

IELTS TEACHER

# THE KEY TO IELTS SUCCESS



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BANDS 7, 8, 9

## Part 1

# Understanding the problem

## Chapter 1

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

Social media has put me in touch with thousands IELTS candidates over the past 5 years. This experience has given me an insight into the most common problems people face when preparing for IELTS, as well as the sense of confusion about the test, which appears to be growing rather than abating.

#### There are so many experts, so why am I still confused?

Many of the people who contact me tell me how confused they are. I recently googled the term 'IELTS' and was immediately given more than 56 million sites to choose from. When I added the word 'expert', I had over 46,000 choices, and adding 'confused' increased this to 916,000. It seems reasonable to suspect that there could be a direct link between the confusion about IELTS and the proliferation of sites offering 'expert advice'. It often seems to me that we are now surrounded by experts, yet it has never been more difficult to find expert help.

#### The consumer age

The confusion can be further explained by acknowledging that we live in an age dominated by consumerism. Social media began as a simple communication tool, but has thrived through advertising. As a result, these platforms now appear to see their users simply as potential shoppers. This shift in thinking means that the main aim of 'free' information is to grab our attention, and try to sell us something, which is often achieved through magical marketing promises. With IELTS, this means unrealistic claims about how you can quickly 'jump' from one band to another, or get 'free materials' with just one click.

#### At 'Google university' the customer is always right

In the consumer age, the customer is always right. If the customer seeks a quick answer, the market will deliver that. We are often being told that technology is becoming more 'intelligent' and is 'learning' from humans through the way that we use the internet or apps. As those sites are now

focused on selling, this surely means that such algorithms are learning only about what consumers **want**, rather than what people actually **need**.

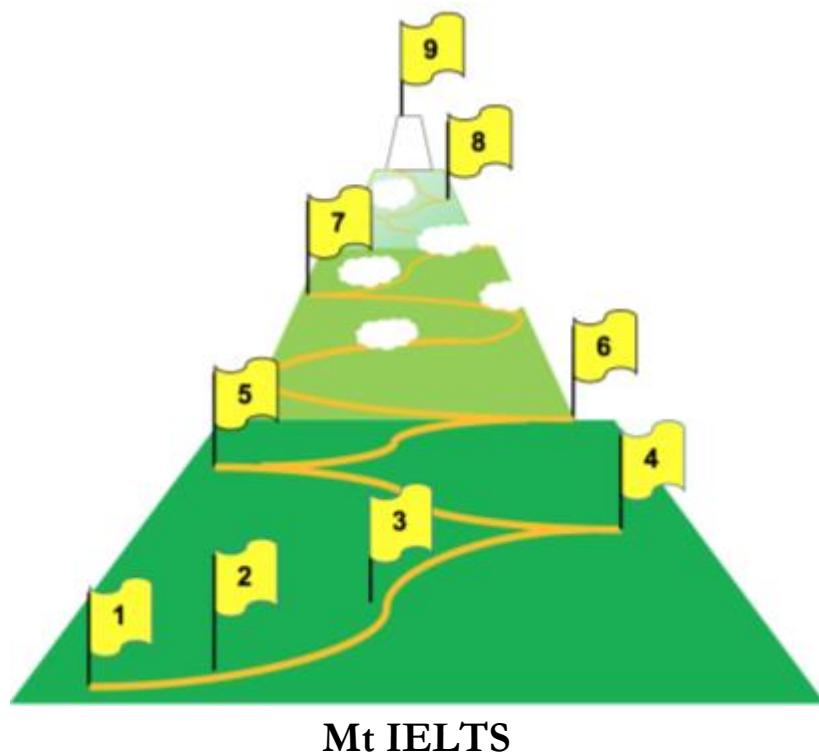
Every ‘click’ on a link to a ‘free download’ inadvertently feeds this ecosystem and triggers a reaction. Our social media ‘news feed’ is then quickly overwhelmed with similar offers, and it should not be surprising that we eventually begin to believe in the idea of a quick solution to a persistent problem. Imagine what the effect might be if doctors and healthcare professionals took the view that patients should get what they want rather than what they need. As with medical help, in my view, we cannot rely on what has been called ‘Google University’ to meet our educational needs.

**Key idea:**

‘Ad-driven systems can only reward attention...they can’t reward the right answer.’ Evan Williams, co-founder of Twitter (Ref 1)

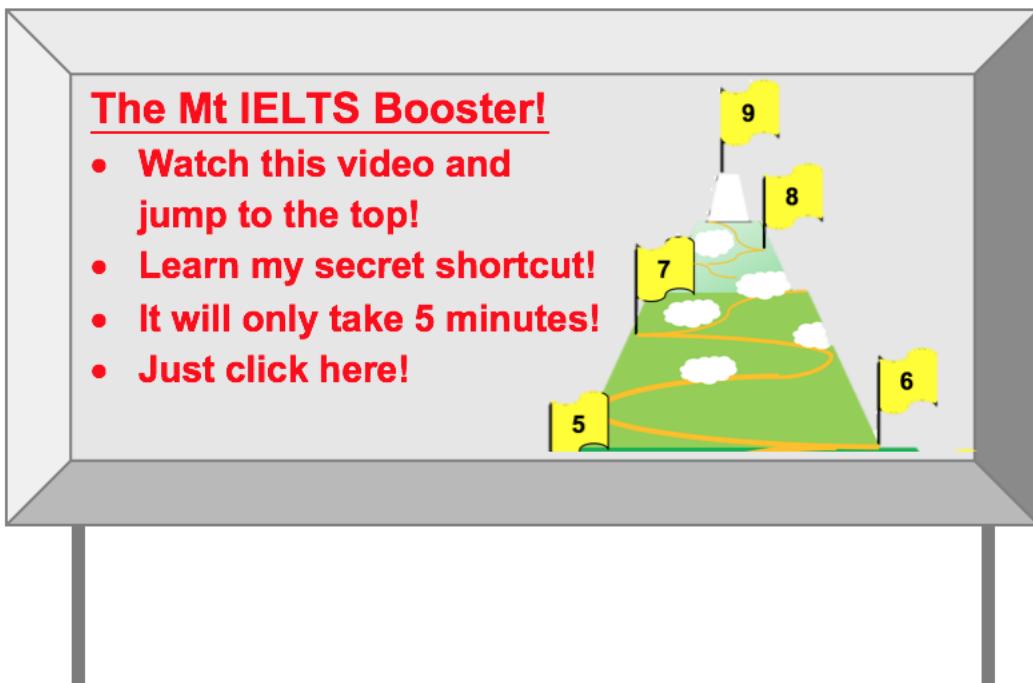
**IELTS advantage or IELTS disadvantage?**

If we were to 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.



**Look for advice based on facts not marketing claims**

Trying to find a way 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, trying to 'jump' up can act as a disadvantage - it wastes time and energy, and when you land, you are in exactly the same place on the mountain as you were before.

### IELTS test practice materials

For many years, perhaps through concerns about copyright, people have been writing their own versions of IELTS test materials. Because these are then advertised as 'IELTS practice,' many people believe they are authentic versions of the test. In fact, many of these test materials are unfair and unreliable. The following table shows some common features of materials like this.

### Common features of unfair and unreliable test materials

#### Reading passages and listening texts:

- are too easy or contain general knowledge (e.g. commonly known facts)
- are too technical and require specialised knowledge

#### Test questions:

- are confusing or rely on tricks and traps to make them seem ‘difficult’
- have more than one possible answer
- can be answered without using reading or listening skills.

#### Writing test questions:

- are confusing, overly complex, or may require specialised knowledge
- cannot be fully answered in 150 / 250 words
- can be answered in less than 150 / 250 words
- are vague and the task is unclear (e.g. questions that end with ‘Discuss’)

The real IELTS test doesn’t have these features. There are no tricks or traps, you must always use reading and listening skills to answer questions, and the questions have one clear answer. In the writing test, the questions force you to show specific writing skills, and do not encourage repetitive or vague and rambling language.

### ‘Cambridge is hiding something from us’

Some of the practice materials I have seen online even include question types that are **not** in the real IELTS test. Teachers and students who rely on materials like these for their IELTS preparation may be tempted to reach faulty conclusions about how the real IELTS test works. It is also possible that, when people cannot find supporting examples within authentic IELTS materials, they see this as proof that ‘**Cambridge must be hiding something**,’ rather than doubting or questioning the sources they are using.

## ‘Sciencey-sounding stuff’

In ‘Bad Science’, Ben Goldacre says that people often use ‘sciencey-sounding’ terms to try to sell an idea to us. Many of the videos that claim to teach you a ‘secret trick’ use data to help make it seem more **convincing**. The statistics they offer as proof are generally very high – so there are often claims that a trick will work in 80% or 85% of IELTS reading passages. Real IELTS test papers are not published in any book. So, we have no idea what type of materials these figures are based on. What we do know is that any test that can be passed using such easy tricks would **not** provide reliable statistics. The real IELTS test takes 12 months to write and its reliability is closely monitored. However, it **would** be quick and easy to write materials where tricks like those in these videos work, which is perhaps why we see so many materials like this online.

If you believe claims such as ‘**you can use common sense to eliminate obviously wrong answers**’, then it is more than likely that you are not using authentic IELTS test materials for your preparation and practice, or you are following the advice of people who are writing their own test materials. Unfortunately, where these theories persist, people tend to write more examples that mimic the flawed materials they have seen. Thus, a vicious circle is created: flawed examples lead to flawed theories, which then lead to more flawed examples. As a result, the confusion and myths about IELTS are perpetuated.

### Key idea:

There are no hidden tricks or traps in the **real** IELTS test. Trust sources that base their advice on **authentic IELTS test practice materials**.

## How can this book help?

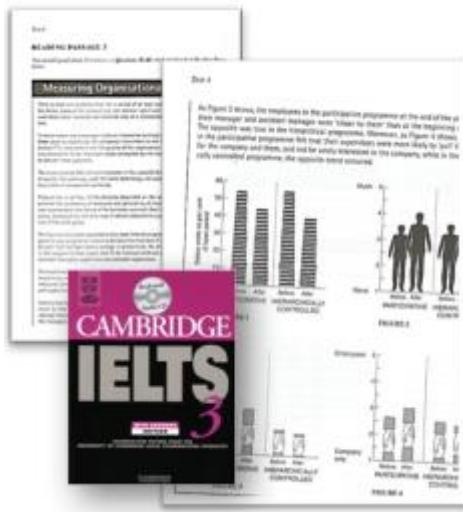
My contact with thousands of candidates over the last five years has shown me that many, many people are using flawed test materials to prepare for the test. I have become increasingly concerned that, at the higher levels, such materials not only provide no benefit, but may actually go as far as to hinder your progress, and keep people stuck at a lower band. This book aims to

help you separate IELTS facts from IELTS fiction, so that you can finally make real progress and reach your goal.

## Why is the advice in this book any different to advice online?

Anyone who writes, whether it is a blog or Facebook post, test materials, or even a book, can only ever write from their own perspective. Our perspective is shaped by our personal experience. So, here is my experience, and the perspective you will find here, and all of my books.

