Listen and read

Rather than just using the tapescript and questions to check answers, you can also use them to train yourself to concentrate for longer periods, such as when following a discussion or talk. In authentic listening recordings, the speakers will naturally use signposting words to help you keep track, and to show how ideas are connected.

Read through the tapescript while listening to a recording and try to notice the language features which help you to recognise the following:

- a change in topic
- when speakers are agreeing or disagreeing with each other
- an attitude or opinion.

***The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*** has several exercises to help practise recognising even more aspects of spoken language like this.

Listen to the recording again, but this time read the questions as you listen. Don't answer the questions, simply pay attention to the features you noticed earlier, and how these relate to the different questions. Pay attention to how you know when to move to a new question, and how the questions and the speakers help you stay on track. Remember, this will only work with expertly written test materials. In fact, if it is impossible to do this with a recording and questions you have found, this is a good sign that you are using listening materials that do *not* reflect the real test.

#### 4 Listen and write

Listen to a short extract and try to write down what you hear. Do this with section 2 and section 4 talks to practise keeping track. Pause the recording or repeat it as often as necessary. You can do this in two ways:

- 1) To test your ability to decode the words you are hearing, write down exactly what you hear, word for word. The benefit of this form of dictation is that it can help you to identify gaps in your own language: the words or phrases you miss and do not hear.
- 2) To test your understanding, as you listen, write notes in your own words. As this is what the test questions do, it is good practice for recognising paraphrase, and will also help train you to keep track in the test. Compare your notes with the information in the test questions – did you manage to note the same key points?

#### Preparing to Listen

The idea of 'preparing to listen' is an important one because you do not get an opportunity to ask questions or hear the information a second time. If we consider this idea in an academic context we can also see its validity. A lecturer or teacher will often give students reading materials to go through before class. The good students, who do the preparation, will learn more from the class than those who do no preparation at all. So, preparing to listen by reading the questions you are given is a key part of the test.

For many years, I was an invigilator for Cambridge English exams in Brisbane. When it came to the listening tests, the day would begin with the lowest levels (A2 – B1) and finish with the highest levels (B2 – C1). I was always interested to see the changes in behaviour as the day progressed, and the language level of both the tests and the candidates increased. Even before the recording began, there were marked differences in the candidates' approaches to getting ready to listen. At the lowest levels, many candidates would simply look at the question paper, often turning over pages and looking ahead at later sections. At band 6, candidates would use a highlighter to mark key parts of the questions, but several would highlight almost all of the paper, rendering it useless. At the highest level (bands 7 to 9), candidates would prepare to listen by highlighting only the key words and phrases they knew they would have to listen for in the test. This helped them not only to focus, but also to recognise the answers when they heard them. This is what you must do in the test.

#### Keeping track and answering as you listen

The real listening test aims to help you *before* you listen and *while* you listen. So, before each recording, you are given time to read through the questions. Like the high-level candidates and the good students mentioned earlier, you should make good use of this time by getting ready to listen. Although you are no longer allowed to take highlighters into the exam room, you can still use your pencil to circle or underline key ideas or words. In a webinar I conducted a few years ago, I used the following image of a section 3 task from one of the 8 practice tests in [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#) to show how to prepare to listen. You can find a link to the webinar on my website.

Just as you would in the test, spend 30 seconds looking at questions and the information I have circled and underlined.

### SECTION 3 Questions 21–30

Questions 21–26

Choose the correct letter, A, B or C.

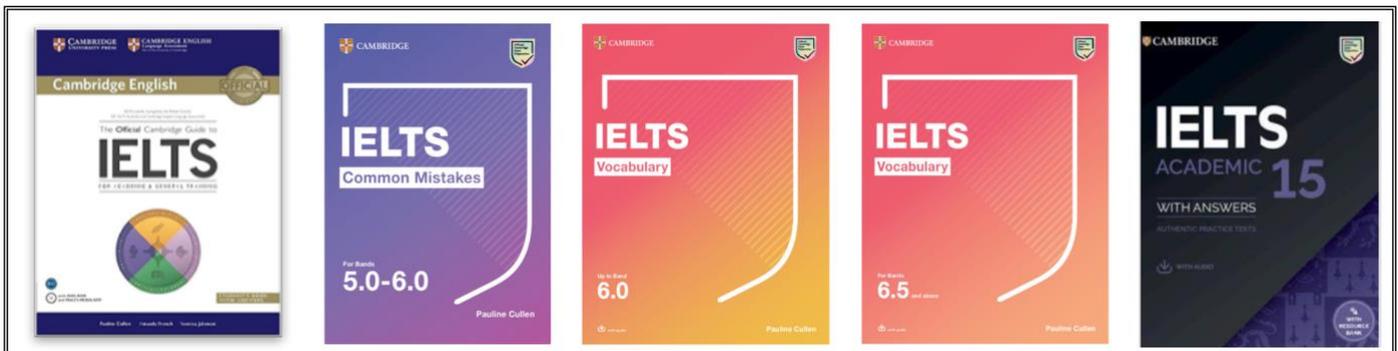
- 21 **Dave** Hadley says that the computer system has
- A too many users.
  - B never worked well.
  - C become outdated.
- 22 The main problem with the computer system is that it
- A is too slow.
  - B stops working.
  - C displays incorrect data.
- 23 Timetabling has become an issue because
- A there is not enough time for anyone to do it.
  - B the system does not handle course options.
  - C the courses are constantly changing.
- 24 To solve the timetabling issues, **Randhir** suggests that
- A students should create their own timetables.
  - B Dave should have someone to assist him.
  - C the number of courses should be reduced.
- 25 **Randhir** says that a new system may
- A need to be trialled.
  - B still have problems.
  - C be more economical.
- 26 Improving the existing system will take
- A a few weeks.
  - B four or five months.
  - C nine months.

The questions act like a map that you can follow to help you stay focused and to make sure you do not lose track. Looking at this task, we can predict that we will hear two people called Dave and Randhir. Dave will mention the computer system (21). They will discuss a key problem with the system (22), then they will talk about timetabling and why this has become a problem (23). Randhir will suggest a way to solve the timetabling problem, and will then discuss using a new system (25). Finally, they will talk about how long it will take to improve the current system they have (26). As you can see, knowing this before the recording begins can really help you to follow the conversation and answer the questions.

If you are using materials that do not reflect the real test, you will find that you cannot use the questions as a guide in this way, so you cannot prepare to listen, and while listening you continually feel lost and miss answers. This again shows why such materials fail to help you develop the skills you need to use in the test.

**Key idea:** If the listening questions in the materials you use do not guide you through the recording you will feel lost and miss answers. This is a good sign that you are NOT using materials that reflect the real test. Using materials like this means you do not develop the skills you need to use in IELTS.

*Use materials that reflect the real test to develop the skills you need in IELTS*



## Table and notes-completion tasks

As we have seen, expertly written test questions and materials help you to:

- get ready to listen, by predicting what sort of information you will hear
- stay focused, so that you do not lose concentration in the test
- easily identify the information you need to listen for

The last point is a key one and is particularly important with ‘completion’ tasks, where you must write down words and numbers that you hear. With these questions, it is very important that you know exactly what information you need to listen for. Look at the following section 4 listening task from Unit 10 of the second edition of *Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced*. Unit 10 teaches you the vocabulary related to space and physics.

Test practice

Rocket science 10

**Listening Part 4**

**Test Practice Track 3**

**Questions 1–10**

Complete the table below.

Write **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** for each answer.

