

Five years of  
IELTS teaching at  
your fingertips

# **Ace the IELTS: Tips from a Teacher**



To my students. You have taught me everything I know.

## Introduction: Why This Book?

There are a thousand different books dealing with preparation for the IELTS exam. Some of them make a lot of elaborate promises about raising your scores, teaching you all you will need to know, or any number of other such things.

I do not.

Why? Because I know what the IELTS is. I have taught it for five years now. I know that there is no way of quickly raising your score.

There are more books out there than I can count which are basically copied and pasted student dictionaries that claim to be all the words you need to pass the IELTS. That kind of book is worse than useless, because nobody in the world can memorize 70,000 words from a textbook. Even if you could, you would be better off spending your time on getting better at English, not just being able to recite lists of difficult words.

This is a marathon, not the 100 meters. I cannot remember the number of times I have seen students who thought that long nights spent studying right before the exam would lead them to success. I spoke to them afterward, and do you know what they said?

They said they actually did worse on the exam than they had done in practice.

In this book I will tell you why. I will also tell you how to avoid their mistakes and the only real, reliable way of raising your IELTS score.

This is not a basic introduction to the exam. I wrote this book thinking that most people know what the exam is, why it is useful to take it, and what the structure will be. I would rather spend my time and yours giving you tips to improve your scores, rather than repeating and rehashing information that appears everywhere on the Internet.

## Introduction to the IELTS Exam

Relax, I am not about to tell you again what the IELTS is or why it exists. I assume you know this or you would not be reading this book.

However, there are a few points that I will be relying on in many sections of this book and it would be a good idea to review them here.

The first and most important of these is that the IELTS is a test of skill, not of knowledge. What does this mean?

It means, essentially, that there is no body of knowledge that you can study to improve your scores. For a math exam, for instance, you can learn certain equations and definitely improve the results you get.

The IELTS, on the other hand, is a test of skill. The only way you can get better at it is to improve your skills in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

This is why, during all the time I spent preparing students for the IELTS, there was one question that bothered me most of all.

“What grammar/vocabulary/phrases should I learn to improve my IELTS score?”

They do not exist. Unless you know in advance what questions you will see on the exam (which is against the rules) there is no way of preparing a list of words, phrases, or constructions to make your scores better.

So how can a book help you with this? Well, there are some strategies that I have found incredibly useful when preparing my students.

What is especially useful is that most of these only require an Internet connection. They are things that you can use without having to hire an expensive prep tutor or paying for sketchy “test prep gurus” online.

I am not planning on telling you what you can find on the IELTS exam or how the academic version is different from the general. That is information you can find anywhere on the Internet, and I would rather spend time on giving you tips that you can use to actually improve your scores.

# The IELTS Writing Exam

## Task 1:

On the first writing task, I like to suggest that people aim for an essay of nine to eleven sentences. You can break it down like this:

Introduce the topic: 1 sentence

Summarize your essay: 2 sentences

First detailed paragraph: 3-4 sentences

Second detailed paragraph: 3-4 sentences

This is the structure that you should follow. Putting it like this helps you organize your thoughts and fits the natural structure of process descriptions in the real world.

But how do you get better at writing descriptions of data or processes?

Here you can take a hint from newspapers. This is my favorite piece of advice, and it has helped a lot of my students improve their scores.

Newspapers are an especially good source because they have to do two things. First, they have to grab people's attention. Graphs and visual information sources are a good way to do this.

Second, they have to explain the graphs they use as quickly as possible. Space in a newspaper is very limited, so they have to choose only the most relevant data.

Look at the data that they choose. Why did they choose it? What sorts of patterns can you see from the data types they choose to discuss?

Cover the descriptions of the tables and try to tell what data the journalists will be talking about. Once you can tell just by looking at it, you will know that you have sufficiently developed this skill.

## Common Weaknesses in Writing Task 1:

- Starting too quickly. Many people make the mistake of immediately beginning their summary when they see the graph, only to realize that they have cited unneeded data. Take a second and figure out what you're going to say.
- Not knowing what types of graphs might appear. I have noticed a tendency for test-takers to take two practice exams with one type of graph in them and then think that task 1 will be easy. Take your time to acquaint yourself with all the types of graphs - you will thank yourself for it. Lists of these graphs are widely available on the Internet, and reproducing them here would be a waste of space.
- Paraphrasing badly. Practice paraphrasing the question. You do not need to write entire essays for each practice question you paraphrase, but you should paraphrase a lot of questions.
- Not practicing comparisons. You are going to need to compare different things on task 1. Take some time and find real world examples of comparisons. What expressions do they use? What could you find useful?
- Not using the passive voice well. I know, passive voice is generally considered to be bad style. I dislike using it personally, but it can be very useful when describing processes (not graphs). If you do not know the passive form of a verb, try rephrasing the process so that you can use a verb you know. Instead of "the meat is ground in a machine" you could say "the meat is put into a grinder".

