

## IELTS Speaking: 3 simple tips

Here are three simple tips that could make a difference to your score:

### 1. Be confident

Although you might be nervous, try to speak clearly and confidently. Smile and be friendly\* with the examiner. As you go into the exam, tell yourself that you have prepared well and that you're going to enjoy the challenge.

### 2. Know that you are prepared

You will feel much more confident if you know that you have prepared and practised for the test. You should know exactly what to expect. For example, have you prepared some common topics (e.g. describe a place, a person, a hobby) for the short presentation? Are you ready for a past and a future question in part 3?

### 3. Speak naturally

Try to enjoy a normal conversation with the examiner. Instead of worrying about your grammar, listen carefully to the questions and try to give natural answers. Most of the questions are about you, your life and your opinions, so it's best to be open. I used to be an examiner, and I always found the job more interesting when students spoke openly about their opinions and experiences.

**\*Note:** You are not marked on body language, but I'd still recommend that you try to act in a friendly, confident manner.

## [IELTS Speaking Part 3: add more detail](#)

In [this lesson](#) I mentioned 3 techniques to help you give longer answers: ask yourself why, explain the alternatives, give an example.

Most students have no problem with the first step (explaining why), but they aren't so good at giving alternatives or examples. Take the following question from last week's lesson for example.

### **Question:**

In your opinion, are newspapers important?

### **Example student answer:**

Yes, in my opinion newspapers are very important **(why?)** because they give us information about what is happening around the world. **(why?)** They are a vital source of knowledge about education, technology, medicine and many other fields.

This is a good start, but let's try to raise the answer to band 9 level.

### **Example answer with 'alternative' and 'example':**

Yes, in my opinion newspapers are very important **(why?)** because they give us information about what is happening around the world. **(why?)** They are a vital source of knowledge about education, technology, medicine and many other fields. **(alternative?)** If newspapers didn't exist, I think the

quality of news coverage would suffer because there would be fewer professional journalists. **(example?)** We would have to rely, for example, on unpaid bloggers who do not have the budgets to carry out detailed research before they write an article.

## IELTS Speaking Part 3: longer answers

Do you remember my advice about how to give longer answers in part 3?

- Answer the question directly
- Ask yourself why or how (and explain in detail)
- Give an example
- Mention an alternative or opposite answer

### Example question

Do you think the seasons still influence people's behaviour?

### Example answer

Yes, I do think the seasons affect how we behave. **(how?)** We still wear different clothes depending on the weather, and clothes shops change what they sell according to the season. We also adapt our habits and daily routines according to the time of year. **(example)** For example, people in my country like to eat outside in their gardens in the summer, but we can't do that during the other seasons. **(opposite)** On the other hand, I don't think we notice the change in seasons when it comes to food; the big supermarkets import food from around the world, so most people don't buy seasonal fruit and vegetables any more.

## IELTS Speaking Advice: get to the point

Yesterday I wrote that you should avoid using long phrases to begin your answers. So what should you use instead? Native speakers say things like:

- I think...
- I guess...
- Well,...

These words/phrases might seem less impressive, but you have to remember that examiners are not impressed by the long phrases either! The important thing is to **get to the point** of your answer.

## IELTS Speaking: avoid these phrases

In the speaking test, examiners don't like it when students use phrases like:

- That's a very interesting question...
- It is my personal opinion that...
- Personally, I would have to say that...
- I am of the opinion that it depends on...
- To be honest, I personally believe that...

These phrases sound unnatural, and it is obvious to the examiner that the student has memorised them.

So what should you do instead? My advice: just answer the question directly. Stop using memorised phrases, and just get straight to the point.

## IELTS Speaking Part 2: don't focus on linking

A student asked me whether it would be a good idea to use the phrases below to organise last week's description of a market:

1. I would like to start with the first point which is where the market is.
2. Going on to my next point which is what the market sells, well...
3. With reference to the question of how big the market is, well...
4. As a final point, I would like to explain why I enjoy to visiting it.

Personally I do **not** recommend using phrases like these. While you won't lose marks for using them, you won't gain marks either. But here's the problem: the time you spend saying these linking phrases is time that you should be spending on the real content of your answer. Focus on answering, not linking!

## IELTS Speaking: complex structures?

Students often worry that they need to use "complex structures" in the speaking test. But what is a complex structure?

This website explains the difference between simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences. You'll notice that compound and complex sentences are ***much easier*** than they sound! I'm sure you use them all the time without realising it.