Ideas for making physics fun			
Name of experiment	Equipment and method	Results and explanation	Real world application
The Brazil Nut Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need a glass jar, a marble and <b>1</b> .....</li> <li>Put everything in the jar and shake</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will expect the marble to <b>2</b> .....</li> <li>but the opposite happens</li> </ul>	It's important in the preparation of <b>3</b> .....
The Unpoppable balloon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs a balloon, a pin, and some <b>4</b> .....</li> <li>Pierce the prepared balloon with the pin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students expect there to be a <b>5</b> .....</li> <li>but there isn't</li> </ul>	Finding out whether a material is very <b>6</b> ..... or not
The <b>7</b> .....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You need a swivel chair and hand weights</li> <li>Students hold the hand weights and spin on the chair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They use the weights to control their <b>8</b> .....</li> <li>holding the weights close causes them to <b>9</b> .....</li> </ul>	The same principal can be seen in competitive <b>10</b> .....

As we saw from the official website information, notes-completion and table-completion tasks should reflect what a person listening to the talk would naturally write down in this situation. This means that you can prepare to listen using the headings and the other information already written in the notes or table, because these reflect the information you will hear. Thus, you can use the questions to predict what you will hear and to help you stay focused as you listen.

In the example above, the title tells us that we will hear a talk about ideas to make physics fun, and the table headings tell us we will hear information about three different experiments. With each experiment, we will hear information about 1) the equipment and method used, 2) the results and an explanation, and 3) how it can be applied in the real world. Even more importantly, we always know what information to listen for to answer each question. For example, with question 1, we need to listen carefully when the speaker talks about the equipment needed for ‘The ‘Brazil Nut Effect’ experiment, so that we can hear what else is put into the

jar with a marble.

Look at table-completion tasks in the Cambridge test practice books (e.g. Test book 9, page 86) and you will find this also applies there. If you are using materials where the tables and notes are confusing and unhelpful, this is **not** a sign that the real IELTS test is *'much more difficult and tricky,'* as some websites suggest. Instead, it **is** a very clear sign that you are using materials that **do not reflect the real test**.

### How to improve your listening test score

As we saw in earlier chapters, you need a balance between building language skills and doing test practice. Reviewing your scores will help ensure that you continue to learn and improve at every stage. Remember, if you are making mistakes, it is important to learn from them. So begin by getting an idea of your current score. If you have not taken the test recently, give yourself a mock listening test using one of the most recent Cambridge test books. Books 9 onwards are the most up-to-date and most accurately reflect the level of the real test.

### How to assess your listening level

To assess your level as accurately as possible, mimic the same conditions as the exam by following these guidelines:

- do **not** use headphones (unless your test centre uses these)
- play the recording **only once**
- write the answers on the question paper as you listen
- give yourself only **10 minutes to transfer your answers** on to a separate answer sheet at the end

**NB:** You can use lower case or uppercase letters (capital letters) to write your answers.

### Marking your answers

When you mark your answers, follow the answer key exactly. There are no half marks in the test; an answer is either right or wrong. If a word is written in brackets in the key, this tells you that you *may* include it in your answer, but you do not *need* to write it to get the mark. There is not enough space in a printed book to provide an answer key that is as comprehensive as the real test. So, although you should take the answers given in the key as the only possible answer, for numbers and dates, there are often more variations that are equally acceptable.

### What does 'two words and/or a number' mean?

As with every part of the test, you must always follow the instructions for each task carefully. In particular, notice whether you must choose one letter, or several letters from a list, like these examples from *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS*:

<p><i>Questions 13 and 14</i> Choose <b>TWO</b> letters, <b>A – E</b>. <i>Which TWO items should volunteers in Group A bring with them?</i></p>	<p><i>Questions 18 – 20</i> <i>What does the guide say about each attraction?</i> Choose <b>THREE</b> answers from the box and write the correct letter, <b>A – E</b>, next to questions 18 – 20.</p>
<p><b>A</b> food and water <b>B</b> boots <b>C</b> gloves <b>D</b> raincoats <b>E</b> their own tools</p>	<p><b>A</b> Aquarium <b>B</b> Crocodile Cave <b>C</b> Penguin Park <b>D</b> Seal Centre <b>E</b> Turtle Town</p>

Notice that **bold** type is used to draw your attention to how many answers you must write, and when you need to write more than 2 answers, you are reminded to **write your answers next to the correct question**

**number on your answer sheet.** This is a key point and a reminder not to rush. If you do, you run the risk of making mistakes when you transfer your answers and losing marks as a result.

Also notice whether you must write **one word only**, or **one, two or three words and / or a number**. If you write too many words, then your answer will be marked wrong. In both reading and listening, if the instructions say 'write **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND / OR A NUMBER**', this means that your answer may consist of:

- a number
- one word
- one word and a number
- two words
- two words and a number

### What if the answer is 'two and a half'?

I am often asked, 'What should I write if the question says 'WRITE ONE WORD AND / OR A NUMBER,' but the answer is 'two and a half'?' To help you understand this, look at this section 1, sentence-completion question. The speakers, John and Susan, are planning a special work breakfast. First look at the question, then read the tapescript:

Complete the sentence below.

Write **NO MORE THAN ONE WORD AND / OR A NUMBER** for each answer.

John and Susan decide to buy \_\_\_\_\_ kilos of flour.

### Tapescript:

**John:** So, we need to get some ingredients for the pancake breakfast tomorrow at work.

**Susan:** Yes, the staff kitchen has enough eggs and milk. We just need to buy flour. Shall we get one kilo, or would two be better?

**John:** Hmm, well there are 30 of us...

**Susan:** Let's get two and a half then, just to be on the safe side.

**John:** Yeah, 3 kilos is probably too much.

John and Susan decide to buy two and a half kilos of flour. Your task here is to 'complete the sentence' and the words 'kilos of flour' are already written in the sentence, so you only need to write the number in this instance. The instructions tell you to write 'one word and/or a number'. In the IELTS test, 'two and a half' is seen as one number, even if you write it in words. So, you could write this answer in several ways, for example:

- 2½
- 2.5
- two and a half
- 2 and a ½
- two and a ½

Because they can be written as figures, or numerals, all of these are seen as 'a number.' Here are some more examples of 'a number'

- fifty percent
- twenty-five
- six thousand five hundred and fifty

The following are examples of answers that consist of 'one word and a number':

- 2½ months
- two and a half years
- 2 and a ½ cups

### What about writing dates?

The format for writing dates varies between the US, Canada, and other English-speaking countries. Remember, this is an international test, so all accepted formats are correct. This means that the month and the day can be written in either order, and you can either write it in words or in numbers.

In the test, if you need to write a date, all of the possible variations are seen as 'ONE WORD AND/OR A NUMBER': June 23<sup>rd</sup>; 23<sup>rd</sup> June; 23 June; June 23; 23/6; 6/23. The most important piece of advice about numbers is to write them as figures not words (i.e. write '23' not 'twenty-three'). Writing numbers as words takes longer, and if you make a spelling mistake, then your answer will be marked wrong.

### 'It's unfair to lose marks for spelling in a listening test'

Some people feel it is unfair to lose marks for spelling mistakes. However, there has to be a clear marking scheme for a test as important as IELTS. If spelling mistakes *were* allowed, how far would the marking scheme have to go to allow for these mistakes? For example, if the answer is 'coffee', should 'cofee' be accepted as an answer? What about 'cofe'? When does a misspelling like this represent a guess at the answer and a lack of understanding? As this example shows, the correct spelling is a key part in showing you have decoded the information and also understood what you heard. If you find you are making many spelling mistakes when using the Cambridge practice tests, use this as a sign that you have a significant spelling problem that you need to address.

### Learning from your mistakes

Once you have completed a test, you can use the information on the official IELTS website to gauge your band score. This screenshot shows how to convert your score:

Listening	
Band score	Raw score out of 40
5	16
6	23
7	30
8	35

Although this indicates that a score of 30 out of 40 in the test would equate to band 7, you should aim to score above this in your practice tests. If you have already scored band 7 in 3 of the papers, and now just need to score band 7 in writing, do not make the mistake of thinking, 'I no longer need to work on my speaking, reading, and listening.' If you do not continue to work on a skill, you run the risk of losing that skill. Compare this to a professional athlete who takes a 6-month break from exercise – they will not retain the same level of fitness during this time. Similarly, when retaking the test, you may find you fail to repeat your earlier band 7 achievement. Instead, it is better to think, 'I achieved band 7, so that means I got about 10 answers wrong on the listening test, and I need to try and improve on that score next time.'