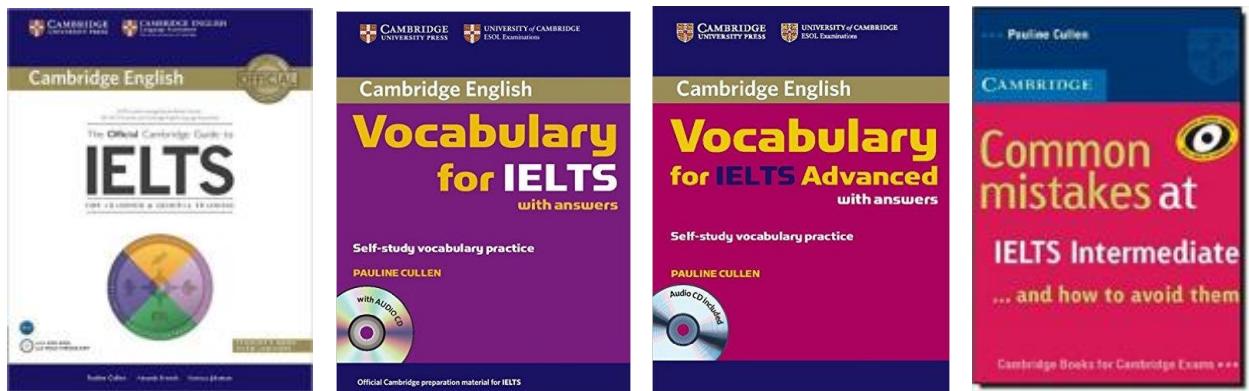
I studied languages at university and qualified as a language teacher in 1985. I taught English as a Second Language full-time until 1997. As an English language teacher, I was always drawn to teaching Cambridge exam classes and became an examiner in the early 1990s. IELTS was first introduced in 1992, and so I began teaching IELTS preparation classes too. I became an IELTS examiner in 1993 and then began writing IELTS test materials in 1995. This is my first Academic Reading test passage:



Since then, for more than 20 years, I have worked passionately on writing materials like this for the IELTS test.

You could say that I wear three hats when I write my books and apps: the hat of the language student, the language teacher, and the IELTS test writer. This is the perspective that I offer in my books and apps. If you add this book to my other books about IELTS, or those of the writers I recommend [here](#), then you will know everything that you need to know **about** IELTS and **for** IELTS.

## My IELTS Preparation books



## My IELTS vocabulary teaching apps - on iTunes and google play

**iTunes Preview**

**Cullen IELTS 7+**  
By Pauline Cullen  
Open iTunes to buy and download \$2.99.

**Description**  
This app will help you to increase your vocabulary for the IELTS writing and speaking tests. It is useful vocabulary that will help you answer questions in the reading and listening tests, improve your reading speed and your listening accuracy, and improve your chances of achieving IELTS Band 7 and above.

**iPhone Screenshot**

25 different topics all related to IELTS. Exercises to improve your speed reading skills.

**Information**  
\$2.99  
Category: Education  
Released: Jan 11, 2013  
Version: 1.0  
Size: 5.3 MB  
Language: English  
Seller: Pauline Cullen  
ID: 241510010  
Seller Rating: 4.5

Compatibility: Requires iOS 3.0 or later. Compatible with iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch.

**Cullen IELTS 8+ Vocab 1.0.1**  
Pauline Cullen - Education  
★ ★ ★ ★ 11+ 2  
Pegi 3  
Age rating: 3+  
Add to wishlist \$2.99 Buy

**Test your spelling and improve your accuracy**

**Exercises to improve your listening**

25 different topics all related to IELTS.

## Chapter 2 – Why is IELTS so difficult?

The majority of people who approach me for help with IELTS have already taken the test many times but keep getting the same score. Unsurprisingly, people who have already committed a great deal of time and money to the test feel extremely 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.

When they first contact me, many people are angry and blame the test itself; they are convinced that the test must somehow be cheating them. In their minds, IELTS is their enemy, and the confusing, and unfair test materials found online feed this idea. Although this mindset is understandable, it is both unhelpful and expensive, because it means people continue to take the test over and over in the hope that a mistake has been made, and that, this time, they will get a different score. Most of the people who feel 'stuck' are at band 6 or 6.5.

### Why is it so difficult to achieve the score you need?

IELTS is much more than just a piece of paper. The right score can act as an important stepping-stone, a key that can open the door to a new life. If you don't achieve your target score, the test represents a closed door that is blocking your way. IELTS has this power because many governments and universities rely on it as an accurate measure of English language. A band 6 or 7 certificate tells the world that you have enough English to successfully study at an undergraduate level. Bands 7 to 9 tell people that you are able to work in a high level professional capacity, such as a Doctor, or that you can study at a Masters level or above.

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 would like to be able get the score they need quite 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 gold. Similarly, if you could achieve IELTS

band 6 or 7 easily, your certificate would no longer open the doors that you would like it to open. IELTS is a formal qualification, and as such, you need to prepare for it in a serious and systematic way.

## Why do people feel ‘stuck’ at one level?

The question of why so many people struggle to achieve a high band and often feel trapped at a certain level, is a little more complex. To answer it, we need to stop and think about language learning.

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

When you learn a language, you are learning to **do** something, not learning facts **about** something. Looking at the scales, 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. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the intermediate and advanced levels, which the following analogy may help to explain.

## The learning curve

When you first start to play a sport, it doesn’t take you 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’ or ‘band 6’ and play socially or even join a local 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, as with any skill, most people stop making very much progress once they reach the intermediate level. Without special training, and the right focus, your level stabilizes. It can feel as though your progress has plateaued, but this level is actually important in helping to consolidate your knowledge.

Nevertheless, if you are determined to reach a higher level, it is important to change something in your practice at this intermediate stage. Any sports

player who wanted to become a professional, would need to take a different approach towards their practice and their skills, and the same applies to the advanced, professional levels of IELTS.

### **'I'm not good at writing, I'm not good at languages.'**

People often lack belief in their ability to succeed at a high level in IELTS. This is perhaps why so many are tempted to initially look for 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 Harvard Business Review called 'The Making of an Expert'.

One of the authors of the article is Anders Erikson, whose research is also mentioned in another of Matthew Syed's books called 'Bounce'. Erikson's research into how we master a skill includes 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 practice.

#### **Key idea:**

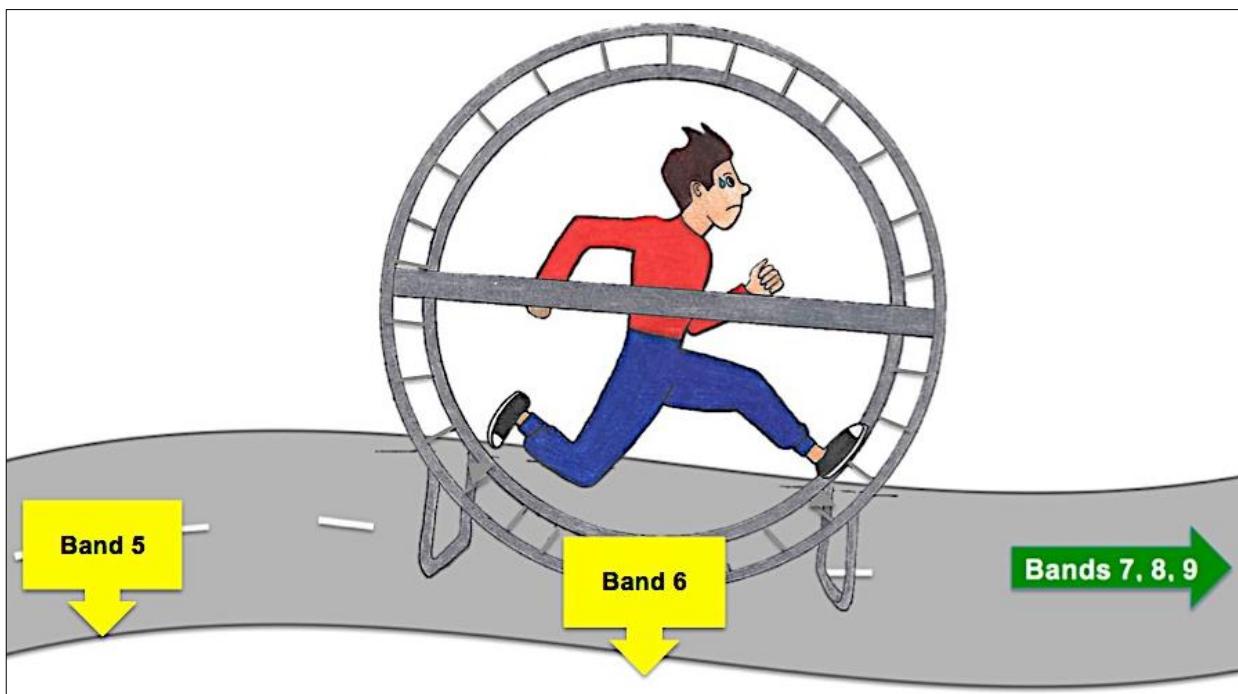
IELTS bands 7, 8 and 9 should be seen as the advanced, professional levels of English language. You must change the way you approach the test and test practice to achieve the higher bands.

#### **First steps**

If you are stuck at the same band, then you need to respond to the problem in a serious, academic way rather than taking it personally. It is important to see the IELTS test as an objective measuring system. Whether you are ready or not, whether you have had time to study or not, the test will just measure your language and give you your score.

In the past, I have compared IELTS to a GPS signal that is telling you where you are in your English language journey. If you haven't moved, your test score will tell you that. People often feel that because they are practising, then they must be moving somewhere. But the wrong type of practice simply keeps you at the intermediate level and does not help you to advance.

You could see the wrong type of practice like this:



Although you may feel that you are continually working or moving forward, you are in fact just going round in circles. You are going around the mountain at the same level, instead of climbing up.

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) People who feel they are 'failing' at IELTS often develop quite negative feelings and blame the test. Doing this prevents you from addressing the real problem, so your attitude can keep you stuck in this closed loop.

## Have you got a helpful attitude towards IELTS?

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

### 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 problems and mistakes in what you are doing and then focus on fixing them. The aim of this book is to help you get off the 'loop' or circular track that you are on and get the score you need. To paraphrase a popular saying: if you continue to practice in the same way that you always have, you will continue to get the same result.

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 genuinely have the time to focus on it, and do the right type of practice.

#### Key idea:

If you have an IELTS test coming soon and you...

- have already received the same band score three or more times
  - have **NOT** been studying English full-time since your last test
- ...save your money and postpone your test.

## Chapter 3 – 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 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 similar to band 5 or 6 - the intermediate level.

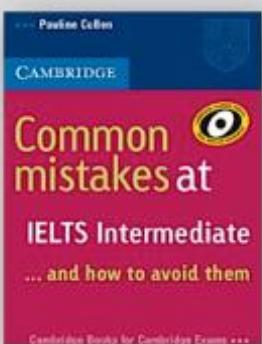
In the last 2 years of high school, we had to choose three subjects to study at the Advanced level. I chose French, Spanish and English, and also took a further O' level in Russian, and I assumed I would continue to have the same level of success as before. In the Ordinary level classes, we had learned 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 in the Advanced level classes we had to read articles, listen to talks, and write formal discursive essays on more general topics like pollution and crime.