Here's my advice: stop worrying about the need for "complex" grammar. Instead, focus on expressing your **ideas** well. As you explain your ideas in detail, you will naturally produce longer sentences which contain a variety of grammatical features.

## IELTS Speaking Part 3: make it personal

In part 3 of IELTS speaking, it really helps if you give personal examples:

### **1. Do you think it's important for people to have hobbies? Why?**

Yes, I think people need to have hobbies because we all need to do things we enjoy in our spare time. In my case, I find that playing football once a week with some friends helps me to relax, keep fit and forget about work. I think it's the same for everyone.

### **2. Can hobbies have any negative effects?**

Yes, if you spend too much time on your hobby, it can affect other parts of your life. I remember that one of my friends spent most of his time at university playing computer games instead of studying. In the end, he failed most of his exams.

## IELTS Speaking Part 3: longer answers

Here are 3 techniques to help you give longer, more detailed answers:

1. Keep asking yourself "why?"
2. Explain the alternatives
3. Give an example

### **Question:**

Do you think that school children should be encouraged to have their own ideas, or is it more important for them to learn what their teachers give them?

### **Answer:**

I think that we should definitely allow children to be creative and have their own ideas. **(why?)** Children need to develop the ability to think for themselves and solve problems **(why?)** because as adults they will not always have somebody to guide them or tell them what to do. **(alternatives?)** If we don't allow children to have their own ideas, they will be less successful in the adult world; they will be too reliant on others. **(example?)** A doctor, for example, might encounter a situation that he or she hasn't been trained for, but will still be expected to make a decision that could save someone's life.

## IELTS Speaking: it's ok to lie!

Students often ask me whether it's ok to lie or invent an answer in the speaking test. My advice is that it's usually easier to tell the truth; however, sometimes your only option is to make something up (to lie). Take this part 2 question for example:

### ***"Describe a team project that you worked on"***

If your job involves working in a team, this might be an easy question. But if you're still a student, or you work alone, you might be stuck for ideas. You might need to invent something!

Here's how you could adapt to the question above:

- Talk about a project or piece of work that you did alone, and pretend that other people were involved.
- Go back to your school days and talk about something you studied, pretending that it was a group project.
- Talk about an English lesson - most English teachers put their students in groups from time to time.

## IELTS Speaking: if you don't know the answer

How do you answer a question when you don't know anything about the topic?

There are 2 things you can do:

1. Be honest and explain why you don't know
2. Guess, and tell the examiner that you are guessing

### **Example question:**

How has technology affected the kinds of music that young people listen to?

### **My answer, using both tips above:**

**(1)** To be honest I don't really know the answer to that because I'm completely out of touch with what young people are listening to, and I'm not a fan of pop music.

**(2)** However, I suppose that technology must have affected music. Maybe young people are listening to music that has been made using computer software instead of real musical instruments like the piano or guitar.

## IELTS Advice: speaking strategies

Here are some of the strategies that I used in [yesterday's description](#):

1. Try to develop each bullet point in detail. If you don't say enough for the first two or three points, you'll find yourself with too much time for the last point.
2. Tell a story! My second point tells the story of how I was given the chair by a friend, and I could probably speak for 2 minutes about this point alone. When you tell a story about something real that happened, you'll find it easy to keep talking. Stories are also interesting for the listener (the examiner).
3. Add examples. In point 3, you can see that I added an example at the end ("last night I fell asleep in my armchair while I was watching a film"). I could easily take this example and develop it into another short story.
4. When describing an object, don't forget the simple things like size, colour (I forgot that one!), shape, material, position ("just under my living room window").

## IELTS Speaking: the importance of part 2

A few people have asked me what will happen if they do badly in part 2 of the speaking test. Is it still possible to get a high score?

In theory, it is still possible to get a reasonably high score (maybe band 7) if you do badly in part 2, but you would need to give excellent answers in part 3. In practice, candidates rarely recover from a bad part 2; I don't remember anyone who made a mess of part 2 but suddenly did a fantastic part 3.

**My advice:** You should consider part 2 as the core of your speaking test. It's your best chance to show how good your English is, and it's the examiner's best chance to listen carefully to your use of language (so it's probably the point at which most examiners get a clear idea of what score to give you).

The good news is that you can prepare for part 2. [Click here](#) to get started!

## IELTS Speaking: useful expressions

In this lesson I want to draw your attention to a few useful expressions that I used in [last week's answers](#). Maybe you could try using them in your own answers.

### **1. An alternative way to say "and":**

- Just as individuals can learn from their mistakes, societies can (also)...
- Just as we need to exercise the body, we also need to exercise the mind.