**Key idea:** If you do not continue to work on a skill, you run the risk of losing that skill. Even if you have already achieved band 7 in one or two skills, continue to work on them and try to improve your score in all parts of the test.

There is a great deal of benefit in taking a holistic approach to your learning rather than focusing on only one skill at a time. We do not acquire a skill in isolation. Thus, your listening ability can have an impact on your writing. I see this especially with lower levels, when someone writes 'Festival' instead of 'First of all.' This is why the decoding exercise I mentioned earlier can be beneficial for all of your skills. When working on pronunciation, we often say, 'if you cannot hear it, you cannot say it', but I believe that this goes further and that you are also unlikely to *write* it.

We can also see this link with native speakers. Several studies have shown that children with hearing problems also have problems when it comes to literacy (the ability to read and write well). Furthermore, a native speaker will often write in a way that reflects the language they are used to hearing. So, the way that a native speaker says and hears this sentence: 'I would've bought a new one.' means they will often make grammar mistakes like this in their writing: 'I would **of** bought a new one.' Reading widely, using good models, can help correct some of these errors, but speaking and listening are by far the most commonly used of our skills, so should not be neglected in your language study.

### How to make small gains in listening

Reviewing the errors you make in practice tests will help you identify your main listening problems so that you can improve on these. Do not assume that all of your errors will be in sections 3 and 4. As we saw earlier, many candidates look ahead at what is coming later in the test instead of focusing on the task in front of them. Remember, a mark in section 1 or 2 is worth exactly the same as a mark in section 3 or 4. So, to achieve the very best score that you can, you should aim to consistently score close to 20/20 in sections 1 and 2.

A follower of my Facebook page, who was using [The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#) to help prepare for the test, recently asked me for help with listening. I asked him to send me his incorrect answers to the first two listening tests in the second half of the book. He had scored 34 and 35 out of a possible 40. Looking closely at the mistakes revealed that all except one of his mistakes was with notes-completion tasks, and many were in section 1. Look at the feedback I gave him on some of his answers:

### Listening Test 1 - Feedback on incorrect answers

Sect	Question type	Incorrect answer	Comment
1	notes	circular track	Problem: you need to prepare to listen. Read the questions very carefully so you know what to listen for, here you needed to listen for 'the start of the run' and find out where that happens. You are told that the run is on a circular track, and it starts 'at the <u>café</u> ', so this is the answer.
1	notes	7km	You need to find out 'The length of the run'. You will never be asked to do maths, so you will always hear the answer in the same form as you write it. We hear 'it is now <u>5 km</u> , it used to be 3 but they added 2 more.' So the length of the run is 5km.
1	notes	illustrate	listen again and read the script to see that this is not given as a volunteer activity, it is just mentioned. The activity is ' <u>taking photographs</u> '. Again prepare to listen by reading carefully before the recording begins.
1	notes	16 or over	pay attention to the question paper – here 'minimum age' means you need to write the lowest age
4	notes	slow down	The question says 'Voice – vary speed and <b>36</b> _____' 'Vary speed' is used as a paraphrase of ' <i>you can talk rapidly or you can slow down</i> '. The speaker talks about changing two things 1) speed and 2) <u>tone</u> , so this is the answer here.
4	notes	weak words	This is probably a decoding problem – the speaker said ' <u>weak verbs</u> ' and you heard 'weak words'. I wouldn't worry too much, this is at the highest level, think of this as a band 8 or 9 level.

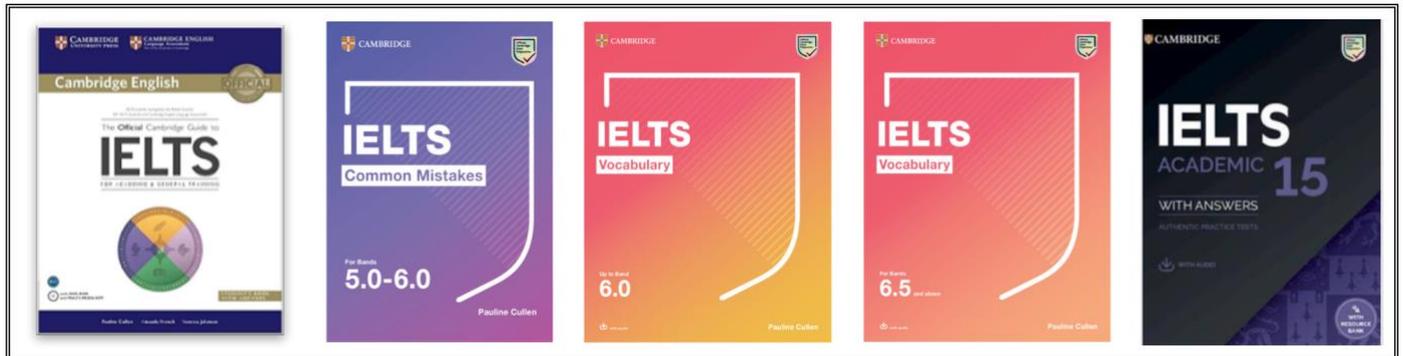
As you can see, the main problem he has to work on is preparing to listen, which again shows the importance of using materials that help you to do this. When you are reviewing your own mistakes, do your best to identify the problem. The following list will help:

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<i>I didn't hear all of the numbers.</i> Or <i>I misheard the numbers.</i>	Focus on listening to numbers in a variety of ways (e.g. in a price, a date, etc.). Practise reading numbers aloud for other people to write down to see how accurately you are pronouncing them – this can reveal problems in how you hear them. <b>The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS</b> has exercises to help with this.
<i>I didn't hear all of the letters in a name.</i> Or <i>I misheard the letters in a name.</i>	Focus on listening to letters of the alphabet and spellings delivered in different ways. Practise spelling out words for other people to write down to see how accurately you are pronouncing letters – this can reveal problems in how you hear them. <b>The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS</b> has exercises to help with this.
<i>I knew when to listen, but I couldn't catch the word – it was too fast for me.</i>	Do exercises in decoding, make sure you develop your skills slowly and gradually by working with lower level section 1 recordings first. Learn any language that is causing the problem.
<i>I knew where the answer was, but I still couldn't answer the question.</i>	This problem could be due to grammar or vocabulary – is there a synonym that you did not recognise? To find out, listen to the part of the recording that has the answer and write down what you hear. Compare your version to the tapescript. Can you identify any grammar or vocabulary problems? Notice the way that the recording paraphrases the question, then work on any language problems or gaps that you can identify.
<i>I didn't hear the answer at all – I got lost here.</i>	Look again at the exercises I suggested to help you develop your listening skills – especially the 'listen and read' exercises. Then go on to listening and writing out what you hear, to find out which words or phrases you are having problems with. Decide if these problems are connected to grammar or vocabulary. Identify <u>where</u> you got lost and why. Did the speaker give a clear signpost that you missed?
<i>I mainly get productive questions like notes-completion wrong</i>	Make sure you are using authentic test materials – compare your scores in listening tests from Cambridge books 9 onwards to see if the problem is with your materials. If you still have this problem, work on preparing to listen; using the questions to keep track; and decoding.
<i>I mainly get multiple choice questions wrong</i>	Make sure you are using authentic test materials – compare your scores in listening tests from Cambridge books 9 onwards to see if the problem is with your materials. If you still have this problem, work on preparing to listen; using the questions to keep track; and reading and listening at the same time.