Every Friday, we were given a formal essay to write over the weekend. When the teacher handed back the essays, mine were always full of red ink from her corrections and comments, and for the very 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 didn't know in my dictionary as I worked. Essentially, I was translating the English ideas in my head. Even though I spent hours on this task, and felt I was working very hard, my low marks each week told me that I was not making any progress. This continued for almost a year.

At the end of the year, I began studying for my exams by looking back at my essays. That's when I realized that, each week, I had repeated the same mistakes over and over again. One word in particular, the word 'tambien', was crossed out in every single 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.



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!

At this point, I was still an intermediate-level learner, stuck at band 6. 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 may 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 and learned. My book ‘*Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate*’ takes this same approach to the most common mistakes made at bands 5 and 6. Try these two exercises from the book to see if you can identify any of your own ‘fossilised errors’.

1) A teacher has underlined 14 mistakes in this essay. Can you correct them?

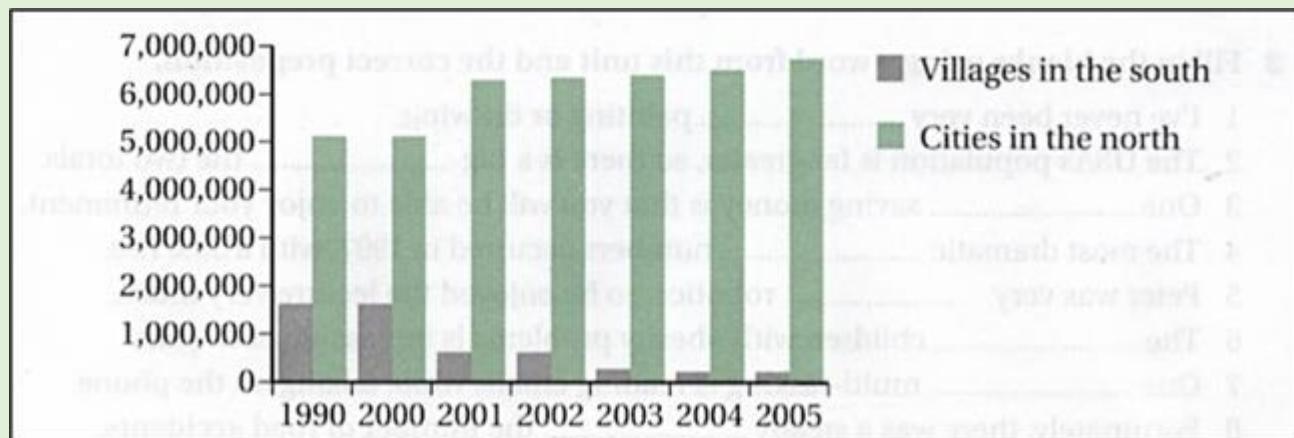
Smoking causes many health problems, is a drain on the workforce and is very expensive. Clearly, there are many good reasons (1) to stop people to smoke.

First, we need to ask ourselves whether this is the responsibility of the government. As we can see, this problem has an impact on (2) many areas our life. (3) Once important example for this is the economy. If people spend too much money on cigarettes, they will not save as much money for their future. Furthermore, if they become ill, the government will need to take care of them. I believe the government does have a duty to educate people about the (4) disadvantages for smoking, and we should all (5) be worried for this problem. However, it is not enough just to (6) advise people to not smoking.

So, what can governments do? Some governments have already (7) tried to increase the tax on tobacco, but even though cigarettes are expensive, people still buy them. Governments have also (8) tried finding ways to target cigarette manufacturers without success. In my country, we (9) only allow to smoke in our own homes and (10) people are not permitted smoking in restaurants or bars. I believe this is an effective way to (11) make people to stop smoking or at least to reduce (12) the number cigarettes they smoke.

(13) I suggest all governments to adopt this strategy. In this way we may also (14) prevent more children to take up this unhealthy habit.

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



The chart shows the number of 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 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.

### ‘But I practice a lot!’

Stop for a moment to think about the type of practice you are doing. If you are just doing IELTS test practice over and over, then you are stuck in a closed ‘test – test – test’ loop. Rather than practising language, you are continually testing yourself and missing out the ‘teach’ or ‘learn’ stage. You need to now enter a learning and language practising stage before you go back to testing yourself again.

In ‘Black Box Thinking’, Matthew Syed tells the story of famous football player David Beckham. Beckham is particularly admired for his ability to ‘bend’ a football, or kick the ball in a way that helps it curve as it flies through the air, and score a goal. He wasn’t born with this ability, he didn’t manage

to learn this skill by practising just a few times a week and, even more importantly, he didn't learn it by only playing in football matches.

Instead, as a young boy, Syed tells how Beckham practised this same shot day and night. He failed thousands of times, but he was very determined and so kept practising until he could hit the net almost 100% of the 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. If you already have an IELTS test result, try to see it as a useful tool to help you identify your areas of weakness - the areas where you need to focus your time and effort.

Although most people do not need to achieve the same level of expertise as a top athlete, it is only through the same combination of determination and deliberate practice that anyone can achieve a high-level goal.

### **Key idea:**

Not all practice is good practice. In a 'closed loop', you are practising the same mistakes and so you stay at the same level and achieve the same score. In an 'open loop', you accept the mistakes and gaps in your knowledge and work on them in a systematic and deliberate way.

### **Marginal gains**

People spend so much time just thinking of reaching the higher bands in IELTS that it 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 then, 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 break these down into smaller, more manageable steps or goals.

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

As IELTS is a language test, the most significant components, or parts, that you must break your target into are 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 down each of these broad, or macro skills into even smaller parts – the micro skills.

That 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 each of 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. In chapter 1, I discussed the idea of people using flawed test materials and reaching faulty conclusions about IELTS based on these materials. Since flawed test materials generally do not require the use of the language skills you need for IELTS, people simply don't believe that learning language skills is going to help them in the test. Many may 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 you focus must be. You will only get higher up the mountain by climbing. Don't waste your time and energy trying to jump up – jumping is not a skill you need for IELTS.

## Know your enemy

The main aim of IELTS is to provide a valid, fair, and reliable testing system. An important part of that fairness is in making sure that candidates and teachers all know exactly what to expect from the test, and exactly what you must do to succeed in the test. If anything were hidden it would not be a fair test.

A valid test is one that has a positive ‘washback effect’ on the classroom, and on your study. This means the test forces you to learn the same skills your certificate will claim that you have. The test would not be valid if the questions encouraged you to simply learn ‘tricks’ for answering questions. So, if your band 7 certificate claims that you can study at a postgraduate level, or work as a Doctor in an English speaking country, a valid test will force you to learn the skills required to do that, by testing you on those skills.

If you do not acquire band 7 language skills then you will not score band 7, this is how the testing system works. Many of the flawed examples of ‘IELTS’ materials that can be found online, do not force you to use those skills. Consequently, they do not force you to practise or develop the skills you need in the real test.

The next chapters will cover each of the individual language components we identified earlier: vocabulary, grammar, and reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills. In each chapter, I will cover the skills you need to show, the common myths that can lead to bad advice, and the best way to approach deliberate practice in order to achieve genuine progress in each skill.

### Key ideas:

- 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 ideas presented above may seem very simple, but in my experience, bad advice about the test can lead to problems from step 1. This means that any effort at step 2 is wasted and step 3 is not achieved. One of the main

reasons people fail to correctly identify the skills needed, is the use of faulty test materials.

## Test practice materials

The best preparation for the test will include a balance of language skills and test practice. The most important point when it comes to test practice, is to use authentic materials – in other words, materials that force you to use and show the same skills as in the real test.

A key concept in the field of design is that ‘form follows function’. This means that the designer’s first priority should be making sure their design actually works (its function), and the style, or look, of the design (the form) should come second. With faulty test materials, if we judge them only from their ‘form’, it is easy to think we are looking at IELTS materials. However, they often do not function in the same way as IELTS test materials.

Before I became a professional test writer, I had already been an examiner and taught exam preparation classes for many years. For my classes, I had often written my own test materials. In spite of this, I struggled with writing real test materials for at least the first five years.

After I had been writing tests professionally for 10 years, I finally grew confident in my ability and have now been writing tests for more than 20 years. I have trained many test writers and seen that they also initially struggle for several years. This is natural, because test writing is a very technical style of writing, and so it is not something we can instinctively do. The skills need to be learned and practised over many years and will only improve with meaningful feedback. It is relatively easy to produce something that copies the ‘look’ and style of an IELTS test, but it is not at all easy to produce materials that function in the same way.

Earlier, I compared taking IELTS to climbing a mountain. The more language and skills you have, the easier your climb will be, and the higher the level you will reach within the time limits of the test. To help you build those

skills, it is important to use practice materials that keep your focus on language, not on tricks that are of no use in the test.

**Key idea:**

If you are using test materials that are confusing, or where there appears to be more than one answer, then it is possible that you are not using authentic materials.

**The autodidact**

## autodidact

*noun [C] • /ɔ:tədækt/ /,a:tədækt/ FORMAL*

★ **a person who teaches himself or herself, rather than being taught by a teacher**

➤ **autodidactic**

*adjective /ɔ:tədæk'tɪk/ /,a:tədæk'tɪk/*

*autodidactic learning*

### Cambridge online dictionary

Many of the people who contact me are self-study students. Often this is because they live in remote areas, or 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 also take responsibility for your learning. At the lower levels, teachers will often ‘spoon-feed’ information to their students. This means giving them everything they need to learn. But, at the higher levels, it isn’t possible to give you everything you need to know, because what is needed is so broad. To reach a high level, it is important to study independently, and to learn more than your teacher can give you in a lesson. My aim in this book, as with all of my books, is to help you become a language learner, whether you have an expert teacher to guide you or not.

# Part 2

## Developing the language and skills needed for IELTS

## Chapter 4 – Vocabulary for IELTS

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

I am often asked which words you need to learn for IELTS and, as always, the answer must 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 Academic module aims to measure and assess your ability to successfully study at a higher level, or to hold high-level professional roles. So, the language skills you need to show are the language skills required for those roles. These can be summarised as follows:

Skills needed for Academic study	Where is this tested?	Vocab
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>understanding longer texts containing descriptive language, academic theories, and complex ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The reading test</li> </ul>	Passive
<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>	Active
<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>	

Your band score is directly related to the extent to which you can complete these tasks accurately and precisely. 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 accuracy and precision you need to show.

## Passive and active vocabulary

We can understand far more language when we are listening and reading than we are able to actively produce. Your passive vocabulary, which helps you to understand reading and listening texts, is much larger than the vocabulary you can produce when you are speaking and writing.

## 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 at the end of this book (Ref 2). 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 and flexible way about any topic. 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).

## Active vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of the biggest problems that I see in band 6 or 6.5 writing. The main issue relates to the type of vocabulary being used and, therefore, the type of vocabulary being learned. These problem words are often old-fashioned words or phrases that I would never use myself, and that I would only expect to find in legal or political documents. We could describe these words or phrases as 'uncommon' or rarely used by a native speaker. Some typical examples I have seen in essays are: **decry, aforementioned, bellicose**.

In the following descriptor for vocabulary (lexical resource) from the public version of the band descriptors for writing task 2 (Ref 3). I have highlighted in yellow the phrases that may be causing this problem.

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> but 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>uses 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. Try to answer the following T/F/NG questions:

Do the following statements agree with the information in the IELTS band descriptors? Are the statements **True, False or Not Given?**

1. Band 9 candidates mostly use **uncommon vocabulary** in their writing.
2. You must use **uncommon words** to score bands 7 to 9 in IELTS.