## Writing Task 2:

This is where the bulk of your points will come from in your writing task. As such, it's the one area that you will have to spend more time and energy on preparing for.

A lot of people say that this should be the academic essay. This is partially true, but not my favorite advice for it.

If you tell someone to write an academic essay, usually they will try to include all of the "smart" words or phrases that they know, even if they are out of place. This makes the essay sound unnatural, which will have a negative rather than a positive impact on your score.

It is better instead to write using words and phrases that you definitely understand. Even if this means your essay is a little bit simpler than you think it should be, that is absolutely fine.

Note here that there is a big difference between 'simple' and 'primitive'. If you are forced to resort to unnaturally primitive expressions, you will not get a good score.

The thing to remember here is that you should be using expressions and constructions that fit the topic, not just ones that you read in some preparation book.

How can you do this? What is the best way of getting not only the vocabulary that you need, but also the style?

Again, I recommend periodicals. This time, though, I would suggest more serious journals. The style criteria for Task 2 IELTS writing are what I would call journalistic. Thus, reading in this field will help you greatly.

Try to read at least one news article every day. Try not to repeat topics too often. The newspapers like to repeat stories on popular topics, so look a little bit deeper to find something unique.

Most importantly, try to find at least two or three 'general' expressions in each one, expressions that you can use in a variety of different essays. Remember these - create a file where you have all of them listed with the context they originally appeared in.

Tip: Remember that it is not just knowing an expression. It is knowing how to use it and knowing which context to use it in that makes your score on this test higher. So include a link to the source of the expression and refer back to it occasionally.

When you have a good list of general expressions that you might want to use, you can go back for more specific ones. In an Excel file, create separate sheets for different topics where you list useful expressions. I recommend choosing no more than eight or so areas to become an expert in - you do not want to overwhelm yourself with too many materials.



## Common Weaknesses for IELTS Writing Task 2

Many of my students get hung up on the thesis statement or their level of “academic” language. They worry about having a long introduction or using the most complex grammatical structures they know.

This is wrong.

Think about it - what is the purpose of writing? Getting your ideas across. The designers and examiners of the IELTS exam know this.

So the point of getting your highest possible score is simple. Explain yourself clearly, use relevant examples, and get to the point quickly.

Do not worry about making things more complicated than they need to be. If you do this, then your essay will sound strange and unnatural.

Keep your structure simple as well. Here is the format I like to use:

Total length: 11-15 sentences

Introduce the topic: 2 sentences

First detailed paragraph: 3-5 sentences

Second detailed paragraph: 3-5 sentences

Conclusion: 1 sentence

That is really as complicated as it needs to be. If you want to maximize your score on the IELTS writing task 2, just remember those simple pieces of advice.

Just remember: the problem that most people have is trying to do something that they do not know how to do. If you put your argument simply, follow my structure, and use reasonably specific vocabulary, you will get the maximum score for your current level of English.

## IELTS Reading

The reading task is probably one of the most daunting ones you will find out there. That is for a good reason.

Why is it so hard? Well, it makes you look for information quickly, the same way that you look for it in written materials that you find in your everyday life in your native language.

Think about it. If you have a menu in a restaurant, you do not read the description of each dish in great detail. You look for basic ingredients that you know you like and then read the descriptions in more detail.

I, for example, am not a great fan of fish. So if I go to a restaurant and see a dish that features fish on the menu, I usually do not look at its description more closely, as I know it is probably not something I will enjoy.

This example may seem primitive, but the IELTS is, at its heart, a basic test. It attempts to put you in real-world contexts and tests your language skills.

So, what materials can you use to prepare for this test?

I used to tell my students that any material they could find in a newspaper, again, was probably a good bet for practice. That is not entirely true.

You see, newspapers often contain opinions as well as information. Opinion pieces, as they are called, are not a good resource for practicing. The reason for this is that the IELTS has to give you purely informational readings - anything that endorses a political viewpoint might make people angry at the test creators, as it can be seen as an endorsement.