### Final tips

- Prepare to listen - pay close attention to the information on the question paper. Use the questions to help predict the topics you will hear, to work out what information you need to listen for, and to stay focused during the test.
- Don't look ahead or back – focus on the questions and on the section that you are currently listening to. Aim to get the best score you can on every section. If you are not sure of an answer, write down your best guess then move on to the next one – always keep pace with the recording.
- Be as accurate as possible – in the earlier example of '2 ½ kilos of flour', if you write 'some' instead of '2 ½,' your answer is incorrect because they decide on a precise amount.
- Always write numbers as a numeral to avoid making a spelling mistake.

- Check the spelling and numbering of your answers carefully at the end. : check your spelling and that your answer matches the correct number on the answer sheet.
- Use authentic IELTS test practice materials to develop the skills you need for the real test.



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## Chapter 9

# The Key to IELTS Speaking

### Understanding the IELTS speaking test

The IELTS speaking test is an interview with a trained examiner that lasts between 11 and 14 minutes. The interview is recorded, and if you take the test for UK visa purposes, it will be videoed. Recording your interview not only allows for your mark to be checked, but it also helps ensure that each examiner follows the standard procedures for the test. This means that the examiner must strictly follow the timing for each part of the test, and ask questions that will allow you to show a range of language.

Speaking is even more personal than writing, and the idea of a speaking test can make people feel anxious, so part of the examiner's job is to put you at ease. They also have to give you every opportunity to show your speaking ability. Looking more closely at the test, we can see how these two aspects are achieved.

Part 1	You answer questions on familiar topics	Familiar
Part 2	You are given a topic to talk about for 2 minutes and answer follow-up questions	
Part 3	You answer broader, more general questions based on the part 2 topic	Less familiar

### Common problems in IELTS speaking

As with all of the previous papers, to improve your score in speaking, you need to begin by identifying your problems and then working on them. In my experience, people remain stuck at band 6 in speaking because of three main issues: key misunderstandings about the test; a lack of awareness of language problems; and a lack of opportunities to practise. Let us begin by looking at some common misunderstandings.

#### ***'Why is the speaking test becoming more difficult each year?'***

A few years ago, I gave a talk to a group of teachers in China. To be able to continue in their role, the teachers had to take IELTS each year and achieve a high score. Many had managed to reach band 8 in speaking. One such teacher was concerned that her own students would struggle to answer the questions the examiner posed during her annual test. In fact, she was convinced the test was getting more and more difficult each year.

On any test day, the examiners will assess candidates of a wide range of levels. They are trained to adjust their questions so that each candidate feels comfortable and able to answer. But, in order to help them reach their language peak, each candidate will at some point be given questions they will find a little more difficult. It would be very unfair if a band 3 candidate was asked the same test questions as a band 9 candidate. It would be equally unfair if the band 8 teacher was asked only basic questions and, as a result, did not have the opportunity to show the full extent of her skills. So, the teacher was correct in thinking that *her* speaking test was becoming more difficult each year: as her language level developed, the examiners adjusted their questions accordingly. But she was incorrect in assuming that her lower-band students would be given the same questions.

#### ***'At the beginning, the examiner seemed rude'***

This is another comment I heard from the teachers. Having trained many oral examiners and worked as a Cambridge examiner myself for many years, I was very puzzled by the comment. It transpired that some of the teachers helped their students to *learn* answers for the test, which poses a problem for the examiner.

This is not a test of your ability to learn answers, but a test of how well you can communicate your ideas when speaking naturally. To the examiner, a learned answer is as obvious as if you were to get up and stand on your chair to try to appear taller. When the examiner hears answers like this, they must quickly interrupt you and ask a new question.

Those who prepare answers generally do so for part 1 questions, which focus on familiar topics. This part of the test should be a gentle introduction that helps you adjust to what can feel like a stressful situation. However, if the examiner has to repeatedly interrupt your answers and change the topic, this instead creates a very frustrating start to the interview. If you give prepared answers, you are cheating yourself of a key part of the test when you should generally be able to respond the most confidently. If the examiner interrupts you to ask a new question, they are not being rude, they are trying their best to give you a fresh start, and a new chance to answer naturally.

**Key idea:** The examiner must ignore any learned answers and will interrupt you to give you a new question. Always answer the questions in a natural way. You will not achieve a high score if you try to speak in memorised, *written* language.

### The candidate's role

Your examiner will try their best to make your speaking test feel like a natural conversation, but this requires your cooperation. The candidate's role is to engage with the examiner by listening attentively to their questions and answering them naturally. Listening plays a key part in any conversation, and it is only by listening well that we can respond appropriately. For example, you should always pay close attention to the tense that the examiner uses. As we have seen, the examiner will try to give you plenty of opportunities to show the full extent of your language and skills. In part 1, this can include asking you about *past*, *present*, or *future* events, while in part 3, you may be asked about the *causes* of something or about what you think *should* or *might* happen *as a result* of something. So, listening well can help you show a wide range of language in your answers. Good course books will help you to practise each of these.

If you are a shy person, try to see yourself as helping the examiner; be polite, friendly, and answer the questions fully. This means giving a complete answer rather than short responses of one or two words. I always advise people to approach the speaking test as they would a job interview. You do not need to go as far as to dress formally, or wear a suit and tie. Nevertheless, your clothes can affect your mood and feelings, so wear whatever makes you feel comfortable and confident.

### Your attitude to the test

I speak with candidates of many different nationalities and I have heard people of every country insist that it is impossible to reach the score they need where they live. People who are band 5, but need band 6, tell me, '*Everyone knows you need to go to xyz to score band 6, they only give band 5 here,*' while those who are band 6, and need band 7, tell me, '*Everyone knows they only give band 6 here, you need to go to xyz to score band 7.*' In English-speaking countries, I have heard the same rumour about the need to go to a different city or test centre. I hope you can see that this is simply a way to find a scapegoat, something to blame for the fact that they are stuck at the same band. As we saw in chapter 2, you will continue to be frustrated, and receive the same score in the test, until you can accept your level and say, '*I am band 6 now, so I need to develop band 7 skills.*'

### Use spoken language not written language

It is natural to want to prepare as much as possible for any test. However, as we have seen, learning answers will not help you achieve a high score. There is a further problem with these learned answers in that people try to 'boost' their score by writing encyclopedia-style answers using written sentence structures. If you find yourself learning whole paragraphs containing words like *Thus* and *Therefore*, then you are not learning to

*Speak naturally*, and so you are not preparing for the speaking test. When the examiner says, ‘*Tell me about your home town*,’ they do not want to hear a paragraph that belongs in the writing test, they want to hear natural, spoken language.

Some people advise you to use complex sentences and vocabulary, and even to use a formula for your answers. For example, ‘*always answer with three sentences, give one detail and one example*.’ This advice is suggested as a way for *you* to control the test, but it is the examiner’s job to do that. Again, these types of responses result in unnatural language. Although you should always give a *full* answer, only keep talking if you actually have something relevant to say. Answering fully does not mean talking at length for each question, it simply means completing your ideas, as the following examples show:

Question	Short answers	Full answers
<i>Do you enjoy reading?</i>	Yes. No.	<i>Yes, I often.../ usually...</i> (give examples of what or when you read) <i>Yes, I particularly like ...</i> (give examples of what you enjoy reading) <i>Yes, I find it ...</i> (explain why you enjoy it) <i>No, I prefer...</i> (give an alternative) <i>No, because...</i> (explain why)

Again, it is important to remember that if you approach this idea as a ‘formula’ to learn, then your answers will not be natural. Express ideas that are true for you, rather than to complete a gap in a learned structure.

### What is band 7 in speaking?

Following a speaking test result, many candidates say to me, ‘*I know I did well, I used lots of high-level words and phrases but I only got band 6, should I ask for a remark?*’ As we saw with writing, at band 6, there is a tendency to focus on vocabulary and quantities. However, this is a *speaking* test, and vocabulary is only one aspect of that; you cannot judge your level, or improve your score, by focusing on vocabulary alone.