If you have already watched my talk about T/F/NG questions, you will know that 'Not Given' means that these claims cannot be checked (or verified) using this source. Both of the statements in the box are 'Not given' in the official IELTS band descriptors.' In the next image, I have highlighted

the key information about vocabulary that often seems to be forgotten or ignored:

Band	Lexical resource
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of vocabulary with <u>very natural</u> sophisticated control of lexical features</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and <u>flexibly to convey precise meanings</u></li> <li><u>Skilfully</u> uses uncommon lexical items 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 <u>flexibility and precision</u></li> <li>Attempts to use less common vocabulary <u>but with some awareness of style and collocation</u></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 use less common vocabulary but with some <u>inaccuracy</u></li> <li>Makes some <u>errors</u> in spelling but they <u>do not impede communication</u></li> </ul>

As you can see, the band descriptors do not state that less common vocabulary must be used. They **do** tell us that, at bands 6 and 7, candidates often try to use less common words. In fact, 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 which most accurately describes the vocabulary I see in band 6 or 6.5 writing.

### Less common does not mean uncommon

The descriptor mentions 'less common' vocabulary, but what does this mean? As you can see from the following image, one house is 'less expensive' than the other, but that does not mean that it is 'cheap'.



In the same way, vocabulary that is 'less common', does not mean using words that are rarely ever used.

### **IELTS Advantage or IELTS disadvantage?**

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. Unlike the sites that use impressive statistics to prove their claims are true, these sites would like you to believe that it is easy to jump a band by just learning a few key words or phrases. The idea seems to be that the examiners can be quite easily tricked into believing you are a high level if they hear you using words that people rarely use.

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

If you learn lists of uncommon words, then you do not have a context to see whether the words are in fact appropriate to use in the test. Words like 'decry' or 'bellicose' are extremely rarely used nowadays, so using these in your IELTS writing means you do not have the 'awareness of style' that is needed for band 7. If you are putting a lot of effort into learning words that may actually reduce your score, 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 does C1 – C2 mean?

When I advise people to use simpler words in their writing, they often refuse to take this advice and insist that ‘complex’ words are necessary for a high score. This could come from a misunderstanding with regards to level and how language learning works or 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 dictionary entries, like this one from the Cambridge online dictionary:

**easy**

adjective • UK /'i:zi/ US /'i:zi/

easy adjective (NOT DIFFICULT)

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

CEFR level

This entry says that the word ‘easy’ is level A1, in other words, candidates at A1 can understand this word. Bands 7 – 9 are the equivalent of C1 – C2 in the scale used for CEFR. Some people may mistakenly believe this means 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. Your language level builds up gradually over time as we acquire more and more vocabulary, and become more and more skilled at using it. 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 and use it when and if necessary – just as native speakers do.

### **‘Short words are too basic’**

Another misconception about vocabulary is that you should try to use as many long words as possible. In fact, one site I have seen assesses students writing based on how many letters there are in each word in an essay, and gives feedback such as ‘more syllables needed’.

Can you guess the level of the following words according to the CEFR scale (A1-C2)?

Words
additionally
destruction
household
effective
produce
able
age
flat
absolute

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

You may be surprised at the answers:

Words	CEFR Level (A1 – C2)
additionally	<b>B2</b>
destruction	<b>B2</b>
household	<b>B2</b>
effective	<b>B2</b>
produce	<b>B1</b>
able	<b>C2</b> (when it means 'clever')
age	<b>C2</b> (e.g. in the phrase 'age old')
flat	<b>C2</b> (e.g. in 'a flat tyre')
absolute	<b>B2</b>

As you can see, even ‘short’ words can have a high level, because it is our ability to use words in a more precise and skillful way that creates levels C1 and C2, not the length of the words we use.

### **Idioms and collocation**

Idioms are phrases that have 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’, something we could not guess from the words ‘turn’ and ‘up’. Similarly, the phrase ‘at the end of the day’ can be used both 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. Again, it is impossible to judge from a list whether a phrase is formal, informal or so old-fashioned that it is no longer relevant in modern English usage.

Collocation is important when learning vocabulary. This means learning which words naturally go together in a sentence. There are times when this collocation creates idiomatic language, for example in the phrase ‘a heavy smoker’ we would not guess from the word ‘heavy’ that this phrase 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).

When it comes to learning vocabulary, idioms and collocation, it is best to learn them in the natural context in which they are used. In other words, as you come across them in the natural context of a reading and listening passage, rather than from lists online. You will show a band 7 or 8, ‘skillful’ use of vocabulary when you can use this type of language accurately, and at the appropriate time.

#### **Key ideas:**

It is your ability to use words skillfully and appropriately that creates levels C1 and C2. 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 2000 most commonly used words as well as the most common academic words in the AWL. To help me choose the words for my books, I first compiled a list of the most 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 talk or write about these topics. 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 either in a ‘passive’ way or an ‘active’ way in the context of IELTS.

### Learning vocabulary from listening and reading materials

I have written two Vocabulary for IELTS books. They each have 25 units and each unit uses the context of IELTS reading and listening passages to help teach and present the vocabulary in each topic. Here is an example page from unit 1 of the first book. Notice how the exercises aim to train you to become an active language learner. Studies have shown that, when we are forced to work to arrive at an answer, we are more likely to learn and remember the information later on.

## 1 Growing up

**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	

**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)

**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.

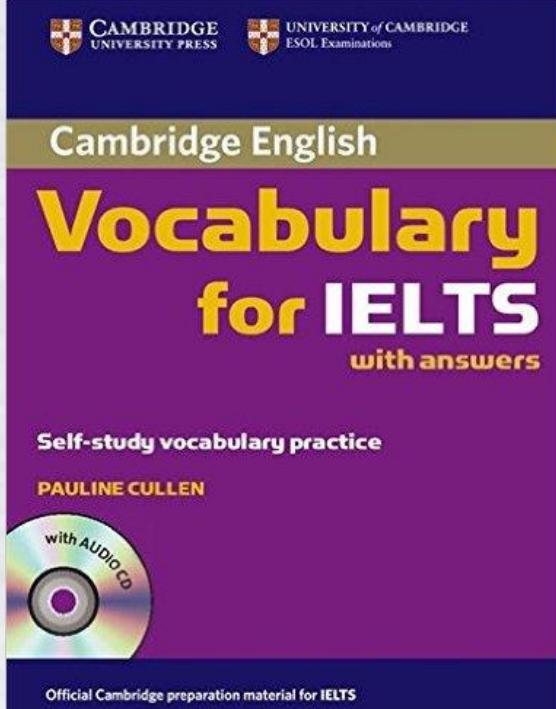


You can listen to the recording here

The next chapter has an extract from the advanced version of this book. Look at the contents page of each book. Do you think you have a wide enough vocabulary to be able to talk, or write, in a precise and accurate way about these topics?

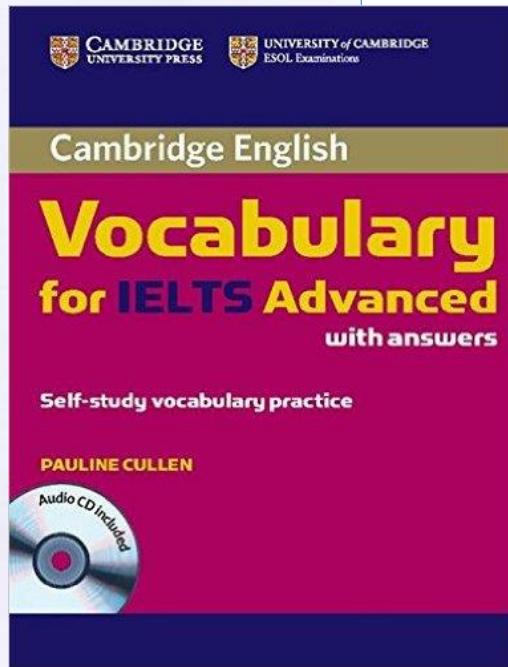
## Contents

Map of the book	2
Introduction	4
IELTS Test summary	6
Unit 1 Growing up	8
Unit 2 Mental and physical development	12
Unit 3 Keeping fit	16
Unit 4 Lifestyles	
Unit 5 Student life	
Test One	
Unit 6 Effective communication	
Unit 7 On the move	
Unit 8 Through the ages	
Unit 9 The natural world	
Unit 10 Reaching for the skies	
Test Two	
Unit 11 Design and innovation	
Unit 12 Information technology	
Unit 13 The modern world	
Unit 14 Urbanisation	
Unit 15 The green revolution	
Test Three	
Unit 16 The energy crisis	
Unit 17 Talking business	
Unit 18 The law	
Unit 19 The media	
Unit 20 The arts	
Test Four	
Unit 21 Language building 1	
Unit 22 Language building 2	
Unit 23 Academic Writing Task 1	
Unit 24 Academic Writing Task 2	
Unit 25 General Training Writing Tasks 1 and 2	
Test Five	
Answer key	130
Recording scripts	132
Wordlist	157
Acknowledgements	167
CD Tracklist	173
	174



## Contents

Map of the book	2
Introduction	4
IELTS Test summary	6
Unit 1 Human nature	8
Unit 2 Time for a change	12
Unit 3 No man is an island	18
Unit 4 Scientific discovery	22
Unit 5 Striving to achieve	28
Test one	32
Unit 6 Powers of persuasion	34
Unit 7 Ways and means	40
Unit 8 State control	44
Unit 9 Natural history	48
Unit 10 Rocket science	54
Test two	58
Unit 11 Progress	60
Unit 12 The latest thing	66
Unit 13 Urban jungle	72
Unit 14 Tackling issues	76
Unit 15 This Earth	80
Test three	84
Unit 16 Energy efficient	86
Unit 17 Getting down to business	90
Unit 18 Law enforcement	96
Unit 19 The media	100
Unit 20 A matter of taste	104
Test four	110
Unit 21 Learning vocabulary	112
Unit 22 IELTS Reading	116
Unit 23 IELTS Writing	120
Unit 24 IELTS Listening	124
Unit 25 IELTS Speaking	128
Test five	132
Answer key	134
Recording scripts	158
Wordlist	169
Acknowledgements	174

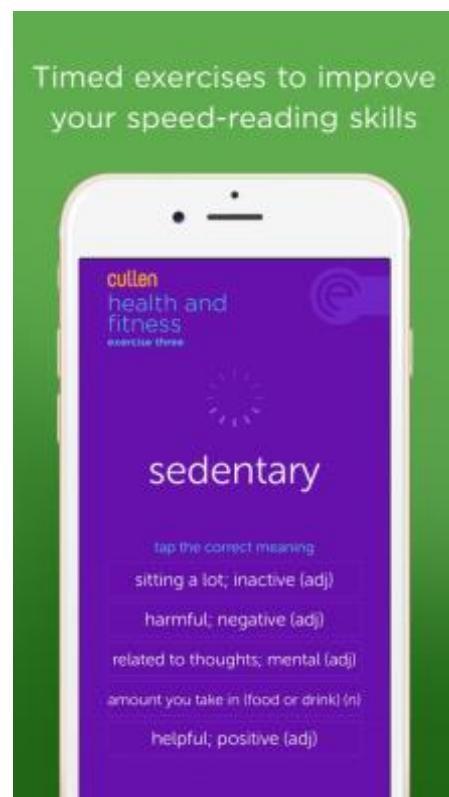
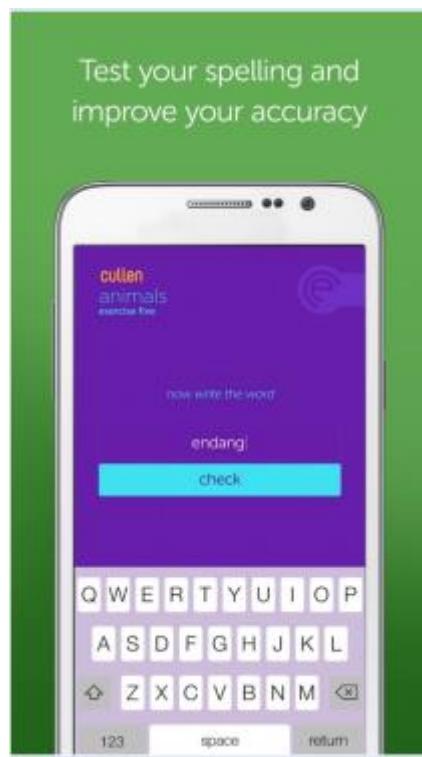


## My IELTS Vocabulary Teaching apps

When I was a language student myself, I would make lists of words to learn. To learn them, I would put them into topics and try to learn 10 new words at a time. I learned to say them, spell them, and use them accurately. I also made a note of sentences containing the words, so that I had a context to help me remember any useful collocations.