So what does this leave us?

News stories are an excellent source, but so are textbooks, trade journals, and even non-fiction books like biographies and history. I highly recommend a mixture of these resources - not only will you most likely increase your score on the test, you will also learn a great deal of fascinating things. Conversations in class were always very interesting after I gave reading assignments as homework.

There is one thing that I must stress, however. When I tell people to read, they often come into class the next day with a copious amount of notes jotted down in the margins of their texts, a huge number of translations of difficult words, and no idea of what the main idea of the text was. This is, to say the least, the wrong approach.

Practice the following exercises with each text. First, read the first and last sentence of each paragraph. This is where all the most important information should be (remember our writing advice? It is relevant here).

Then, see if you can write down in one or two sentences what the main idea of the text is. Take your time at first and then see if you can go more quickly.

Then go back and see if you can spot where the most important pieces of information in the text are. Circle them - do not be afraid to make marks on your testing materials. They can be very helpful.

Note: Do not underline the whole passage. I once saw a young student who heard my advice about making marks on the materials and she then underlined an entire paragraph. This does not help, to say the least. It is simply confusing.

After you circle the most important information, go back to each paragraph and see if you can decipher what important information it contains. Is it an important paragraph? Does it have essential information, or does it explain what has happened in another paragraph?

Once you get good at answering this type of questions you are ready to start working on actual test-taking techniques.

The first of these is to read the questions first and underline the key words in them. After your reading the paragraphs and getting the key words out of them, this should be no problem. Write the key words down on a piece of paper quickly, then go to the text.

Now you can see the logic of my approach. After you know what information you are looking for, you can find it much more easily. I cannot count the number of students I had who said that they had taken the IELTS before, read the text very thoroughly, and then gone to answer the questions. You know what happened?

They answered the questions for one, maybe two texts and then ran out of time. The key here is not so much to read every word as it is to find information efficiently.

Think about it. A text transmits information. That is its purpose. So if you want to show that you understand texts well and can figuratively speaking “find your way around a text”, then you need to show this ability, this basic skill of finding information quickly.

Yes, you will need to know synonyms. Yes, there are certain specific tactics you can use on specific questions. But my approach is and has always been to get better at using the language, then to get better at taking the test.

For a native speaker like myself, taking the IELTS reading test may have been challenging at first due to its structure. Once I learned the easy techniques that I outlined above, I was able to fly through it. Why? Because of my greater proficiency at using the language. The test structure is easy to learn. The language part of it is hard!

This is a lesson that I cannot stress enough. If you want to get better at the IELTS, you need to get better at using the language.



## Common Weaknesses on IELTS Reading:

- Attempting to read the text fully without understanding what information you should be looking for.
- Not using context to figure out what unknown words mean.
- Getting stuck on a question and wasting time on it. If you can't answer a question in two minutes or so, skip it and come back if you have time at the end. Do not spend ten minutes on a difficult question and fail to answer three easy ones.

## IELTS Listening

This section of the IELTS is very challenging to teach. Not because it is particularly hard, but because there are not very many tips you can give to your students when they take it. That said, there are a few great tips you can use to improve your IELTS listening score.

First, as you remember from the reading section, underline key words in the questions. If you have prepared properly for the reading section, this should be very easy. These key words will give you something to listen for in the audio materials, and will give you a good leg up.

Second, do not get caught up trying to remember what the audio materials said about an earlier question and miss the answers that you are hearing now. This goes along with the reading section tips - the passive modules of the IELTS are really very similar to each other, and the skills you have developed from preparing for the reading section carry over very strongly to the listening part.

Now, how do we improve our listening skills? There are some great resources for free all over the Internet to help you out.

The first one that I like to use for my students is the podcast. There are many podcasts out there and you will definitely find at least one that suits your interests, hobbies, or profession. You can improve your English while learning about things that are important to you - for me, things cannot be a lot better than that.

Do not limit yourself to things that you find interesting, though. Many of my students made that mistake and, while they then got very good at discussing things that were interesting for them, they got lost when the conversation went into areas that were outside their personal interests and expertise. Listen to a variety of podcasts and you will find that your listening skills get much better.

Podcasts are great because you can listen to them passively, in your car or on public transportation. They are portable and practically inexhaustible. But what if you want more specific listening material for the IELTS?

This is where you will need to set aside a time and place for listening practice.