This misunderstanding comes from a surface-level reading of the band descriptors, which mention ‘*idiomatic language*.’ Many people take this to mean that you can score band 7 by simply adding some idiomatic phrases to your answers, and this idea is the basis for many of the videos about how to ‘boost’ your speaking score. Nevertheless, as we saw in the vocabulary chapter, several key ideas are being ignored here. For example, we are told that band 9 candidates use language with ‘**flexibility**’ and ‘**precision**’ and, even more importantly, ‘**naturally**’. We are also told that a band 7 candidate uses idiomatic phrases in a way that shows ‘**an awareness of style and collocation**’. These ideas show that you cannot improve your overall speaking score by simply adding a few idioms to your answers.

### Learning idioms

I discussed the use of idioms at length in chapter 3, and explained that idiomatic language is not at all limited to expressions such as ‘*it takes two to tango*’ and ‘*hit the nail on the head*.’ When people tell me, ‘*The test book says this model essay has good examples of idiomatic language but I can’t find any*,’ this is because they are looking for these types of idioms, many of which native speakers rarely use in real situations.

Remember, there is no quick solution; to achieve a high score, you must always go further than learning a list of words or phrases. If you want to focus on idioms, make sure you learn those that a native speaker would use in real life, outside of the IELTS websites and YouTube videos you have seen. Also make sure that the idioms you learn reflect who you are as a person; in other words, be aware of their style and tone. A good example of this is ‘*a ton of*,’ which was mentioned in one of the videos I watched recently, and which I have seen people try to use in academic writing task 1 answers. If you search for this phrase in formal written texts, you will find that it is not used idiomatically (i.e. with a different meaning to that suggested by the words

themselves.) Instead, it is used quite literally to mean 'one ton' (a weight of measure equal to one thousand kilograms).

It is most often used without its literal meaning by young people like my daughter, who will often complain that she has 'a ton of homework to do.' Among family or close friends, I might sometimes use it myself in a similar way. However, I do not think there are many situations where I would talk about 'a ton of' something in an interview. I am talking personally, here, and this is what you must consider yourself: does the language fit your own style and personality? Does it fit the situation you are talking about? This is what is meant by 'an awareness of style.'

The best way to learn idiomatic language is when you see or hear native speakers using the phrases in *real* situations. When you do, think first about the speaker and the context, ask yourself if they are talking about a serious topic, and in a formal situation. If they are, then the language may be useful for the IELTS test. Make a note of the phrase and find out as much as you can about its meaning, then try to use it in a similar way yourself. I have used idiomatic language throughout this book, go back to see if you can find some good examples to learn. If you do not have time to do this type of research into vocabulary, use my **Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS** books and my band 7+ and 8+ vocabulary teaching apps.

**Key idea:** If you spend time learning lists of words and idioms that are not relevant to IELTS, you are doing the type of practice that keeps you stuck at band 6. You need to go beyond learning lists and gain a deeper understanding of the tone and style of the language you learn.



### **Deliberate practice for IELTS speaking**

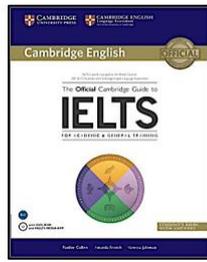
Many of the self-study students who contact me live in non-English speaking countries and have little opportunity to practise with a native speaker. They also tend to see the criteria used to assess the test in a rather simplistic way. Fluency and coherence are interpreted as '*speaking quickly*', and '*using cohesive devices to create complex sentences*'. Vocabulary and grammar are viewed as '*adding idioms and complex words*', and pronunciation means having '*a good accent*'. If you are stuck at band 6, and see the criteria in these limited ways, then you will not be able to identify the problems you need to work on. In this section, I will look at these problems in detail, and how to deliberately practise the necessary skills, no matter where you live.

### **Fluency and Coherence**

Fluency is the ability to keep talking without pausing to think of a word, or how to explain something. Thus, rather than simply being a matter of *speed*, your fluency is clearly linked to your knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. In fact, when candidates try to speak *quickly*, what they say becomes difficult to understand. As in all parts of the test, clear communication is the key, so speaking too quickly will *limit* your fluency rather than enhance it. Coherence in speaking relates to your ability to connect your ideas together so that the examiner can easily follow them. So it is also closely linked to clear communication and being understood.

In the writing chapter, I advised you to see your current score as a guide to your problem areas. Similarly, see the band 6 descriptors for the speaking test as a description of your current problems, and the band 7 descriptors as showing you what to aim for in the test and in your practice. Looking at these in detail, we can see that, at band 6, a candidate will 'lose coherence at times due to occasional repetition, self-correction, or hesitation.' By band 7, these problems are less frequent. However, without useful feedback, it can be difficult to assess these problems in your own speaking.

**The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS** has several videos showing a real examiner interviewing a range of candidates.



Look at the following transcripts showing answers given by candidates at band 5 and band 7 in the video. The candidates are answering the following question: 'What different types of writing do you do? For example, letters, emails, reports or essays.'

### Fluency and coherence

Band 5	Band 7
<p><i>usually maintains flow of speech but uses repetition, self-correction and/ or slow speech to keep going</i></p> <p><i>'I prefer to email. I prefer to connect, err, by email with my friends with my family and, err, sometimes I prefer to write letters by myself because, err, it's err, very mmm actual. I think, err, it's from...if you send a letter, err, for, by yourself, and err, it means that you are, err, you are, erm, you are very.... appreciate this person'</i></p> <p><i>'For my studies I prefer computer to type in computer, err, but, erm...err, for my essays, err, I prefer to write by pen.'</i></p> <p><i>Why?</i></p> <p><i>'Erm..err, because erm, err, I feel more comfortable when I, erm...when I try to explain err, my err, something, err, which I want to say. It's err, more comfortable and easy to write it yourself.'</i></p>	<p><i>speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence</i></p> <p><i>'For the university – I'm attending university – and I often do essays, erm essay for exam or researches with a group. Letters - it happened only once - I had to write a letter for a job.'</i></p> <p><i>'I prefer writing with a computer because I can erm, I can pick up the main erm, errors, the main mistakes, because the computer shows them to you and it's easier.'</i></p>

Recording yourself, then writing out your responses in this same way, can help you to see your problems. Notice that the band 5 speaker relies on repetition (*I prefer...I prefer...*) as well as the filler 'erm' to keep going. The band 7 candidate also does this, but far less frequently – he is able to summon the language he needs to explain his ideas more easily. Do the same for your own answers to see if repetition or hesitation are problems for you. Notice also that the band 7 candidate answers *fully*, but with the band 5 candidate, the examiner needs to ask a follow-up question.

### Lexical resource

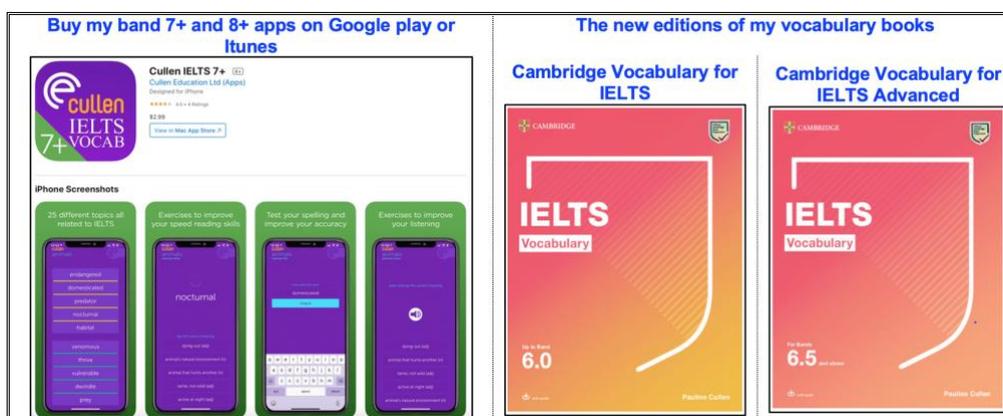
A word that is often ignored in terms of vocabulary is 'flexible,' which is used in the descriptors at Band 7 and above. These examples, again from *The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* video, give you some idea of what this means.