This is exactly how I created my vocabulary teaching apps. Each app contains 250 words (so a total of 500 words). Then, there are ten stages, where you learn the pronunciation, the meaning, the spelling, and practise

speed reading them and speed listening to them. You also practise writing them in a sentence and review them all in a word search game at the end.



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 easily produce.

### **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 helps in another way. The context helps your memory to retain a word by giving you a mental image so that you can recall the word when you need it.

To show how this works, let us imagine you are doing writing test practice and writing a task 2 essay. Imagine you are trying to remember a word from an essay you once wrote about traffic problems, a word that means ‘too much traffic on the roads’. To try to remember it, you might think back to when you wrote it before, and mentally picture yourself writing it or finding the word in a dictionary for the first time. Perhaps you can see yourself reading the word in a passage or an article and looking it up. Or maybe you can see yourself in class and watching your teacher write it on the board. This visualisation, remembering the context and the background, helps bring back the word when you need it.

You may remember the word slowly at first, and the thoughts in your head may progress something like this: ‘I think it was con... something... con... con...congest...Hmm, I remember the teacher taught us the pronunciation and said it rhymed with ‘suggestion’...congestion!, that’s it!’

Once you’ve remembered the word in this way, it will come to you a lot sooner the next time you want to use it. Remember, we can remember something more easily when we have to work at getting an answer, instead of just being given the answer. And studies have also shown that writing helps us to retain more information. Thus, each time you use new words in your writing or speaking helps to carve it even more deeply into your memory, so that you can eventually produce it fluently, and without pausing to think.

What you first learn as new language, gradually becomes part of your own language.

### 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 without context, 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 they can. In fact, they will often write three words when one is enough. For example, a typical band 6.5 candidate may write, ‘The consequences of this are **devastating, calamitous and desolating.**’ This is a little like a cook thinking, ‘This spice tastes good, so adding a lot more will make my dish taste even better.’ A band 9, or native speaker, would simply write: **‘The consequences of this can be devastating.’**

A further problem with these words is that, just like a very hot spice, they tend to have an extreme effect and meaning - using an extreme word at the wrong time means your writing is not precise. Typical words like this are ‘plunge’, ‘soar’, or ‘controversial’. These words **are** ‘less common’, but they will only impress the examiner if they are used with an awareness of their style and 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 writing task 2 question does **cause very strong disagreement** among people (controversial). A good 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.

### Advice from Band 8 candidates

There are many sites created by candidates who say they have achieved band 8 and promise to show you how to do the same. It is more than likely that, in their test, these candidates produced some less common vocabulary ‘with an awareness of style’, but I do sometimes wonder if they have reached a

faulty conclusion about how they achieved their band 8 score.

They may believe that they achieved band 8 because of some higher level vocabulary they used and, like the cook I mentioned earlier, may also believe that using more of this type of language would surely their score even better. The model answers I have seen produced on these sites are much closer to band 6.5 language than band 8.

### **Vocabulary affects every part of the test**

Vocabulary is so fundamental to language that it has an impact on every part of the test. As such, I will discuss it as a separate issue in each of the skills chapters.

## Chapter 5 – Grammar for IELTS

### How is grammar tested in IELTS?

As with vocabulary, IELTS does not have a separate paper that tests you on grammar alone. Nevertheless, grammar 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 is the cooking skills that help you to blend and combine them to create meaningful sentences. It is the combination of a wide vocabulary and good grammatical skills that help make your ideas clear, accurate, precise, and help you to reach a high band.

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 here is clear, accurate and precise

As with cooking, once you have a good knowledge of the basics, you can gradually add more sophisticated skills and techniques. Furthermore, just as you cannot skip basic cooking techniques to become a good chef, you cannot skip language levels A2 to B2. For those who try, the result is often a confusing mix of A2, B1 and B2 language with some learned C1 or C2 phrases and sentences mixed in.

You cannot trick the examiner into believing you are a band 7 or 8 candidate by adding some ‘high level’ structures to your writing. For the examiner, this is like eating a sandwich and finding a piece of cake inside; the cake does not belong in the sandwich, and will not persuade the examiner that you are indeed a great pastry chef. Thus, as we saw with vocabulary, it is not the use of C1-

C2 sentence structures that will help you to achieve band 7 or above, it is showing a mastery of A1-B2 level structures that will get you to that level.

## Complex grammar

Many people mistakenly believe that they must use as many complex structures as possible to achieve a high band in IELTS. In fact, this can lower your score, because the resulting sentences usually **make your ideas very difficult to follow**. When discussing vocabulary problems, we saw that many people believe that long words are better than short ones. Similarly, with grammar, there are many who believe that a sentence can only be 'complex' if it is very long. However, as with vocabulary, your grammatical skill is not measured by the length of your sentences but by the ability to convey your ideas clearly, and to connect them together logically.

As we shall see later, 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.

## What are complex structures?

The descriptors for Grammatical range and accuracy, tell us that candidates at bands 7 – 9 make few errors, and use a variety of 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 errors in grammar and punctuation but <b>they rarely reduce communication</b></li></ul>

## How language develops from the simple to the complex

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

I like apples.

I don't like oranges.

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

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 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 complex ideas. So, high level candidates will produce sentences like this: **Although public transport is better for the environment, many people would rather use their own car.**

A band 3 or 4 candidate will struggle to communicate ideas like this, because they only have a basic knowledge of language, and can only express familiar ideas in a simple, and often repetitive way. That is because they are limited to using words like 'and', 'but', 'so', and 'because' to connect ideas. At the higher levels, candidates can skillfully connect their ideas through the accurate use of words such as: although, despite, in spite of, in contrast, as a result, consequently.

Higher level candidates can also accurately and effectively use all 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. Accurately using words and structures like this will naturally create '**a variety of complex structures**'. You do not need to worry about adding an extra layer of complexity by combining more and more ideas to create sentences that cover 3 or more lines of a page.

## Complex + Complex = Complicated

Like the lower level candidates, a band 6 candidate will struggle to communicate ideas clearly if their first aim when writing is to produce very long, complex sentences. When you aim to write complex ideas in a complex way, the result is complicated language. This is a little like trying to climb up the IELTS mountain while performing gymnastics; your efforts hold you back rather than helping you to advance.

## Make the examiner's job easier, not more difficult

Your first priority in the writing test should **always** be to help the examiner understand your ideas by explaining them **as clearly as you can**. Don't confuse the examiner by hiding your ideas in grammatical gymnastics – a confused examiner means a lower score.

### Key idea:

When you aim to explain complex ideas using long and complex sentences, your ideas become complicated and difficult to follow. A confused examiner means a lower score.

## Grammar in the writing test

Like vocabulary, grammar plays an important role in establishing the tone and style of your writing. The official IELTS website tells you that you must write 'in a formal style.' (Ref 5) Let us consider how this affects the different parts of the writing test.

## Grammar issues in writing task 1

In 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 in task 1, or to write 'We can see...' or 'I can see...'. Similarly, when describing a process, instead of writing: '**Someone packs the cereal into boxes and sells them**', you should write, '**The cereal is packed into boxes and sold.**'

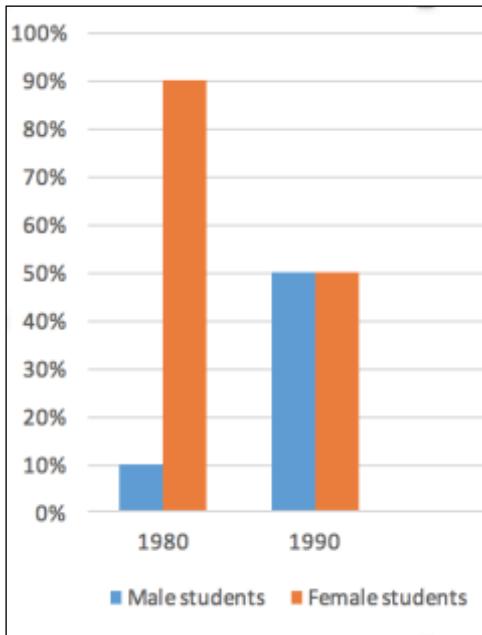
## Being precise

Grammar can help you to be more precise, but it can also present a problem

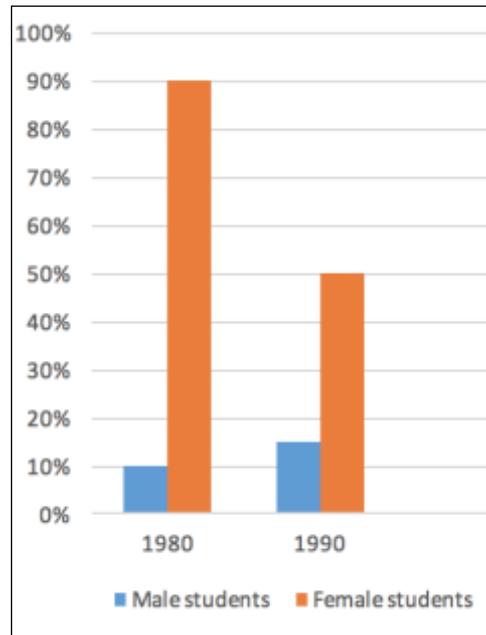
if you are not aware of the differences that even small changes in language can make. For example, consider the impact the different prepositions have on the meaning of the following sentences:

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%.

To help illustrate the difference, match images A and B to the correct sentence.



**Figure A**



**Figure B**

Sentence 1 matches image B. So, if you were to write this in a summary of the data in image A, then you would not be precise and accurate in the way that you describe the information.

### Using the correct style and tone

The verbs and tenses you use have an impact on the tone of your writing. For example, as 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 for writing task 1.

- 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.

