The Complete A to Z Guide to IELTS Reading

The Complete A to Z Guide to IELTS Reading

Welcome to the comprehensive guide designed to help you excel in the IELTS Reading test. This provides a complete walkthrough of strategies, question types, and essential reading skills to maximize your score.

If you're preparing for the IELTS exam, this guide will equip you with all the tools and techniques needed to approach the reading section with confidence and achieve your desired score.

Introduction: How This Will Help You

Listening and reading are considered the 'easy' parts of the IELTS test, but this does not mean that they do not require preparation.

This provides you with the means of preparing fully for the reading test. It is designed as a complete A-to-Z guide and should be read in its entirety.

If you are reading this, you already have the required level of English to do well in both tests. What you are probably lacking is a sound knowledge of the strategies needed to get very high marks.

This will take you step-by-step through the different sub-skills that are required and the different strategies I suggest for dealing with all of the different question types.

What This Guide Covers

Test Format

The format of the test and what to expect on exam day

Question Types

Strategies for all 12 different question types you might encounter

Reading Skills

The reading sub-skills that are tested and how to improve them

Vocabulary Building

Techniques to expand your vocabulary and handle unfamiliar words

The Reading Test: Key Features

3
Reading Texts
Three separate reading passages of increasing difficulty

2000-..
Total Words
The combined length of all three passages

40
Questions
Total number of questions to answer

60
Minutes
Time allowed to complete all questions with no extra transfer time

Academic vs. General Training

Academic

The texts are taken from journals, magazines, books, text books and newspapers. The texts are of an academic nature, but you do not require a specialist knowledge of the subjects to do well in the test.

These passages often contain complex vocabulary, abstract concepts, and detailed arguments that test your ability to understand academic writing.

General Training

The texts are taken from general sources, such as adverts, notices, government documents, manuals, leaflets, books and magazines. The texts are intended to test a person's ability to cope with everyday life in an English speaking country.

These passages focus more on practical information and everyday communication that you would encounter in work or social situations.

Essential Reading Tips

These tips are simply to give you an introduction to IELTS reading. They are not intended to be the only document you look at. Many IELTS students think that 'tips' are the only things they need to get a good score. They are not. Make sure you use these as an introduction and use the rest of the document to really progress.

Time Management

Time is your enemy. Use it wisely and don't get stuck on difficult questions.

Read Instructions Carefully

Always read the instructions VERY carefully before attempting any question.

Understand Question Types

Each different question type requires a different strategy and tests different skills.

Vocabulary Is Key

Improve your vocabulary and you'll improve your reading score significantly.

Question Type #1: Short Answer Questions

These questions are often called 'comprehension' questions and they are very common in English classrooms all over the world. Most students have answered these kinds of questions before and, for this reason, most students tend to do quite well with them.

Skills Tested

- Ability to skim the passage quickly and understand overall meaning
- Ability to scan for specific information
- Understanding the question being asked
- Thinking of possible synonyms and paraphrases of keywords

Common Problems

- Going over the word limit
- Lack of awareness of synonyms and paraphrasing
- Reading every single word instead of skimming and scanning
- Panicking when you see a word or phrase you don't understand

Short Answer Questions: Strategy

Read Instructions

Read the instructions carefully and note the word limit (usually "NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER")

Understand Questions

Read and understand the questions. Think about the information you will need to find

Identify Keywords

Underline any keywords in the questions and think about synonyms or paraphrases for these keywords

Locate Information

Find the part of the text the question relates to (answers appear in the same order as the text)

Read Carefully

Read the section containing the answer carefully and identify the exact answer

Remember: The answers do not need to be grammatically correct, just short answers. Don't give your opinion, just give the answer that is in the text.

Question Type #2: Multiple Choice Questions

On both the academic and general IELTS reading papers you are likely to be asked multiple choice questions (MCQs). Your job is to simply choose the correct answer from a list of possible choices.

Skills Tested

- Understanding the main ideas contained in a text

- Ability to scan for specific information

- Reading in detail for understanding

- Differentiating between two or more possible answers

Common Problems

- Not answering the questions at all

- Reading the text before looking at the questions

- Being tricked by 'distractors', such as qualifying words

- Not reading the questions or text carefully

Multiple Choice Questions: Strategy

Read Questions First

Read the questions carefully before looking at the text

Skim the Text

Quickly skim the text to get the general meaning

Identify Keywords

Underline keywords in both questions and answer choices, thinking about possible synonyms

Predict Answers

Try to predict the correct answer before finding it in the text

Locate and Analyze

Find the relevant section of text and read it carefully, considering how each option might be wrong

Always write an answer. It is better to guess than not answer at all. Try to narrow the choices down to 2 or 3 out of the 4 possible answers to increase your odds.