### Lexical resource

<p><b>Band 5:</b> <i>uses vocabulary with limited flexibility</i></p>	<p><b>Band 7:</b> <i>uses vocabulary flexibly</i></p>
<p><b>Examiner:</b> <i>Do you think that people in small towns help each other more than people in cities?’</i></p> <p><b>Candidate:</b>  <i>‘Because in a small town there are, err, not as much, err, people as in, err, big cities. Erm, because, err, they need help and, err, they are more closer to each other, err because they are few. Err, so, err comparing with people who live in big cities, they are very busy. They just err, think about yourselves.’</i></p>	<p><b>Examiner:</b> <i>‘Why don’t people in cities help each other?’</i></p> <p><b>Candidate:</b>  <i>‘Because the life in cities is quite stressful, there are many people that have to run from one part of the city to the other and they don’t, erm, they don’t take care of, of people that maybe need help. They don’t notice.’</i></p>

In the first example, the band 5 candidate struggled to complete her ideas because she did not have enough vocabulary, and this happens again with this second question. The band 7 candidate, on the other hand, has enough vocabulary to convey his ideas clearly, even if he does not know always the precise words. This is what is meant by flexibility; you will only be flexible if you have a wide enough vocabulary to talk about any topic. These extracts again show a clear link between a lack of vocabulary and fluency problems.

***My Vocabulary for IELTS books and apps will help you build your active vocabulary so that you do not struggle to remember words when you need them in the test.***



In terms of grammar, the idea of flexibility is conveyed through your *range* of structures. Do you have a wide enough range to be able to clearly explain your ideas or are you limited in what you can explain? Does pausing to think about grammar interfere with your fluency? In the grammar chapter, I mentioned that good course books use a ‘*present – practise – produce*’ pattern. It is only when we need to produce language that we can identify what we do not know how to say, so speaking test questions are particularly helpful in identifying gaps like this.

Use the following exercise to help identify your own fluency, grammar, and vocabulary problems. Record your answers to a complete speaking test, then listen to your answers, paying special attention to any occasion when you stumbled or struggled to explain an idea. Write out a transcript of your answer (including pauses and fillers like ‘erm’) and decide whether your problem was linked to grammar or vocabulary, then work on any specific gaps you find. For example, did you struggle to talk about *the topic of money*? Were you able to clearly recount an event in *the past*? If you identify specific gaps like this in your language, look back at chapters 3 and 4 to find ways of improving these. Also notice whether the same problems occur in your writing.

## Improving your fluency

Building your vocabulary, and making sure you use new language as often as possible, will help improve both your fluency and your confidence in speaking. However, another factor that can interfere with fluency relates to advice I often see that tells you to lie or invent a story, particularly for part 2 of the test.

I have heard several recordings of part 2 tasks where the speakers hesitated and struggled to finish their talk. Each time, the speaker admitted that their story did not actually happen; they had invented it. In doing this, they were adding an extra level of difficulty to the test: the ability to invent facts that sound convincing. As we saw with writing, there is no benefit at all in inventing examples or stories like this; you are not being assessed on your ability to amuse or entertain the examiner, and you will more than likely create a fluency problem as you try to invent details. A similar issue arises when people aim to 'give three sentences for each answer', even when they have no more to add. When you practise, always answer naturally and honestly, and only keep speaking if you actually have something to say. I am sure you will find that your fluency and confidence improve.

**Key idea:** Answer naturally and honestly, and only say something when you actually have something to say.

## Preparing your part 2 talk

A further problem in part 2 is lack of preparation. In the real test, you will have 1 minute to think about the task and what to say. Yet, when practising, I find people skip this step and try to just keep talking; their focus is on filling the time rather than what they are saying. This is similar to the problems in writing, where people lack ideas but still aim to fill a page. If you do this with speaking, what you say will be repetitive, less coherent, and you will struggle to keep going. In effect, you are practising staying at band 6.

Thinking is an important part of giving a short talk. Spend a minute thinking carefully about the information and bullet points you are given as part of your task. To help think of different ideas you can talk about, use the visualisation technique I mentioned in the reading chapter. The *Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS* has more tips and exercises to help you with this planning stage.

## Can I change the question?

Some people worry that they will be given a part 2 topic that they are not very familiar with. This concern may come from practice materials they have found online that do not reflect the real test. You should not ask for a new task if you are given one that you do not initially like. Instead, react to the situation just as you would in a job interview. Answer honestly, and do your best to relate to it personally. For example, if you are given a question related to sport, but do not participate in any yourself, then simply explain this and talk about a person you know who does.

**Key idea:** Make sure you practise preparing and thinking of ideas for part 2. If you do not have any personal experience of the topic, think of someone you know who does and explain this in your talk.

## Improving coherence and grammar

Part 2 tasks are particularly useful in testing your ability to connect ideas together, and they can also help to uncover problems with referencing. A good form of deliberate practice is to record yourself giving a talk. Listen back and write out the transcript to identify your problem areas. If you can see a better way to explain your ideas, repeat the same talk. Record yourself each time so that you can see, and hear, the improvements in fluency and coherence. Through repetition, you will gain confidence, and through repeating the same task, you will practise speaking more accurately and more fluently. As we saw with writing, if you always look for new tasks, then you are missing good opportunities to review and improve. You should also find that the work you do here will have a positive effect on the accuracy and fluency of your writing as well.

When you listen back to your part 2 talks, focus on different elements each time. For example:

- **Grammar and fluency:** think about tenses and accuracy – are your problems similar to those in your writing? Do any grammar problems affect your fluency?
- **Vocabulary and fluency:** is your vocabulary flexible enough to talk about any topic? Are there any topics you struggle to talk about and that affect your fluency?
- **Cohesion:** is it easy to follow your ideas? Do you connect your ideas logically?
- **Referencing:** when you recount a story, is it always clear *who* you are talking about or *when* something happened?
- **Repetition:** Do you overuse the same basic words or connectors (*and, so, because, and, but*)?

## Pronunciation

When it comes to pronunciation, many people neglect to think about individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and so on, and instead only ask me whether it is better to have a British accent or an American one. Different accents are not mentioned in the criteria because they do not matter; even at band 9, it is only important that your speaking is 'effortless to understand.' Thus, the features of your pronunciation that will lower your score are those that make your ideas difficult to follow, while the features that will *raise* your score are those that help make your meaning clear.

## Making yourself intelligible

At band 6, speakers may have problems with individual sounds that make their language unclear at times. To see if this is a problem for you, and to identify which individual sounds you need to work on, ask someone else to write out a transcript of your recording. What they write will reveal how intelligible your individual sounds are. In chapter 4, I recommended comparing English to the grammar and vocabulary of your own language, and this can also help with pronunciation. There may be individual sounds in English that do not exist in your own language, and which are likely to be a common problem for people in your country. If possible, try to work with someone of a different nationality, because they are more likely to notice these problems.

A follower of my Facebook page living in Pakistan found an IELTS student in Brazil, and each week they would Skype each other to practise their speaking. In this way, they learned each other's weaknesses and could identify which elements of their language the examiner may struggle to understand. As well as chatting on Skype, you could also send each other your recordings to transcribe.

## Developing 'the positive features' of pronunciation

The band 7 descriptor for pronunciation mentions the 'positive features of pronunciation.' These are the elements that *enhance* your communication. For example, clear pronunciation of individual sounds, and the use of stress and intonation to help convey meaning. Another important feature, which I mentioned in the listening chapter, is chunking. This is the way that we naturally run words together so that we do not talk in a robotic way. It is chunking that makes decoding more difficult when listening.