Sentence 1 is giving an opinion, so is not appropriate for task 1.

## Grammar and coherence

As I mentioned earlier, grammatical accuracy can affect the coherence of your writing. In the following sentence, the grammatical problems make the reader confused and prevent us from fully understanding the idea:

**Figure predicted for 2020 to 2025 rising.**

The correct version would say: This figure **is predicted to rise between 2020 and 2025.**

An example from my Facebook page can help illustrate this problem further. A follower of my page asked me which of these sentences was correct:

1) Have the third-year term started, it will no longer be too long for my commencement day to come.

Or

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. Confusion for the reader is a clear sign that there is a grammatical problem. The part of the sentence I found the most confusing was: 'no longer too long for my commencement day' and my follower explained that he was actually trying to practise using conditional sentences to be able to create 'complex' language in the writing test.

If a sentence is to be conditional, there needs to be a condition – in other words, one event or action must be dependent on a different event or action. So, the correct version of these sentences would be: 'When the third term begins, I will not have to wait too long for my commencement date.' However, I would more naturally express this idea in this way: 'When the third term begins, my start date will not be too far away.'

Notice that my sentences are complex but they do not cause confusion. That is what your examiner is looking for - clear communication, not complicated sentences. Another important point is that this person is trying to practise for

the test by taking a simple idea and trying to make it sound more complex, but in the test, you need to do the opposite. So, the best way to practise for the test is by taking complex and abstract ideas and making them easy to understand.

### **Key idea:**

The best grammar practice is to try to explain and connect complex ideas in a simple way.

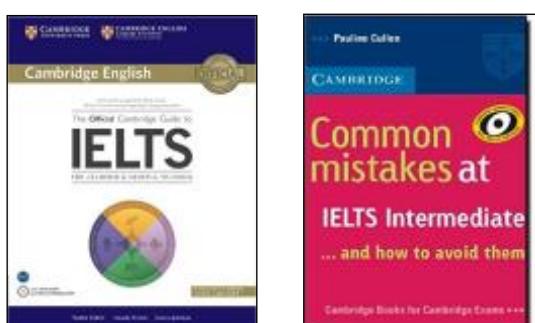
### **Editing and correcting**

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

Each of the following sentences has a grammatical problem from the list above. First, decide what the grammatical mistake is, 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 more helpful exercises like this in my books **Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate** and **The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS**.

## Grammar issues in writing task 2

When researchers describe their studies in an academic journal or paper, they generally use the passive voice. This is done to show that their study is objective, impersonal, and could be repeated by any one.

When it comes to writing task 2, it is again 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 in writing task 2 is candidates using the passive inappropriately, perhaps because they believe they **must write in an academic way** in the test, and so they **must only use the passive**. If the 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, and so this does not tell the examiner what **you** think, feel, or believe.

## Using the passive appropriately in writing task 2

As we saw with writing task 1, the passive voice is used to remove or hide the subject of the verb from a sentence. In task 2, you might use it to make a general statement, or perhaps as a useful way to avoid repeating the same structure or language. 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.
2. Social media is now often used as a news source rather than just a communication tool.

The second sentence uses the passive to convey the same idea as the first sentence. 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.
2. The plans to build a new cafeteria **have been cancelled** because **it was felt that** the money **should be spent** on new machinery.

Because of the active use of verbs, any employee hearing the first sentence would understand that the speaker 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 don't know who made these decisions.

This is a very important point for IELTS because, although you should try write in an impersonal way, you also need to make your own position and views very clear.

**Key idea:**

In task 2, if you write only in the passive, you are likely to be hiding your own views, which will cause you to lose marks in the test.

### 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.** agrees that the statement may be partly be true
- C.** disagrees with the statement

1. **If** traveling **was** so risky, fewer people **would** do it.
2. **Admittedly**, traveling **alone**, **in certain areas**, **could perhaps be a little** risky.
3. Traveling anywhere **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 in these sentences. It is important

to remember that when you write 'traveling alone can be risky' you are conveying your own view, the reader understands this as: 'I believe that this can be 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 impersonal 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 try to write in a general and less personal way, you do not need to completely avoid using subject pronouns such as I, we, you etc.

### **How to learn and study grammar**

In 1973, when I started high school, most teachers used what is called the audio-lingual method to teach languages. 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 by repeating set phrases over and over.

My French teacher would walk into the classroom with 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 weeks the class all chanted sentences like this:

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 knowing the individual words. I found this both frustrating and confusing at the time, and I was not alone. When I was studying for my teaching diploma, teachers I met told me that, at the time, children used to secretly try to write the words down, which had a terrible impact on their spelling later.

Next came the grammar-translation method, where we learned language by translating stories and then eventually, classical literature. The weaknesses of these two methods became very clear to me in 1982, when I arrived in France as a student and was unable to order the coffee I liked or understand the advertisements for accommodation. So, 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 communicative approach**

The gaps in my knowledge were not the fault of my teachers. In chapter 3, I mentioned the washback effect (the impact that a test has on your study and on classroom teaching) and the testing systems at the time put a great deal of emphasis on grammar, translation, and classical literature. So, it was the tests that I had to prepare for that were responsible for my inability to communicate in a lot of everyday situations.

Since the 1980s, the most widely used language teaching method has been the communicative approach, and it is this method that is reflected in the IELTS test. In the communicative method, the main emphasis is on real communication and on using authentic materials. If the materials we had used to learn French in the 1970s had been authentic, then there would be monkeys on the café tables in Paris, and the advertisements in the newspaper would be written in a beautiful, rhyming poetry.

### **Present, Practise, Produce**

Nowadays, a good language teacher will begin by finding out what students need to know and learn. The teacher will **present** new language using authentic materials, such as a reading or listening text. Then, they will help you to **practise** the language, using controlled, task-based exercises. After that, the teacher will encourage students to **produce** the language, either through classroom games and role play, or in real situations outside the classroom. This method is reflected in all good course books and resources.

My Grammar for IELTS book uses authentic materials to present the 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 way as in the test.

If you have any course books that you have completed rather quickly, or some time ago, it may be a good idea to go back and see if there are any stages that you skipped. For example, if you have downloaded a book without the recording, then you may be missing out on key stages of either ‘presentation’ or ‘practice’. Or, if you tend to skip straight to the exercises, you may be missing out the ‘presentation’ and ‘production’ stages.

### **Staying focused**

As you work through a course book, it can help to be aware of what you are doing and why. Try to keep up a mental dialogue with yourself about what you are learning. So, you might say something like this: “Right, so, 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 for example ‘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 to stay focused and make sure you are practising in a deliberate way.

### **Understand, practise, produce**

Even better than explaining language points to yourself is finding a study partner that you can try to teach a language point to. 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. Try to look up the structure in several different resources until you feel you understand it. After that, practise, practise, practise, and produce, produce, produce.

If you have not studied grammar for a long time, then I suggest you look for Raymond Murphy’s grammar books, especially 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 or between certain activities.

### **Beware of false friends - comparing English to your own language**

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

In your language, 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 with your own language can help you to understand the structures you are learning and also to remember how to use them more accurately in the test. Nevertheless, we also talk about 'false friends' in language, when something looks or sounds similar to your language but has a different meaning or is used differently. I often had to note the 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**

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, try to see it first as 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 sentence. 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

### 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, which you can find on page 57. Listen to the talk and complete the notes, then listen again and think about whether you can use any of these ideas to help you study.

## **Dictation**

Dictation was a common language testing method before the 1980s. Although it cannot tell us a great deal about your listening comprehension, dictation can be a useful diagnostic tool when it comes to identifying gaps in your language. If you can hear, or distinguish between, individual words in spoken language, you are more likely to be able to produce the same language yourself. Conversely, if you cannot 'hear' particular words, this may reveal gaps in your knowledge.

To try to see if dictation can help you to identify any problems in your grammar listen back to the recording and write out what the speaker says at the beginning of the talk, from 'Good morning everyone' to '...your personality.' Listen several times until you are happy with what you have written, then check your answer with the tapescript in the answers section. What mistakes did you make? Are any of these related to the five grammatical problems listed on page 48?

## Listening Section 4

▶ 03

### Questions 1–10

Complete the notes below.

Write **NO MORE THAN ONE WORD** for each answer.

### Test tip

Remember that although the information on the question paper will paraphrase the information that you hear, it will be in the same order. Make sure you keep to the word limit you are given and be careful to check your spelling at the end. You can write your answers in capital letters or lower case.

#### Past views of intelligence

- Thought to be only one type
- Could be assessed through an IQ test

#### Current views

- More than one type of intelligence – these can be seen in our 1 .....
- Howard Gardner – *Frames of Mind* (1983) identified seven types of intelligence:
  - i) linguistic (i.e. words and language)
  - ii) 2 ..... (science and maths)
  - iii) musical
  - iv) kinaesthetic (i.e. the body and 3 .....)
  - v) visual (relating to images)
  - vi) interpersonal (conscious of the 4 ..... of other people)
  - vii) intrapersonal (relating to self-awareness)
- Other intelligences have been suggested but are not generally included because they are too 5 .....

#### Uses in education

- Adapt activities to suit the type of student you are, e.g.
  - a kinaesthetic type learner will not learn well from a 6 ..... – they would learn better from taking part in a 7 .....
  - visual learners could create their own 8 .....
- Find out the type of learner you are by thinking about the way you prefer to do things, e.g. when teaching someone how to use a new piece of equipment
  - a visual learner would prefer to use a 9 .....
  - a kinaesthetic learner would prefer to do a 10 .....

## Learning grammar in context

The previous chapter discussed the benefits of learning vocabulary in context rather than from a list. In the same way, it is helpful to focus on grammar in the context of a reading passage to help you understand the meaning. This focus on meaning is something that a good teacher can help you with, but is something that self-study students often neglect to consider. 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. Similarly, confusion about grammar can interfere with your ability to understand what you **read** in a precise way, so studying grammar in context can help with your reading as well as your writing. I will discuss this idea in more depth in the reading skills chapter.

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 writer's tone (especially the use of modals and conditionals).

To turn this into deliberate practice, try to focus on the list of five common problems I mentioned on page 48 or any other problems that you have identified in your own writing. Thus, if you realise that relative clauses are a particular problem for you, then look for these in reading passages and think about how, when, and why they are being used. Try to work in a systematic way and do the same for prepositions, articles, different tenses, and so on.

## Grammar and tone

In formal writing, native speakers try to be as polite as possible, and often use adverbs and modal auxiliary verbs to help soften 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 has quite an aggressive tone, not only because of the vocabulary used, but also because of the grammatical structures. The second sentence conveys the same message 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 B1 and C2 candidates will use these words, the difference is that the C2 candidate will use the words accurately, appropriately, and with an understanding of style and tone. Simply adding words or structures like this to your writing will not magically transform your language, you must also show and understanding of the tone they create.

### **What grammar points should I study?**

When it comes to creating a list of grammatical points to study, you will find my Common Mistakes at IELTS book covers the most frequent errors made at bands 5 and 6 in IELTS writing, so it is a good place to start. But you can also build up your knowledge by noting down grammatical structures you find when you read more widely, outside of IELTS practice tests.

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 texts, or books, about a subject you enjoy, for example, if you enjoy sport, then look for well-written books on that topic. I have listed some interesting non-fiction books at the end of this book and I share interesting, well-written articles in my free IELTS Weekly magazine on Flipboard.