Question Type #3: Summary Completion

You will be given a summary of information from the text and there will be some gaps in that summary. You will either be given a list of words to fill the gaps with, or asked to find the answers in the reading text. Your job is to insert some of the words from the list into the gaps, or, if asked, to fill the gaps with words from the text. There will be more words in the list than required to fill the gaps.

Skills Tested

- Scanning for the correct information in the text
- Being able to identify synonyms and paraphrases
- Understanding the general meaning of the summary

Common Problems

- Not being aware of synonyms and paraphrasing
- Trying to fully understand every part of the text
- Ignoring correct use of grammar
- Copying words from the text instead of using synonyms or paraphrase

Summary Completion: Strategy

Check Instructions

Note how many words you can write and if you should get the words from the reading text or a list

Understand the Summary

Skim the summary to grasp the overall meaning before attempting to fill gaps

Predict Answers

Try to predict what might fit in each gap, considering word type (noun, verb, adjective)

Locate Information

Find which part of the reading text the summary relates to by scanning for synonyms

Check Grammar

Ensure your chosen word makes the sentence grammatically correct

If you have a list of words, try to eliminate those that can't be correct based on meaning or grammar. This narrows down your options.

Question Type #4: Matching Sentences

You will be given a list of incomplete sentences with no endings and another list with possible endings. Your job is to match the incomplete sentences with the correct ending based on the reading text. This is not one of the more common questions, but should be studied all the same.

Skills Tested

- Prediction
- Being able to identify synonyms and paraphrases
- Understanding how the ideas in the sentences are connected to the main ideas in the reading text

Common Problems

- Not being aware of synonyms and paraphrasing
- Not reading or fully understanding the correct parts of the reading text
- Looking for the exact words in the reading text, rather than synonyms
- Trying to complete the sentences using logic or grammar, rather than using the reading text

Matching Sentences: Strategy

Read Instructions

Understand exactly what you need to do

Focus on Incomplete Sentences

Read these first without looking at the endings, highlighting keywords (especially names, places, dates)

Predict Endings

Try to anticipate what might complete each sentence before looking at the options

Eliminate Unlikely Matches

Rule out endings that definitely cannot match based on grammar, collocations, and meaning

Locate and Verify

Find the relevant text section for each incomplete sentence and confirm the correct match

Remember: The answers are in the same order in the text as they are in the questions. Locate question one first, and then you know where to begin.

Question Type #5: Sentence Completion

You will be given a number of sentences with gaps in them, and asked to complete the sentences with words from the reading text. These questions are as much vocabulary tests as they are reading tests. They require you to be aware of paraphrasing (using different words to repeat a sentence so that it has the same meaning) and synonyms (words with the same or very similar meanings).

Skills Tested

- Understanding what synonyms and paraphrasing are
- Being able to identify synonyms and paraphrases
- Scanning for the correct answer

Common Problems

- Not being aware of synonyms and paraphrasing
- Trying to match words in the question with the exact same words in the reading text
- Not reading the instructions properly
- Reading the text before the question

Sentence Completion: Strategy

Check Word Limit

Note how many words you can write and if you must use exact words from the text

Analyze Sentences

Read the incomplete sentences, predict possible answers, and identify keywords

Scan for Location

Quickly locate where the information appears in the text (answers appear in the same order as questions)

Review Question

Read the incomplete sentence again to ensure you understand what's needed

Read Carefully

Study the relevant text section to find the exact answer and check your spelling

Remember that your answer should be grammatically correct. If it says "no more than two words," you can write one or two words. If it says "no more than three," you can write one, two, or three words.

Question Type #6: True/False/Not Given

'True, False, Not Given' questions require you to identify if information in a text is true, not true or not given. You will be given a number of factual statements and you have to check in the text if they are true or not. This is probably the most difficult question type on the reading paper.

TRUE	FALSE	NOT GIVEN
If the text agrees with or confirms the information in the statement	If the text contradicts or is the opposite to the information in the statement	If there is no information or it is impossible to know from the text

True/False/Not Given: Common Problems

Misunderstanding "Not Given"

Many students don't understand that "Not Given" means the information simply isn't in the text - not that it's difficult to find.

Wasting Time

Spending too much time making sure that something is truly "Not Given" instead of moving on.

Missing Statement Meaning

Failing to understand exactly what each statement means, focusing on keywords instead of overall meaning.