### **2. A nice way to introduce a personal example or opinion:**

- From what I've read in the newspapers,...
- From what I've heard / seen / experienced,...

### 3. Giving an opinion when you're not sure:

- If I had to guess what might happen in the future, I'd like to think that...
- If I had to give my opinion, I'd say...

### IELTS Speaking Part 2: main topics

For part 2 of IELTS speaking, I encourage my students in Manchester to prepare ideas for 6 main topic areas:

1. Describe an object (a gift, something you use etc.)
2. Describe a person (someone you admire, a family member etc.)
3. Describe an event (a festival, celebration etc.)
4. Describe an activity (e.g. a hobby)
5. Describe a place (somewhere you visited, a holiday etc.)
6. Describe your favourite (book/film/advertisement/website)

Most questions fit into one of these topics. For example, ***"Describe a river, lake or sea which you like"*** is number 5 - you could describe a holiday by the sea, or a city with a river.

Don't take the test without preparing some ideas for these topics first!

### IELTS Speaking: how to feel more confident

Here are some tips to help you feel more confident when you go for your IELTS speaking test:

- Be prepared: you should know exactly what to expect in the 3 parts of the speaking test, and you should have read the suggestions on this website about how to answer.
- Lots of practice: a student who has practised answering all of the questions in all eight Cambridge books, as well as the questions on this site, will feel much more confident than a student who hasn't.
- Write it down: when studying at home, you have time to prepare 'perfect' answers to practice questions; write your answers down, and ask someone to help you check and improve them.
- Speak aloud: start by reading the answers you wrote down (like an actor uses a script), then gradually stop using the script.
- Record yourself: this allows you to analyse the quality of your answers, as well as your pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.
- Focus on ideas: it's difficult to think about grammar when you are speaking, so I advise students to stop worrying about grammatical structures, and focus on expressing good ideas (which means good vocabulary).

## IELTS Speaking: the examiner's attitude

I sometimes hear from students who are worried that their examiner seemed rude or angry in the speaking exam. Maybe the examiner didn't smile or make much eye contact, interrupted a lot, or kept looking at his/her watch. Does this mean that you will get a low score, or that you should complain?

The answer is no! Don't worry, and don't think that you need to complain. The examiner's attitude is not important at all, and you should ignore all of the things I mentioned above. Focus only on answering the examiner's questions as well as you can.

Remember: it's possible to have a very nice, smiling examiner who gives you a low score. On the other hand, an examiner who seems impolite or disinterested might give you a higher score than you expected!

## IELTS Speaking: add detail

Many students worry too much about grammar. For speaking parts 2 and 3, it's more important to worry about the quality of your answers. The best way to improve the quality of your answers is by adding detail.

### **Example:**

Describe your best friend. Say when you met him/her.

### **Short answer about when we met:**

I met my best friend at school when I was 11 years old.

### **Detailed answer about when we met:**

I met my best friend at school when I was 11 years old, so we've known each other for ... years. I remember we sat next to each other in my first science lesson at secondary school, and we had to work together to do an experiment. We got on straight away, and we've been friends ever since.

Notice that by adding more information I've also used more/better vocabulary and grammar.

## IELTS Speaking Part 3: explain, alternative, example

In part 3 of the speaking test, you need to give longer, detailed answers. A good way to do this is by organising your answers according to the following steps:

1. Idea: answer the question directly.



2. Explain: give a reason or explain your answer in more detail.
3. Alternative: explain an alternative (e.g. the opposite) to your answer.
4. Example: give an example to support your answer.
5. Another idea: sometimes you think of another idea while you are speaking. Just add it on the end of your answer.

You can give a really good answer without including all five steps, but you might find it useful to practise including all five, as I've done here:

***Why do you think some people prefer to buy products from their own countries rather than imported items?***

**(idea)** I suppose it's because those people want to support the economy of the country they live in.

**(explain)** If they buy something that was made in their own country, they know that they are contributing to the salaries of workers within the same

country, **(alternative)** whereas if they buy imported items, a foreign company and its employees will benefit. **(example)** For example, if I buy some meat that originates from a local farm rather than a

farm in another country, I'm helping one of my fellow citizens to carry on in business. **(another idea)** Also, I think that trust is an issue; people might feel that they can trust domestically produced items more than imported ones.

## IELTS Speaking Advice: record, transcribe, analyse

Here are some steps that you could follow when practising for the speaking test:

1. Choose a real speaking test from one of the Cambridge books.
2. Record yourself answering one or all of the parts of the test.
3. Listen to the recording and transcribe it (write down everything you said).
4. Analyse the transcript. How could your answers be improved?
5. Take some time to prepare better answers for the same questions.
6. Try the same questions again! Record yourself, transcribe and analyse.
7. Repeat the process a few times until you are happy.