If you read something that you find interesting, read it again to look at the language. How did the writer express or connect their ideas? What language structures did they use? Try to collect sentences that you find interesting, and use these 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. As I was reading, I noticed this sentence in the article: '**The emotional significance of the dress far outweighed its monetary value.**' The sentence struck me as a very nice way of explaining the importance of this discovery. Rather than learning and copying a whole sentence like this, you should look at the basic structure and try to learn, then mimic that. So, from this sentence, you would learn: '**The ...of ... far outweighs its ...**'

You can then deliberately practice by trying to write your own variations in this sentence. Once you can confidently and accurately write your own version, then the structure becomes part of your own language rather than a phrase or sentence you have learned. So, you will eventually 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.

### **Controlled practice and free practice**

The examples I have given so far are mostly what we call 'controlled practice', where you control the sentence and the situation, so you are less likely to make mistakes. This helps you to speak and write more accurately and more fluently, because you can eventually produce the language automatically, and you do not have to pause to think.

But it is also important to then **produce** the same language in a less structured way, when you are writing and speaking. This will help to increase your natural and active use of the new structures you are learning. When we write, we write in the voice that is in our head. What is important is trying to find activities that will help your inner IELTS voice to speak accurately and confidently.

## Chapter 6 –Developing IELTS Reading Skills

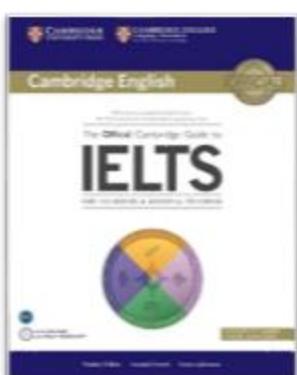
### Key idea:

When I help people with IELTS reading they often say, ‘**But what about when it says...?**’ They then show me a link to a video, or a site, where the examples used **do not reflect the real IELTS test**, and so my advice does not work. The advice I give here will only apply to authentic test materials that have been written by trained and experienced test writers.

### **Deliberate Practice for IELTS reading**

In chapter 3, 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 a lot longer to build the skills you need. Remember, David Beckham did not achieve his skills from playing in football matches – before he could qualify to play on a team, he first needed to first develop the necessary skills.



The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS has 8 units devoted to reading skills. You could see the first half of the book as coaching you in the skills needed to take part, while the second half of the book gives you plenty of ‘match’ practice, through 8 complete practice tests. Rather than competing against the test, it may help to think that you are competing against yourself and your last test score.

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

To answer this question, as always, we need to keep in mind that IELTS aims to find out whether or not you have the skills needed for academic study. 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, finance, engineering, and fashion, but the one common factor was that each course included a dissertation. This involved writing a question, carrying out research, reaching a conclusion to trying to answer the question, and 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, which helped to narrow down her search. Nevertheless, her initial search still resulted in a list with over 800 possible references. Clearly, no one has time to read this number of papers or 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 be able to efficiently use her time, and finish her dissertation within the deadline, my niece had to use the following key reading skills. She had to quickly **scan** the titles to eliminate any that were duplicates or simply not useful, leaving 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, which left 6 studies. She then had to **read** these **in detail** to **reach a conclusion** and **answer her question**.

The IELTS reading test mimics this same process in miniature. For each question in the reading test you must:

1. **Identify the key information or terms** in the question (**and any possible synonyms**) to help focus your search.
2. **Scan** the passage for these key terms).
3. **Skim read** to check if the mention you have found is relevant to your question.
4. **Read** the relevant part of the passage **in detail**.

## 5. Reach a conclusion and answer the question.

We will look at ways of building these skills later.

### Your deadline is 60 minutes

The reading test has three passages and a total of 40 questions. You are given 60 minutes to complete all of the questions **and** transfer your answers onto a separate answer sheet. It is very important to be aware that there is no extra time given for this, your answer sheet **must** be completed within the 60 minutes. High-level candidates can do this within the time limit, making few mistakes, while lower level candidates find it extremely difficult. The difference between the two comes down to language and reading skills. The limited time you are given plays an important part in the test, because it acts like a deadline, and is just one of the ways the test forces you to use a variety of reading skills.

#### Key idea:

You have a deadline of 60 minutes in the reading test. In this time, you need to answer 40 questions and transfer your answers onto a separate answer sheet. No extra time is given for this. Only your answer sheet is marked.

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

As you can see from my niece's experience, in academic study, you need to be able to scan, skim read and read in detail. There is often confusion about the difference between skimming and scanning. In language teaching, we use 'scan' to mean moving your eyes very quickly over a text to find a key detail, such as a word or a number. In everyday life, you would use this skill to quickly find a telephone number on a website or in an email, for example. When we scan, we do not read, our eyes just search for the detail, a little like trying to quickly spot a detail in a picture or photograph.

Skim reading, on the other hand, 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 from skim

reading, you will only be able to give a general impression or overview of the text.

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

My answer to this question is always that, this is a reading test, so your main focus should always be on reading. 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.

My main concern with reading the questions first is that candidates are tempted to think they will be able to guess some of the answers. This promise is made in several videos, but it only applies to faulty test materials. Remember, the materials for the **real** test are written slowly and carefully by professional test writers; it takes 12 months to write, edit, pretest, and check the live test materials to make sure that the answers cannot be guessed and that the materials are valid, fair and reliable.

### ‘Reading the passage first is a waste of time’

Several videos will tell you that skim reading the passage first is a waste of time, but doing this gives you useful background knowledge, to help you understand the test questions as you work through them. To demonstrate how useful it can be, look at the following example taken from one of the 8 practice tests at the end of 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.

First of all, notice that **you cannot guess the answer without reading** the passage. Skim reading the whole passage first, would have told you 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 a British team and a Norwegian team. If you now

look back at the question you will see how this sort of background information makes it easier to understand the questions when you come to them; when you look for the answer in the passage, you can concentrate on only looking for information about the attitude of the reporters in New Zealand.

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 help give you some idea of what the passage is about. Nevertheless, both scanning and skim reading help you to quickly, and efficiently find the relevant information to answer each question, so they are important skills to master for the test.

### **Building scanning skills**

The test questions will often contain key details to help you 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 the next time.

### **Synonyms and paraphrase**

The reading test questions will often use synonyms to paraphrase the information in the passage. So, just like my niece, you may also need to scan for synonyms of key terms. To build on your scanning skills, look back at the list of words from the previous exercise and try to 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 using the synonyms.

People often find that, under the stress of a test situation, they forget everything they have learned and revert to old habits – their fossilized errors of reading. If you regularly spend 10 to 15 minutes deliberately practising these skills, then you are more likely to use them automatically in the test, which will help you to find key details more quickly.

## Building skim reading skills

With skim reading, remember that you are not reading every word or reading in detail. Instead, you are only trying to get a general idea before reading the questions in detail. Thus, after skim reading a whole passage, you may only be able to give general information, 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

You may only be able to give one or two impressions like this at first but, with practice, you should 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 minutes, 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 with a big dot or cross in the margin, 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, even if you haven't finished, jump to the next dot, start the timer again, and skim read the next 100 words. Repeat this until you get to the end of the passage. If you cannot skim read 100 words in this time, then adjust your timer to give yourself longer and try to reduce your time with practice.

After you have completed a passage, try to write down anything at all you can remember. If you are working with a partner, you could try giving them your general impressions, or record yourself talking about it. Don't try to remember details – you are only trying to form a mental picture of the passage at this stage. So, 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 when trying to form a general impression of a text.

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.

### **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 test passages quickly. As the following paragraphs will show, the language itself also needs to be familiar to you. Read version 1, then version 2, as quickly as you can and 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 later 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 version, 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. Thus, if your current IELTS reading test score is relatively low, then you should aim to focus on learning vocabulary and grammar before you work on IELTS passages. You can still develop skim reading skills using simpler passages. Skim reading IELTS reading passages alone will not help you to improve.

My 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 can 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 at the end of this book.

*Dear Pauline,*

*I have had your app on my iPhone for less than a day. I immediately recognized your system of teaching, which is in all of your books. That is, that a word can be learned in different ways at one time. How is it spelt, how does it sound, its meaning, usage in a sentence and its synonym. This is what I like about your teaching method and why I bought your app.*

*With many thanks and best wishes,*

*Zhenia*

**10 exercises to help you practise and learn**



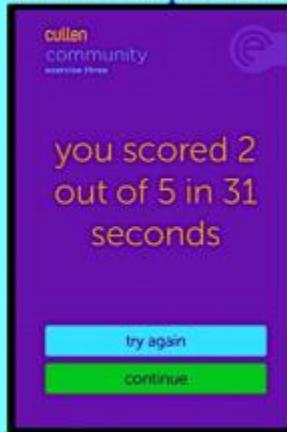
**Ex 3 - Speed read 1**  
How quickly can you match the words and definitions?



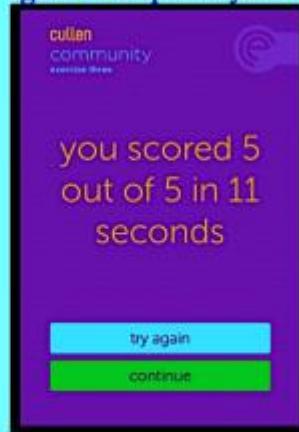
**Ex 4 - Speed read 2**  
How quickly can you match the definition to the target word?



**Need more practice?**



**Try again to improve your score**



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## Reading in detail

Scanning and skim reading increase your efficiency, and help with your timing, while detailed reading is the final stage that helps you reach a conclusion and answer the questions correctly. When we read each word in a passage slowly and carefully, we are reading in detail. Just as my niece did not attempt to read 800 papers for her dissertation, you should not begin by reading the whole passage slowly and carefully, as this will waste your time and cause you to miss your 60-minute deadline. Remember, the amount of time you are given is a deliberate way of forcing you to use more than one reading skill. In my experience, mistakes that are made at this detailed-reading stage can occur because of:

- misinterpreting the question or the passage
- looking for the answer in the wrong part of the passage
- reaching a faulty conclusion about what the passage says
- mistaking a small detail for a big idea
- trying to simply match words instead of using reading skills

All of these problems can be linked to a lack of reading skills, problems with vocabulary and grammar, and practising with bad examples.

### **The effect of grammar on reading in detail**

The reading passages in the test are authentic academic texts. They deal with complex ideas which are described, explained, and discussed. At the detailed-reading stage, language problems can begin to interfere with your understanding of the passage and your ability to follow the ideas being discussed or explained. This means that you will often need to trace and follow the development of one main idea within the passage, which requires an awareness of referencing within and between sentences. Consequently, any problems in your own writing related to the use of articles, relative clauses, or pronouns, may be linked to your inability to see how different ideas in a reading passage are connected to each other. We will see several examples of this later.

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

If a reading test has one type of question, your test preparation is very limited. For example, to prepare for a test that only has multiple choice questions, you only need to practise choosing one answer from a list. Although these questions can be effective in testing reading comprehension, they do not reflect the full range of reading skills needed in real life situations. Thus, the different types of reading test questions in IELTS are a way of ensuring that the test has a positive washback effect on your studies, because they force you to learn a range of different reading skills.