Using Outside Knowledge

Bringing in information you know about the topic rather than basing answers solely on the text.

True/False/Not Given: Strategy

Check Question Type

Make sure you know if it's TRUE/FALSE/NOT GIVEN (facts) or YES/NO/NOT GIVEN (opinions)

Understand Statements

Read each statement carefully, focusing on the whole meaning rather than just keywords

Watch for Qualifiers

Pay special attention to qualifying words like "some," "all," "mainly," "often," "always"

Locate Information

Find the relevant section of text (answers appear in the same order as the text)

Compare Carefully

Read the text section in detail to determine if it confirms, contradicts, or doesn't mention the statement

If you can't find the information after a reasonable search, mark it as "Not Given" and move on. Don't waste time looking for something that isn't there.

Question Type #7: Yes/No/Not Given

Yes/No/NG questions are very similar to T/F/NG questions. The main difference is T/F/NG asks you to look at facts or information in the text, and Y/N/NG questions ask you to assess the writer's opinion. This opinion could be based on a certain section of the text or on the text as a whole.

YES	NO	NOT GIVEN
If the text agrees with or confirms the writer's opinion	If the text contradicts or is the opposite to the writer's opinion	If there is no information or if the statement may or may not be true due to lack of information

Yes/No/Not Given: Tips

Focus on Writer's Opinion

Remember that you are only judging the writer's opinion, not facts or other people's opinions mentioned in the text.

Look for Opinion Markers

Watch for phrases like "In my opinion," "I believe," or use of comparatives and superlatives that signal the writer's viewpoint.

Sequential Order

The questions are in the same order as the text, which helps you locate the relevant sections.

Definite Contradiction

If the answer is "No," the statement will clearly contradict the writer's opinion, not just be slightly different.

The strategy for Y/N/NG questions is very similar to T/F/NG questions, but with the crucial difference of focusing on opinions rather than facts.

Question Type #8: Matching Headings

This type of question tests your ability to understand the main idea of each paragraph. Headings are short sentences that summarise the information in a paragraph. You have to pick the one that best summarises the information in a paragraph. You will be given between 5 and 7 headings and asked to match each paragraph in the reading text to one heading. There are always more headings than paragraphs.

Skills Tested

- Understanding the main idea of each paragraph
- Quickly understanding the general meaning of a paragraph without reading every word
- Differentiating between two or more similar headings

Common Problems

- Not understanding the statements as a whole
- Lots of information to process and not enough time
- Some of the headings may appear to have the same meaning
- Not understanding the main idea of each paragraph in the text

Matching Headings: Strategy

Do This First

If this question type appears, tackle it before others to gain familiarity with the text

Ignore Headings Initially

Don't look at the headings first; focus on understanding each paragraph

Read Strategically

Read the first 1-2 sentences and the last sentence of each paragraph to grasp the main idea

Summarize Mentally

Try to sum up each paragraph in one or two words before looking at the headings

Match and Compare

Match obvious headings first, then compare similar headings to identify subtle differences

You are not expected to read every word of the text. If there are words you don't understand, don't worry about this. Focus on the general meaning of the paragraph as a whole.

Question Type #9: Labelling a Diagram

This type of question tests your ability to understand and label a diagram or plan. There are three kinds of diagrams you might get: a technical drawing of a machine or invention, something from the natural world or a design or plan.

Skills Tested

- Ability to cope with unfamiliar concepts or processes
- Ability to appreciate the relationship between a text and diagram or plan
- Locating the correct part of the text that contains the pertinent information

Common Problems

- Focusing too much on the diagram and trying to understand everything about it
- Failing to locate the paragraphs that contain the information quickly
- Writing the wrong number of words or spelling the word incorrectly
- Getting stuck on one question and wasting time

Labelling a Diagram: Strategy

Check Word Limit

Note how many words you're allowed to use for each label

Study Diagram Briefly

Get a general understanding of what the diagram shows without spending too much time

Identify Keywords

Note any existing labels or parts of the diagram that might help locate information

Predict Word Types

Try to determine if you need nouns, verbs, or adjectives for the labels

Scan and Verify

Locate the relevant text sections and carefully extract the exact words needed

Remember that numbers count as one word and hyphenated words like 'state-of-the-art' count as one word. Do the easiest questions first to build confidence.

Question Type #10: Matching Names

In this type of question, you are asked to match someone's name, normally an expert's, researcher's or scientist's, to a statement. You are given a list of names and a list of statements. Your job is to read the text and then match the names with the correct statement. The reading text will tell you what that person has said or done (normally research findings) and this will guide you to the correct answer.