To work on this, as well as other features of pronunciation, the best resources that you have are the listening test recordings: they feature native speakers talking naturally and using language that is appropriate to the test. Listening section 1 and 3 recordings show you how native speakers discuss ideas naturally in conversation, and sections 2 and 4 show you how a native speaker connects ideas together in a talk. Use the following exercises to help exploit the listening resources to work on your speaking skills:

## Using short extracts:

1. To work on chunking, stress, and intonation, listen to a recording while reading the tapescript. On the tapescript, mark the following:
  - the words the speaker runs together (e.g. saying '*atthecafe*' instead of '*at . the . cafe*')
  - where the speaker adds stress to a word (e.g. *I'm sure you don't **really** want ..*)

- when the speaker's voice rises and falls in a sentence

Reading from your marked-up tapescript, try to copy the patterns you noticed. Record yourself and compare your version to the original recording. Repeat the exercise until you are happy with the result.

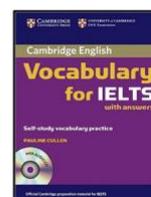
### Using longer extracts

2. To develop your fluency, and to make sure you are not speaking too quickly, practise reading aloud from the script along with the recording, be careful to match your pace with the speaker's. The monologues in listening sections 2 and 4 are the most useful for this.
3. To further develop your fluency, use a section 1 recording from a test you have already done. Cut out one of the speakers from the tapescript so that you can play their role. Pause the recording when it is your turn to speak, and use the answers from your question paper to help you complete the conversation. Repeat this several times until you are happy with the result.
4. To practise giving a talk for part 2, listen to a section 2 or 4 monologue and take notes – you may need to listen several times. Use your notes to give the same talk and record your answer. Compare your recording to the original and work on any problems.

**Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS** and **Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced** have lots of exercises to help you focus on specific elements of pronunciation.

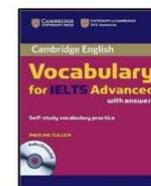
6 ▶ 14 PRONUNCIATION Underline the syllable with the main stress in these words. Listen to check your answers. Then practise saying the words correctly.

advertise	exaggerate	essential
advertising	personal	marketing
advertisement	luxury	pressurise
commercial	articles	brochure
product	possessions	impulsive
irritating	promotional	effective



5.1 PRONUNCIATION s+h are not the only letters that make the sound /ʃ/. Look at the following pairs of words and decide if the underlined sounds are /ʃ/ or /s/.

1 censored <u>ce</u> n <u>su</u> red	4 <u>pa</u> rt <u>ia</u> l <u>pa</u> rc <u>el</u>	7 <u>fu</u> r <u>ni</u> sh <u>fu</u> rn <u>ac</u> e	10 <u>se</u> a <u>l</u> ed <u>sh</u> i <u>el</u> d
2 <u>co</u> ars <u>e</u> n <u>ca</u> u <u>ti</u> o <u>n</u>	5 <u>se</u> e <u>k</u> <u>ch</u> i <u>c</u>	8 <u>su</u> bl <u>e</u> <u>sh</u> u <u>tl</u> e	11 <u>ru</u> st <u>ru</u> sh <u>e</u> d
3 <u>ce</u> n <u>su</u> re <u>se</u> n <u>so</u> r	6 <u>ch</u> a <u>u</u> ff <u>eu</u> r <u>so</u> f <u>a</u>	9 <u>cr</u> u <u>st</u> <u>cr</u> u <u>sh</u> e <u>d</u>	12 <u>si</u> p <u>sh</u> i <u>p</u>



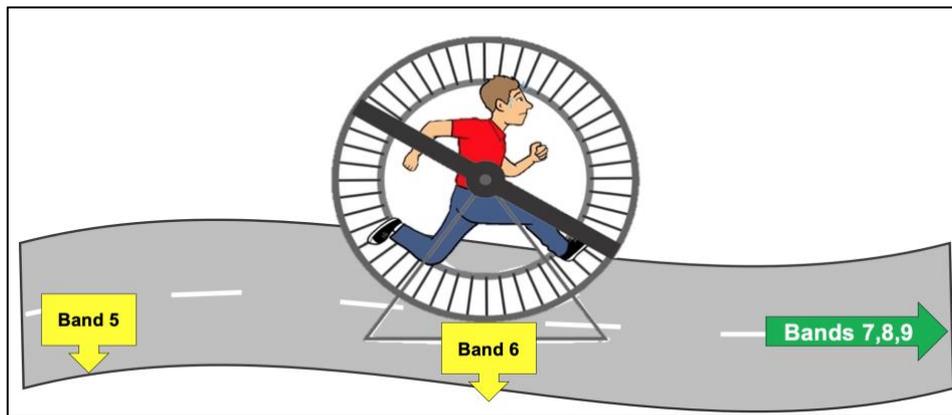
### Final tips

- Don't try to learn answers – just answer naturally.
- Practise answering questions on a wide variety of topics – make sure you have something to say.
- Review your answers by recording yourself and writing out what you say – focus on different criteria each time, such as fluency and coherence, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation.
- Work with a friend if you can.
- Focus on different aspects of pronunciation.
- Practise preparing and thinking of ideas for part 2.
- Repeat tasks so that you can improve and build your language and skills.
- In the test, try to be friendly and answer all of the questions fully.
- Listen well so that you answer appropriately and with a range of tenses.
- Don't invent stories – this can make you less fluent.
- React naturally to the questions – if you cannot hear or understand, tell the examiner and they will help by repeating the question or rephrasing it.

## Chapter 10 Resources for IELTS

### The importance of IELTS resources

Hopefully, you will now understand just how important the resources you use are when it comes to your practice and preparation for IELTS. If you do not use test materials that reflect the real test, you will not develop the skills you need to achieve a high score, and you will remain stuck. As we have repeatedly seen, using resources that reflect misleading advice about the test, and that are not *valid, fair, and reliable* means you are practising staying stuck at band 6 or lower.



### Common Problems with IELTS resources

While the theory of test writing may be briefly covered in teaching courses, the practice of it is generally not discussed. Yet teachers are often instructed by their schools to write tests, either to assess progress at the end of a course, or as a placement test for new students. This is certainly how I began writing tests early in my teaching career.

When I first began writing tests *professionally*, I had to unlearn everything that I thought I already knew. Only after 10 years of having my work rewritten or even rejected altogether, did I feel confident enough in my test writing ability to put forward a book proposal. I do not believe I am a particularly slow learner, and my experience has been echoed in test writers I have trained and worked with over many years. The fact is that learning the craft of test writing is often a frustrating, painstaking process.

The assumption that anyone can write a test, and that no special skill is required is widespread, and so the time commitment and effort involved in producing test materials that are *valid, fair, and reliable* are not generally understood. In chapter 1, I mentioned algorithms learning what consumers **want**: easy access to cheap or free IELTS materials and a quick fix to their problems. As a result, fast and cheap materials are produced along with matching tricks that work with those materials. As we have seen, it is a mistake to see such materials are representative of the real test. What you **need** to be able to improve your IELTS score is test materials that have been produced with skill, care and attention. This cannot be done cheaply or quickly.

For students using unsuitable materials, the washback effect in terms of language learning is a mistaken belief that you must learn technical language and jargon to achieve a high level in the test. This is why people try to tell me that I am not targeting the right words in my books or apps.

When it comes to skills, some of the washback effects that I have noticed include:

- In reading, candidates focus on matching words and do not develop key reading skills.

- In listening, candidates focus on matching vocabulary in the question and do not develop key listening skills.
- In writing, students learn to ignore part of the question and to write in a repetitive or rambling way.
- Passages and questions feed the belief that you must learn complex words and sentences.

Materials like this can be found in abundance because they are easier, faster, and cheaper to produce. But, as they are not fair, valid, or reliable, they cannot be said to represent IELTS, and cannot help you to prepare or develop the skills needed for the real test.