Imagine if you did this kind of hard work every day for a month. I'm sure you'd be more confident and better prepared than you are now.

## IELTS Speaking Part 2: formula phrases

A student asked me whether the following formula is useful for speaking part 2:

- I guess I could begin by saying something about (point 1) and I think I would have to choose...
- Going on to my next point which is (point 2), I really need to emphasise that (explain point 2).
- And now with reference to (point 3), the point I want to make here is that (explain point 3).
- And so finally, if I have time, in answer to the question of (point 4), really I should mention that...

So, are these 'formula phrases' a good idea? My answer is no!

As an English speaker and ex-examiner, I find these phrases annoying. It's obvious that they are memorised, and they do not address the question topic. Please don't expect the examiner to be impressed by this kind of thing.

There are a couple of benefits to learning a formula: it gives your answer some structure, and it might make you feel more confident during the test. However, the disadvantages are greater:

1. Your focus is on the phrases you have memorised, when it should be on [answering the question](#) with relevant ideas.
2. The examiner thinks that you are using memorised phrases because you are unable to produce good language spontaneously. In other words, your use of long formula phrases suggests that your level of English is lower.

## IELTS Speaking Part 2: three tips

Here are three quick tips for IELTS speaking part 2 (the short speech):

### **1. Use the 1 minute preparation time well**

Think about how you would answer the question in your own language, then write down as many ideas as possible in English.

### **2. Give real examples**

Say what you really think, talk about your real life, and give real examples. Examples are really important; whenever you don't know what to say, give an example from your own experience.

### **3. Don't worry about grammar**

You haven't got time to think about passives or conditionals. Focus on answering the question - ideas and vocabulary.

## IELTS Speaking: use real examples!

To improve your IELTS speaking score, use good examples to extend your answers. Real examples or

stories about yourself are the best.

Use examples in part 2 when you need to make your presentation longer. Use them in part 3 to support your opinions.

**Here's an example that helps me to extend a part 2 presentation about my mobile phone:**

"For example, yesterday I used my phone to call some friends to arrange a get-together this weekend. Some of them didn't answer, so I either left a message in their voicemail or I sent them a text. I also replied to a few emails while I was waiting in a queue at the bank."

## IELTS Speaking Part 1: short, simple answers

The first part of the IELTS Speaking Test lasts around 4 to 5 minutes. The examiner asks about 10 questions related to you, your daily life and your interests. Common topics are hobbies, family, friends, food, music etc.

Part 1 questions are supposed to be easy, and the examiner must get through all of the questions in 5 minutes or less. That's only about 30 seconds per question. If you try to give long answers, the examiner will interrupt you. My advice is to keep Part 1 answers very simple:

**Do you prefer home-cooked food or food from restaurants?**

**I prefer home-cooked food because I think it's healthier and you know exactly what you're eating. I also enjoy cooking for family and friends.**

You don't need to say any more than this. Just answer the question with a full sentence, give a reason, and maybe add one extra piece of information. Then stop speaking. ***Stop with confidence and look at the examiner, ready for the next question.***

## IELTS Speaking: how to talk for 2 minutes

Students often ask whether it's necessary to speak for the full 2 minutes in part 2 of the speaking test. The instruction is: ***speak for between 1 and 2 minutes***, so it's not strictly necessary to speak for the full 2 minutes. However, my advice is that you should ***try*** to keep speaking until the examiner stops you.

Here are some tips to help you keep talking:

1. Go through the bullet points on the task card in order.
2. Try to develop each point, even easy ones. For example, if the first bullet point for

- the topic "describe a person" is "who is it?", don't just say "I'm going to describe my father". Add more information, such as your father's name, age, what he looks like, where he is now, how often you speak to him...
3. Give examples and tell stories ([click here](#) for more advice about this).

## IELTS Speaking Part 2: essential preparation

It's impossible to prepare for **every** question that you might get in the speaking test, but what are the **essential** things to prepare for?

Here's my list of essentials:

1. Favourites: Don't go into the test without knowing what your favourites are. Prepare to talk about your favourite book, film, music, and website.
2. People: Be ready to talk about a famous person and a member of your family.
3. Activities: Have you prepared some ideas about a hobby? Can you describe a typical day in your life? Try to remember some special moments in your life, such as birthdays, festivals and weddings.
4. Places: You need to be able to talk about where you live. Also, think about the places you have visited, what you did there, and why you liked or didn't like them.
5. Things: Can you talk about the things you use every day, something you would like to buy, or a present that you received?

