The three biggest mistakes when taking the IELTS writing exam

I have graded thousands of papers for the IELTS exam. The purpose of this article is to tell you the three major mistakes that candidates keep making in order that you may avoid them.

The first problem is poor time management. About 30% of my students who write IELTS exams under timed conditions fail to complete both Task 1 and Task 2. In this case, their score for Task Response (one of the four grading criteria) is reduced, and to make matters worse their score is penalized for being under length. Therefore, this is like a double penalty and so you should make sure you can write sufficient words for both tasks by controlling your time. This means 150 words for Task 1 and 250 words for Task 2.

The second problem is rushing to start the task without properly reading the question. Again, also about 30% of my students will write an essay that is off-topic, which again not only lowers their score for Task Response but also makes it difficult to score well in the grading category of Cohesion and Coherence because often the essay does not make sense to the reader who is looking for a response to the question. A common example of this is with a question like "to what extent do you agree or disagree." This requires YOUR opinion, and therefore saying things like "some people believe that...." is off-topic, unless you state whether you agree with them or not.

The final issue is the frequency of errors. Try to allow time to proofread what you have written. In order to get above a six for vocabulary, you may only produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and word formation. The biggest error is the singular/plural form of words, so always check your nouns and verbs to see if they should have an "s" ending. For a grammar score of 7, you must produce frequent error-free sentences. The most common errors are with articles (a, an, the), so look at each noun and think about whether it needs an article. In other words, if you can proofread your writing and cut-down the number of errors you stand a better chance of getting over the 6 hurdle for vocabulary and grammar.