### **‘Actual IELTS’**

Following a test, many people want to ‘help’ others and so try to remember parts of the test to share online. For the writing and speaking tasks, these so-called ‘*actual tests*’ become filtered through the candidate’s language level, memory, and their own views of how test questions are written. Small changes have a big impact in test writing, so such materials cannot be seen as representative of the real test. Furthermore, the sharing of such questions leads to a belief that you can predict the test question and learn answers. If this is your approach, you will remain stuck at a low score.

Even worse, with the reading and listening tests, people try to find articles on a similar topic online and then **write their own test questions**. The resulting tests are a confusing mix of guessable or impossible questions and overly technical and complex passages. Rather than admitting they have written the materials themselves, people share these tests and claim that theirs are ‘*real*’ while those in the Cambridge books are not, thus feeding the idea that ‘*Cambridge is trying to trick you.*’

Such materials undermine your trust in the test as well as your trust in your own ability to improve. Furthermore, they mislead you when it comes to the skills you must develop and use and the language you must learn. The real enemy here is not the test, it is the materials that trick you into believing myths about IELTS and get in the way of your preparation.

**Key idea:** Use materials written by skilled test writers, who understand how to create test materials that are fair, valid, and reliable, so that you can be sure you are practising the skills needed for the real test.

### **Unreliable resources are also poor language models**

If we consider just two questions taken from a reading passage from one of these ‘*Recent Actual IELTS*’ books, you can hopefully see that there is an even bigger problem: they contain many English language problems.

- 31** The lifestyle of Stevenson
- A made his family envy him so much.
  - B should be responsible for his death.
  - C gained more attention from the public than his works.
  - D didn’t well prepare his life in Samoa.

Which **TWO** positive functions about Mintzberg's research are mentioned in the last two paragraphs?

- A offers waterproof categories of managers
- B provides a clear concept to define the role of a manager
- C helps new graduates to design their career
- D suggests ways for managers to do their job better
- E makes a fresh way for further research

There are language problems connected to grammar in every option (*the lifestyle of Stevenson, envy him so much, attention from the public, prepare his life*) and the stem of the questions does not fit grammatically with the options given: '*The lifestyle of Stevenson should be responsible for his death.*' There are also vocabulary problems in most of the questions, with poor collocation a particular problem (*waterproof categories; a fresh way*). These feature in phrases that are intended to act as synonyms that 'translate' phrases in the passage. Thus, these materials not only prevent you from improving and practising reading skills, but they also interfere with the language you are learning.

**Key idea:** If you are using test materials that are confusing, highly technical, and where the questions often have more than once answer, then you are not using materials that reflect the real test.

### Finding reliable resources

When I first started writing on social media, people would sometimes tell me that my posts were too long and they told me to make videos instead. When I did that, they said, '*Your videos are too long, it's better if they are only about 5 minutes.*' Eventually, someone said, '*Actually, can you make one-minute videos?*' This is when I realised that the big demand is for a quick fix, and as I know this does not exist, pandering to the idea would make matters worse. I decided that the real solution was to try to persuade these same people that you need to work at complex problems in order to understand and solve them; you cannot do this passively through watching a short video. I also realised that those who would take the time to *read a book* were the people I could actually help.

A further aspect of this issue became clear over the last five years: the demand for free materials has had an enormous impact on publishing, with many people seeking free downloads of books rather than buying them. I am well aware of the irony of spending more than a year writing a free book in order to persuade people to **buy** books, but I hope that this book will also persuade you that books **do** have value, and that writers deserve to be paid for their work.

### Useful books for Deliberate IELTS practice

Many years ago, we could assess the freshness of food by simply looking at it. The advent of fast foods changed all of this, and we now need to carefully read labels to see whether what we buy is nutritious or not. The advent of free and easy contents online has had a similar impact on IELTS resources and you now need to be more discerning in those that you use to ensure that they have a positive effect on your preparation for the test. To help you assess whether materials are reliable, use the practice tests in the Cambridge test books as a good model and guide for comparison. Below is a list of books and authors I recommend.

## discerning

adjective · UK  /di'sɜː.nɪŋ/ US  /di'sɜː.nɪŋ/ FORMAL APPROVING

★ showing good judgment, especially about style and quality:  
*a discerning customer*

*Cambridge online dictionary*

**Key idea:** The best preparation for the test will include a balance of language skills and test practice using materials that reflect the *real* test and so force you to use and show the same skills as in IELTS.

### Reliable resources

Over the last 20 years, I have been extremely lucky to have been mentored by skilled test writers such as [Clare McDowell](#), [Vanessa Jakeman](#), and [Judith Wilson](#), all of whom are wonderful authors who have produced excellent materials for IELTS. Other excellent authors I have worked with are [Amanda French](#), [Miles Hordern](#), [Sophie Walker](#), and [Megan Yucel](#).

### IELTS Language books

[Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS](#) by Pauline Cullen

[Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced](#) by Pauline Cullen

[Cambridge Grammar for IELTS](#) by Pauline Cullen and Diane Hopkins

[Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate](#) by Pauline Cullen

### IELTS Skills books

[The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#) by Pauline Cullen, Amanda French, Vanessa Jakeman

[Step-Up to IELTS](#) by Clare McDowell and Vanessa Jakeman – a great resource for lower level candidates

### IELTS Test practice and preparation books

[The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS](#) by Pauline Cullen, Amanda French, Vanessa Jakeman

[Cambridge Practice test books 9 onwards](#)

[Practice Test plus](#) by Judith Wilson and Morgan Terry

[Insight into IELTS](#) by Clare McDowell and Vanessa Jakeman

### IELTS E-books:

The Key to IELTS Series, by Pauline Cullen (more books coming soon)

- 1) The Key to IELTS Success
- 2) The Key to IELTS Writing Task 2
- 3) The Key to IELTS Academic Writing Task 1
- 4) The Key to IELTS GT Writing Task 1

### IELTS Apps (Available on iTunes and google play)

Cullen IELTS Vocab 7+

Cullen IELTS Vocab 8+

### General English resources

[Practical English Usage](#), by Michael Swan

*English Grammar in Use*, by Raymond Murphy  
*The Cambridge Online dictionary*

### **Wider reading - Non-fiction books to help build language and get ideas:**

It is important for you to read widely, beyond your own field of study, so that when it comes to the test, you can write about what you know. I highly recommend these books and authors, who are very good at clearly explaining complex ideas and making their own position clear.

***Black Box Thinking***, by Matthew Syed

***Bounce***, by Matthew Syed

***Bad Science***, by Ben Goldacre

***Blink***, by Malcolm Gladwell

To find out more about the test and see how IELTS scoring works and any other information about IELTS, there is only one official website: [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)

### **References and further reading based on the ideas in this book**

**The Academic Word List:**

<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/>

### **Discussion of the thesis statement:**

How to make a good argument: *Teaching the thesis statement to university students* by Dr. Alex Baratta, School of Education, The University of Manchester

### **You can find more help from me here:**

- Twitter: @CullenPauline
- Facebook: IELTS Weekly with Pauline Cullen or Key to IELTS
- Web: [www.keytoielts.com/](http://www.keytoielts.com/)
- Flipboard: Key to IELTS

#### **Testimonial:**

*'Amazing effort put in by the author. A step by step guide that helps you climb the ladder to success. I came to realise what I was actually doing wrong in all those previous attempts. I enjoyed reading the e-book as it seemed as if the author saw right through me, picking all the short comings and forcing me to correct them. I also read Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS. It was extremely helpful. I bought the Cullen IELTS vocab app, it was very useful.*

*Lastly , I got my IELTS results on the 11th of November - I improved my reading from 6.5 to 7.5, previously I always ran short of time, on the exam day I completed the reading section ten minutes ahead. I also improved my writing from 6.5 to 7.*

*Finally I will be sitting for the PLAB exam. Once again, a very big thank you Pauline Cullen!*