Remember that in part 2 you are always asked to "**describe**". Make sure you prepare some good adjectives for each topic, make sure you can talk about your opinions and feelings, and think about some examples or stories to make your descriptions more interesting.

## IELTS Speaking Part 1: five simple rules

Part 1 of the IELTS Speaking test is supposed to be easy. You don't need to give 'difficult' answers, and you should try to avoid making mistakes.

**Here are five simple rules for Speaking Part 1:**

1. Keep your answers short, then stop with confidence.
2. Answer the questions using full sentences.
3. Use words from the examiner's question in your answer.
4. If possible, give a reason for your answer.
5. Don't forget to say "yes" or "no" when necessary.

**Here's an example to illustrate these points:**

Do you like parks?

Yes, I like parks because they are great places to relax. If you live in a city, a park is often the only place where you can escape from the noise and the traffic.

## IELTS Speaking: advice about grammar and vocabulary

It's difficult to think about grammar when you're trying to speak. I think it's much easier to improve your vocabulary score than your grammar score.

### **Remember:**

- Grammar is only 25% of your speaking score.
- If you are thinking too much about grammar, you will lose fluency.
- If you try to use memorised grammatical structures, your speech will not sound 'natural'.
- You will not avoid small grammar mistakes unless you have lived in an English speaking country for many years.

I've taught many students who have achieved a score of 7 or higher, and they all made small grammar mistakes. They got their high scores because we focused on ***vocabulary, ideas, opinions*** and ***fluency***.

Have a look through my speaking lessons, and you'll notice that the focus is usually on vocabulary.

## **IELTS Speaking Part 1: home town**

Here are some part 1 questions and answers on the topic of 'home town'. Try changing the answers to similar ones about your own town or city. Keep your answers short, simple and direct.

### **1. Where are you from?**

I'm from Manchester, which is a city in the north west of England.

### **2. Do you like your home town? (Why?)**

Yes, I like living in Manchester because it's where most of my friends live, and because there are plenty of things to do there. The only thing I don't like is the weather.

### **3. Would you prefer to live somewhere else? (Why?)**

For the moment I'm happy living here, but at some point I'd like to live in a country with a warmer climate, and I'd like to live near a beach!

### **4. Do you think your home town is a good place for young people? (Why?)**

Yes, Manchester has lots of things for young people, such as sports facilities, music and cinemas.

## **IELTS Speaking: if you don't know what to say**

In Sunday's [lesson](#) I suggested answering in the following way if you don't know what to say:

*"Well, I don't really know much about... because..., but I suppose..."*

In other words, you admit that you don't really know what to say, you explain why, then you invent an answer anyway. Let's try using the formula above with an example.

### **Question:**

What kinds of jobs might stop when the season changes?

### **Answer:**

Well, I don't really know much about seasonal jobs because everyone works all year round where I live, but I suppose that some jobs related to tourism must stop at the end of the summer holiday period.

## **IELTS Speaking: if you don't understand**

What should you do if you don't understand a question in the speaking test? Here are my tips:

### **Part 1**

In part 1, the examiner is not allowed to help you, but he/she can repeat the question.

Just say: "Sorry, can you repeat the question please?" If you still don't understand the second time, try to say something related to the topic or any of the words that you heard. Try your best, then focus on the next question.

## **Part 2**

You are given a task card with the question written on it, so you shouldn't have any problems in this part. If there is a word that you don't understand on the task card, don't ask the examiner - he/she is not allowed to help.

## **Part 3**

In this part of the test, the examiner is allowed to rephrase the question. If you don't understand, just say something like: "Sorry, can you explain that question in a different way please?"

## **IELTS Speaking: a tip for each part**

Here are three tips, one for each part of the speaking test.

### **Part 1: stop and smile**

For part 1 of the speaking test, you need to get used to giving short answers. Many students find it difficult to stop speaking, and the examiner is forced to interrupt. My tip is to give your answer then stop and smile, showing the examiner that you are ready for the next question.

### **Part 2: tell a story**

In the context of speaking part 2, a story is simply a long example to illustrate a point that you have made. If you're describing a person, for example, you could tell a story to illustrate why you like him/her. People find it easy to keep speaking for longer when they have a story to tell.

### **Part 3: include an 'if...' sentence**

Look at technique number 2 in [this lesson](#). The 'alternatives' technique helps you to say more, and it also encourages you to add a conditional 'if...' sentence, which might help your grammar score.