Skills Tested

- Scanning for the names in the text
- Reading the appropriate part of the text in detail for understanding
- Appreciating the presence of synonyms or paraphrasing that might help find the correct answer

Common Problems

- Reading the whole text and trying to find the names that way
- The names that occur several times will be harder to match than the names that appear only once
- Not reading the appropriate sections in detail
- Trying to find words in the text that match with words in the statement exactly

Matching Names: Strategy

Read Instructions

Check if names can be used more than once or if all statements must be matched

Scan for Names

Quickly locate and underline all instances of the names in the text

Start with Unique Names

Focus first on names that appear only once in the text as these are easier to match

Read Surrounding Text

Examine the text before and after each name to find their opinions or research findings

Match and Eliminate

When you find a match, cross off that statement as each is used only once

Remember that names might be shortened to just a first or last name. For example, 'John Jones' might appear as only 'Jones' in the text.

Question Type #11: Matching Information to Paragraphs

In this kind of question, you are asked to match statements to paragraphs in the reading text. The statements could be reasons, descriptions, summaries, definitions, facts or explanations. You do not need to understand what the whole paragraph is about, just find specific information in the paragraph and match it to one of the statements. The answer will normally be contained in a whole phrase or sentence, rather than a single word.

Skills Tested

- Skimming for general meaning of paragraphs
- Finding specific information in a paragraph
- Reading carefully to fully understand the meaning

Common Problems

- Having to look at the whole text
- The answers might not be the main idea of each paragraph
- Dealing with lots of irrelevant information
- Not all paragraphs contain an answer, and some contain multiple answers

Matching Information: Strategy

Do This Last

Complete other questions first to become familiar with the text

Look for Specific Details

Focus on names, places, and numbers in the statements as these are easier to locate

Paraphrase Statements

Try saying each statement in your own words to better recognize synonyms in the text

Skim First

Quickly read the whole text to understand its general structure

Scan and Verify

Look for synonyms in paragraphs you think might contain the answer and check carefully

Be aware that there may be synonyms. For example, you might see '34%' in the question, but it might say 'just over a third' or 'about a third' in the text.

Question Type #12: Table Completion

For these questions, you will be asked to complete gaps in a table. You may also be asked to complete gaps in a flow chart. You have to complete the gaps using words or phrases from the text.

Skills Tested

- Reading the instructions correctly
- Scanning the text to locate the relevant paragraphs
- Transferring information to the gaps correctly

Common Problems

- Not reading the instructions carefully, especially the word limit
- Going over the word limit
- Changing the form of the words from the text
- Spelling errors

Table Completion: Strategy

Read Instructions

Pay special attention to the word limit and whether words must be taken exactly as they appear

Understand the Table

Note the heading and existing information to understand what the table is about

Predict Answers

Based on the table structure, try to anticipate what type of information is needed

Locate Information

Scan the text to find the relevant paragraphs containing the answers

Transfer Exactly

Copy the words precisely as they appear in the text and check your spelling

Reading Skills: Overview

The reading test is a test of your general reading skill, but this is made up of more specific sub-skills. This section will look at all of the most important reading sub-skills. This will give you a greater insight into what is actually being tested in each question.

Skimming

Reading quickly to understand the general meaning of a text

Scanning

Looking for specific information, words or phrases in a text

Close Reading

Reading carefully to understand every detail of a specific section

Inference

Understanding implied meaning and dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary

A greater awareness of these skills allows you to decide what the best approach to each question is. It will also give you the confidence that you are approaching each question in the correct manner.

Skimming: Reading for Gist

Think about how you do this when reading in your own language.

This is when you quickly read the whole text or a large part of the text, so that you understand the general meaning. In other words, you read quickly to generally understand what it is about.

When I look at a newspaper, I tend to do this, so that I can quickly understand what the stories are about and if I want to read some of them in more detail. In this way, I can read a whole newspaper in 5-10 minutes because I have not been reading every word of each story, but, instead, just quickly finding out what the general meaning is.

Skimming Strategies

Read the questions first. This will allow you to know what you are looking for, before starting to skim.

Use Titles and Headings

Titles and sub-headings will give you a good idea of the general meaning before you read the actual text.

Focus on First and Last Paragraphs

The first paragraph and last paragraph of a text will normally give you a good idea of what the whole text is about.

Scanning: Finding Specific Information

This skill does not normally give you the correct answer, but allows you to find where the answer is.