Many of the audio materials on the IELTS are instructions. This makes sense in the same way as the reading exam makes sense - a lot of what you will need to understand are verbal instructions, things you hear over loudspeakers, and things of that nature. The skills you need to develop are very similar to the ones you need on the reading test.

Think about the following situation. You are in a train station somewhere in England and you need to catch the next train to London. A notice comes over the loudspeaker, and you hear that the train they are talking about goes to Liverpool. You do not need this information, so you do not listen any further to the announcement.

This is an example of gist listening, or listening only for the main point of the audio materials.

How do we practice gist listening? Well, outside a natural language environment, there are only a few ways.

First, you can watch movies. Although movies include visual information that will be absent on the IELTS listening section, this is still one of the best ways you can practice this skill. Why?

Everything that is said in a movie is important (at least, in well-made movies this is true). Every piece of information has to move the plot forward.

Here is an exercise that I invented to use with my students. We would divide into teams (but you can do this by yourself with a few pieces of paper) and each team would have one main character as their mascot.

Each time a new piece of information connected to the plot was revealed, we would decide whose character was most influenced by that piece of information. Basically, whose character cared most about it.

This is good practice because it lets you immediately take something you hear and understand its basic direction, the way it points in a larger context. You can choose your favorite movies for this, but I prefer ones with lots of dialogue and not much action on the screen to make this exercise more effective.

The second skill you're going to need is listening for relevant information. We can go back to our train example for this.

You are standing in a train station waiting for the next train to London. You hear an announcement on the loudspeaker,

“There will be a slight delay on trains to Liverpool, Cardiff, and London.”

Here we have relevant information. Note that the part that concerns you is at the end of the sentence - this is a classic thing to watch for in the IELTS listening section. Still, you needed to listen to and understand the first part, hear the parts that were irrelevant, and catch the portion of the message that concerns you.

How can we train ourselves for this type of listening skill?

My favorite tool here is the how-to video or, better yet, pure audio recording. The pure audio recordings are harder to find, so you can use a mixture of them.

YouTube is full of how-to videos, from how to fix a kitchen sink to how to eat a chicken wing. Listen to these and, while you are doing this, try to note down the most important parts of the process. This will help when you listen to the IELTS materials.

One other type of audio material has a deserved place in my IELTS preparation strategy.

With the rise of the Internet, many people and organizations have published educational materials that are useful for people who wish to advance their own knowledge but do not have enough time or money to go to university courses or private lessons. These materials can be ideal for you as an IELTS student.

Be warned, these materials are not simple, but in this way they can provide some advantages. Think about it - if you are preparing for something challenging, does it not make sense to prepare using more challenging materials? That way, the test itself will be simpler than what you used to prepare for it.

Organizations like [openstaxcollege.org](https://openstaxcollege.org) and Khan Academy are great for finding this type of material.

Additionally, for those who want to take the IELTS exam for educational purposes, these courses and materials are a great way to prepare yourself for what you will see in the classroom. If you are not planning to study, then you will simply learn some new things.

With all of these materials and skills to learn, you are more than ready to begin preparing yourself for what you will face on the IELTS listening exam.



## Common weaknesses on the IELTS Listening Exam:

- Spending too much time trying to remember what someone said, rather than listening for new answers
- Hearing one possible answer then writing it down without listening for more information. Sometimes there are false answers that are then corrected in the course of the conversation. Be aware of this.

## IELTS Speaking

If the reading test is like a mathematical formula, the speaking module is like a dance. Here is where you will be tested on your ability to give answers to factual questions (simple ability to transmit information in a spoken medium) as well as your ability to converse about more complicated topics.

This is one of the easiest modules to teach in person, especially to individual students, but when writing this book I have had quite a hard time in thinking of ways to help you get the best score you can on the IELTS speaking section.

You see, in person, and as a native speaker and experienced IELTS preparation teacher, I could tell what areas my students had to work on and what areas they were doing fine with. Speech is something that happens in a moment and then is lost forever - this means that without a conversational partner it is very hard to tell where your weak and strong areas will be.

As such, it is very advisable that you find a partner to work with on this section. Even if this partner is not able to give criticism on your usage of English, it is imperative that you become more comfortable with the structure of the test and questions on it.

Just as it is with the other modules, we can get a clue on how to get better by examining the actual skills that the exam tests. When we do this, we can understand how to replicate this is conditions that are as close to the real world as we can get.

In what situations do people have to answer questions and talk about themselves? For me, the answer is simple. Interviews.

Now, unless you have a friend who is a journalist then you are unlikely to have someone who can do an interview starring you. But you do have another choice.

Go on any video-sharing site and look for interviews in English. These can be from the news, entertainment sites, or talk shows.

When the interviewer asks a question, pause the video and try to answer that question for yourself. What are the things you find it easy to talk about? Which things are more challenging? You can even tape your interviews and ask people online for help (but be warned about this - many of the people who offer help online are neither examiners nor experienced test preparation tutors).

I hate to leave this as the only advice for you, so I am going to simply give a few of my own observations about the common difficulties and anxieties that my students often faced when preparing for the speaking section of the IELTS.

# Accent

Many people are very self-conscious about their accents when speaking a foreign language. This is understandable - we all want to fit in and having an accent marks us as being from another place.

My students always asked me what the penalty was for having an accent on the IELTS speaking exam. They seemed to think that having anything less than a flawless native accent was going to cost them points. This is ridiculous.

An accent will cost you points on the IELTS speaking exam if and only if it is so strong that you cannot be understood because of it. Anything less and there will be no reduction in your score. If the examiner has trouble understanding you because of your accent, then there will be a reduction, but only inasmuch as the accent has hindered understanding.

In order to reduce your accent, you need to speak more. I am afraid there is no other option than this one. Listening to a lot of materials spoken with a good accent will help a small amount, but the only way to train yourself to speak naturally is by speaking more often.

See if you can find a language club and go as often as your schedule permits. The more practice you get, the stronger your skills will be.

If you cannot find a language club then your options are limited, unfortunately. Thankfully, the Internet is a great resource for finding language partners who are willing to chat on a variety of topics. They probably will not be experienced in test preparation or even have much knowledge of the exam, but practice is going to have a positive impact on your preparation in any case. More conversation will always be a good thing, both regarding accents and general proficiency.

## Pauses

Another problem that my students would often bring to me is that they often make pauses in English, and they wonder how to get rid of this problem.

The answer is a bit complicated.

There are two different types of pauses that people make when they speak. The first is the language-related pause, and the second is the content-related pause.

The first type means, essentially, that you do not know how to say something but that you know what you want to say. This happens if you forget a word or if you do not remember a particular grammatical construction that is necessary for completing your thought.

This first type is going to cost you points on the IELTS. Why? Because it shows a gap in your usage of the language and a lack of skill in this particular area. This is what the exam is testing.

The second type, the content-related pause, is another story. This means that you simply do not know what to say, and it is completely fine to make this type of pause in your conversations. I, and all other native English speakers, do it every day. Speech without pauses is artificial, something that you only hear on the radio or television, and is not the goal of the exam.

For making content-related pauses, you will not be deducted any points. Sometimes you just do not know what to say to a particular question.

## Common weaknesses on the IELTS speaking module

Many of my students were often afraid of giving the incorrect answer on the speaking exam. This, along with the writing test, makes up the half of the exam where you do not have to worry about giving correct answers, but instead about formulating them well. There are no incorrect answers here, so simply say what you honestly think.

Similarly, do not be afraid of not having a deep, soulful conversation with your examiner. That is not their job - their job is to judge your level of spoken English. They may have a more or less enjoyable time while they do this, but they are professionals. That means that, even if the conversation was not very interesting, they are still supposed to be objective.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

The IELTS is a well constructed skills exam. This means that it fairly accurately places students in the correct band for their skill level. You can learn the structure of the exam (in fact, doing this is necessary) but the skills you can gain from preparing for the exam specifically (as opposed to generally improving your skills) are fairly few. In my experience, knowing the structure of the exam and taking a short preparatory course adds no more than half a point to specific module.

So what does this mean for you if you consistently get band 6 but need band 7? It means a lot of work improving your skills.

I would advise that you use the techniques outlined in this book much more than you use practice tests. Practice tests are good, but my students who applied themselves to improving their real-world knowledge of the language improved much more than those who relied heavily on the test itself.

I, and some test examiners that I know, have had the consistent experience that learners who prepare for the IELTS can reasonably expect a progression of about half a band exam-wide per month. That means my example earlier of the person who needs band 7 but only has band 6 would need approximately a year to improve their skills enough.

One of the best ways of doing this, along with the techniques you have just read, is to attend ordinary English courses that do not have a focus on the IELTS specifically. If you do, then you might be surprised at how much you can improve your skills, which will be useful not only on the exam but also wherever you may decide to move or study.

Best of luck on your exams. I hope this book has been helpful to you in your preparation.