Scanning is when you look for a particular word or phrase. We normally use this skill when we are trying to locate where the correct answer is. This skill alone does not give us the correct answer, rather it tells us the correct location of the correct answer.

This skill is useful because it means we do not have to read the entire text to find the answer. In that way, it is a time saving skill more than anything else.

Scanning Strategies

Read the questions first. This will allow you to know what you are looking for before starting to scan.

Focus on Relevant Sections

Focus on finding the relevant paragraphs or parts of the text, rather than looking at the text as a whole.

Avoid Reading Every Word

Avoid reading every word, or reading line by line. Let your eyes move quickly over the text looking for key terms.

Close Reading: Understanding Details

In this guide, I often refer to this skill as 'reading in detail'. It is the skill that most often allows you to establish the correct answer.

There is no point in just skimming and scanning without using this skill, because skimming gives us general meaning and scanning gives us location, neither of which give us the correct answer.

Close reading is when we understand a whole sentence or paragraph, so that we know exactly what it all means. In other words, you understand every word and the meaning of the whole sentence. It takes time and concentration and requires you to think carefully about meaning.

You will use this skill when deciding the correct answer.

I use this skill when reading an important email from someone. It is essential that I read and understand every word. If I don't, I could misinterpret something and send the wrong reply.

Lots of students mention 'skimming' and 'scanning' when asked about reading skills but ignore this, the most important skill.

Dealing with New Words

The key here is not to panic and accept that there will always be 'new' words.

A 'new' word is a word that you have never seen before. This causes lots of stress because students believe that the new word is key to finding the answer, and not knowing what it means will lose them marks.

Assess Importance

Decide if the new word is actually needed to get the correct answer. If not, ignore it.

Use Context

Look at the words, phrases and sentences around the new word to guess its meaning.

Analyze Word Form

Consider if it's a verb, noun, adjective, etc. to help narrow down possible meanings.

Think of Synonyms

Try to replace the word with one you know that might fit in the context.

Move On If Necessary

If a word is causing too many problems, accept that you won't understand everything and continue.

Topic Sentences and Context

Topic Sentences

The first line of any paragraph will tell you what the rest of the paragraph is about.

Topic sentences tell the reader what the main idea of the paragraph is. It acts as a sign post, telling the reader what to expect in the rest of the paragraph.

A topic sentence is normally made up of two elements: the topic and the idea.

The topic will normally be a noun or noun phrase. The idea is the sub-context that they will be tackling within the topic.

Using Context

Context is essential for guessing the meaning of new and unknown words.

The general meaning of the paragraph will help you when guessing meaning from context. The topic sentence will help you quickly identify the overall meaning.

What form does the new word take? Is it a verb, a noun or an adjective? This will help you guess the meaning.

Could you replace the word with a word you already know? This will normally be a synonym of the unknown word.

Vocabulary Building

The reading and listening tests are as much vocabulary tests as they are skills tests. It is much easier to get a good score when you have a wide-ranging vocabulary.

Read and Listen

Studies have shown that the number one way for learners to improve their vocabulary is through reading and listening to genuine sources of English.

Record

You must record any new words you hear or read, so that you will remember them effectively. There are lots of ways to do this.

Review

It is essential that you regularly review these new words and phrases in order to retain them in your memory.

When you encounter new words while reading, try to guess their meaning from context before looking them up. This practice strengthens your ability to handle unfamiliar vocabulary during the exam.

Online Resources for Practice

You do not need to spend any money to improve your vocabulary. All of the resources you need are freely available on the internet.

BBC News

All of the common IELTS topics are covered on a daily basis. Listen or read.

The Guardian

They have a great selection of news articles and podcasts.

The Economist

Economic, as well as political, commentary on current world issues.

New Scientist

A scientific, journal-style magazine that is not only educational, but also very interesting.

Other useful resources include Memrise, Wired, Quizlet, and free eBooks. Simply use Google to find something that interests you.

Filling Out the Answer Sheet

This is not a skill, but is crucially important.

Stop! I know you think this is 'easy' and you know how to do this, but you would not believe the number of good students that throw away marks because they don't fill out the answer sheet properly.

Read Instructions Carefully

Use any examples to help you understand exactly what to do. If you don't understand, don't move on until you do.

Check Spelling and Grammar

One small mistake and the answer will be marked wrong. Be extremely careful with this.

Transfer Answers Methodically

Try copying your answers section by section rather than all in one go to reduce errors.

Leave No Blanks

If you have no idea, guess. There's no penalty for wrong answers, so always write something.

THANK YOU

For Your Precious Time

www.ieltsadvantage.com