We could see the tasks as asking questions like this:

- 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 reading passages and 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 are not asking you 'Where is this information?' instead, they are asking you the precise meaning of one part of the passage. We could see these as asking, 'What does **this** mean?' or 'Does **this** mean xyz?' Thus, the questions are written in a way that makes it relatively easy to scan the passage and find **the part that you need to read in detail**.

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

- Short answer questions
- Sentence Completion (where you need to write a word from the passage)
- Multiple choice questions
- True, False, Not given or Yes, No, Not given

## How should I answer these questions?

Remember, the testing aim with these questions is to check that you have a precise understanding of one part of the passage, and they generally contain information that will help you to locate the relevant part of the passage.

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 your specific test 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. 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, but the following advice applies to both types of task.

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

These are the questions that I am asked about the most frequently, and that appear to cause the most confusion. Yet, as we shall see, answering them requires the same skills as other questions in the test. As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, the confusion often occurs because of bad examples found in materials that are not written by experienced test writers. Social media has shown me that the alternative versions of IELTS (often found online) cause confusion, doubt, and even bad advice about how to approach your preparation and practice for the real test. In this next section, I will try to show how True False Not given questions work in the real test and why the alternative versions of IELTS are so often wrong.

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

'True' is fairly self-explanatory and seems to cause little confusion. A true statement is one that accurately reflects, or means the same as, the information in the passage. However, there appears to be some discussion over what 'False' means. One source of confusion comes from the idea that false must mean the 'opposite' of true, but it can be very misleading to think that a False statement is 'the opposite of the information in the passage'. Very often, a 'false' statement is simply factually incorrect rather than a contradiction of the passage. 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 think that 'False' means incorrect or untrue.

### What does Not Given mean?

The idea of 'Not Given' causes even more confusion, and there appears to be a common belief that it means searching through a passage for something that is not there. If this were true, then the task would be both frustrating and unfair, because you would waste a great deal of time looking for something that does not exist.

Some videos tell you '**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**'. The problem with this advice is that, when people do find the same key terms in both the passage and

the question, they wrongly conclude, ‘I found something, so it can’t be Not Given, it must be either True or False.’ However, as we will see, this is not how these questions work.

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 all of these questions, **you will 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.

### How valid are True, False, Not Given questions?

We often say that IELTS is a fair, valid and reliable test. If a test is valid, then the tasks clearly reflect the purpose of the test. To help explain the validity of True, False Not given questions, and demonstrate how they work, I would like to 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 need to do some research and find some good sources of information. Then, when he writes his dissertation, he would need to refer to his source material to provide support for the statements or claims he makes. The following image shows 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.

Here is the source material he used to support his statements:

Dissertation	Source material
<p><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. So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</p>	<p><b><u>Urban Heat</u></b></p> <p>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.</p>

My nephew's tutor will give him feedback as he works 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 that there are some problems. In the first sentence, he has made the claim that '**Luke Howard**' invented the term '**Urban Heat Island**'. Scan the passage for these key terms, then read the information in detail. Does the source material support his claim?

Dissertation	Source material
<p><b><u>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</u></b></p> <p>It was <b>Luke Howard</b> who first invented the term '<b>Urban Heat Island</b>'. 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><b><u>Urban Heat</u></b></p> <p>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, this is a

modern term, and was not created or used in the 1880s by Luke Howard. My nephew's tutor is likely to add this comment:

Dissertation	Tutor feedback
<p><b>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</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. So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this.</p>	<b>No, he didn't!</b>

The source material tells us the statement is **incorrect**, in other words, **False**.

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 in the source, we have to first scan for the part that tells us what Howard discovered about '**temperatures in the city**' and '**the country**' during '**different seasons**'. So these are the key terms we need to scan for, but remember we also need to consider synonyms. Can you find synonyms for '**the country**' and '**seasons**' in the passage? Read the relevant part of the passage in detail (the highlighted areas below) to check the accuracy of the second statement in the dissertation.

Dissertation	Source material
<p><b>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</b></p> <p>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><b>Urban Heat</b></p> <p>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 <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 here, we need to keep reading to trace the meaning and fully understand the complete idea within the passage. The passage tells us that Howard did notice the difference in temperatures in cities and **rural areas**, but we need to keep reading to learn that this occurs in **winter and summer**, or, in other words, ‘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**.

Take some time to notice the referencing used 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. Again, to check this, we first need to scan for the key details of **experts**, **concrete** and **bricks**, and then read this part of the passage in detail.

Dissertation	Source material
<p><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. <u>So far, experts have failed in their efforts to create heat-reflecting concrete and brick to try to deal with this problem.</u></p>	<p><b><u>Urban Heat</u></b></p> <p>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. <u>Experts</u> agree that this is due to urban development, when open green spaces are replaced with asphalt roads and tall <u>brick or concrete</u> buildings. <u>These materials</u> 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. The passage does mention bricks and concrete, and also tells us what experts have concluded about these materials, but **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 quite 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>	<b>Tutor feedback</b>
<p><b>The Effect of Buildings on Climate Change</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>There is no evidence to support this idea in the text. You will need to find another source to check this.</b></p>

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. The materials I have used here actually come from page 58 of the Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS. This is what it would like in the test:

<p><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><b>Questions 1 – 3</b></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 the test, or when practising, it may help you 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).

**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.

**T/F/NG or True False Not Given?**

I am often asked if it is ok to write just the letter for these answers. The answer is that you can write your answers either in letters or words, just make sure that your letters are not ambiguous. For example, some people write the letter T in a way that resembles the letter F, if this is true for you, then I advise you to write the word instead, so that your answer is clear.

**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.

**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 'I think these are the most difficult, most confusing questions in IELTS.' And because the speaker truly believes this, they produce their own examples to support their belief, which may be based on using faulty test materials themselves. This is a good example of the vicious circle I talked about in chapter 1 and, in my view, this is where a great deal of the confusion about True, False, Not Given questions stems from.

Many of the videos contain examples where the 'passage' consists of one simple sentence and a question that very closely resembles it. Thus, these videos teach that you can answer by simply matching vocabulary. 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 puzzle it presents, and there are usually 2 or even 3 possible answers. We could argue that the statement above is True, or Not Given, while the speaker in the video will state that the answer is False.

The confusion comes from a lack of understanding of how these questions are written. The example above is not a valid or reliable test of reading skills, and thus it cannot be said to represent IELTS. Examples 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 reading test.

**Key idea:**

Only well-written practice materials will help you to develop the skills you must show in the test. If you find you are frequently confused when using certain test practice materials, it is possible that they have not been written by experienced test writers.

**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 several videos I have seen, the changes made the questions either ambiguous or overly complicated, and therefore completely unsuitable for True, False, Not Given tasks.

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 relating 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 easily find the key information, highlighted above, and identify the relevant part to read in detail. However, if you stop at this point and simply match vocabulary, you are likely to see the words 'more than' and '400 million acres' and incorrectly answer 'No.' Remember, at this point we need to skim read to trace the whole idea and see how much more of the passage we need read in detail. A closer look and a more detailed reading, shows that this 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 trace the meaning, as follows:

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 is the number of acres currently being used for agriculture. So, the statement in the question agrees with the information in the passage and the correct answer here is 'Yes'. Remember, the real IELTS test questions will force you to read – if your strategy is to look for tricks to avoid reading, your answer will be wrong.

Another video took the final question in this set and changed it into a negative statement to 'warn' you about ways that 'they' try to trick you.

**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.

IELTS Reading Questions 09 - Yes - No - Not given

The original question in my book simply requires you to use your scanning, skim reading, and reading in detail skills. The change this person has made means that, even if you do that, you are likely to get the question wrong because

they have added a triple negative that would confuse any candidate, whatever their level is. They did this to prove a point – that the test is trying to trick you, but only badly written materials will do that – the real test, and authentic test materials, will not. 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, as they may not be a true representation of the original.

### Reaching a faulty conclusion

Earlier, I mentioned the impact that grammatical problems can have on your ability to follow ideas within a passage. Similarly, with more discursive passages, grammatical problems may cause you to reach a faulty conclusion about the writer’s position or tone. This can be linked to grammatical problems, such as misunderstanding the use of modal or conditional verbs, or a misunderstanding of vocabulary. It is often language problems like these that cause candidates to misinterpret a part of a passage. As we have seen, bad examples may also cause people to focus on simply matching vocabulary in the question and the passage. As a result, they answer too quickly and without reading with the close attention needed to understand and follow complex ideas.

To demonstrate this, look at the multiple choice question I shared earlier, and the relevant part of the reading passage. One of the followers of my Facebook page thought that the answer to this question should be B – that is because, rather than using her reading skills, she focused on matching words in the questions and the passage. Look at the question and read this part of the passage in detail to see why B is incorrect:

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

My follower decided that 'astonished' was the same as 'impressed' and so she chose B. This reveals a vocabulary problem: astonished, means very surprised, but you can be astonished about 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.

Multiple choice questions always require a close, detailed reading of several sentences, and often a whole paragraph. 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 '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 as 'the Japanese had only lightweight sledges... made of bamboo and wood.' Thus, through a detailed reading, and using our knowledge of both grammar and vocabulary, we can see that the correct answer is A. Note that 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, and could be seen as 'Not given' here.

Notice that, in authentic IELTS multiple choice questions, you will never find 'silly options' that you can easily dismiss. As with True, False, Not given questions, you must not approach these questions as a vocabulary matching

exercise, but as an opportunity to use your scanning, skim reading and reading in detail skills.

### Which questions are not in order?

For some questions, the testing focus is on **locating** the information. 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
- Matching sentence endings

### How should you answer questions like this?

Answering questions that are not in the same order as the information in the passage requires the same skills of scanning for a key detail, skim reading, and reading in detail. While you may be able to find key details to scan for in the question, you are more likely to find several mentions of these details in the passage or to need to scan for synonyms. Thus, your skim reading skills are much more important with these questions, as they help 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 from looking in the wrong part of the passage for the answer.

#### Key idea:

For questions that are not in the same order as the passage, you are more likely to need to scan for synonyms or find more than one mention of a key detail such as a name or date. Skim reading to decide which part of the passage is relevant is much more important with these questions.

If you struggle with these test questions, the problem is likely to be related to a lack of language, and skim reading problems. So, 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.

### **A small detail or a big idea?**

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. The distinction can be linked back to skim reading and the idea of general information rather than a specific detail. Some reading test questions will ask you to identify the main idea in part of a passage. This is sometimes done in multiple choice questions, but the clearest example can be found in matching headings tasks, where you must identify the main idea of a paragraph or section by choosing the correct answer from a list. The list may contain small details, rather than big ideas, or it may contain inaccurate details and ideas.

### **Matching headings**

Matching headings questions are asking you to identify the main idea of a paragraph. If you find these questions difficult, then you probably struggle with skim reading, and recognising the difference between a big idea and a small detail. As mentioned earlier, this idea can be seen in other parts of the test, such as selecting and reporting only the main ideas in writing task 1. In the Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS, you can find more practice in both the reading and the writing units to help with this.

The following is an extract from unit 8 of the reading skills section, and I will use it to show a good way to approach matching headings tasks. The reading comes from a General Training section 3 article. 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 try to 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 may relate to details in the paragraph, for example 'a major change' and 'the consequences' of the change, but these are not accurate as the city did not vote and there is no mention here of professionals warning about the consequences. In this way, we could see the remaining headings as 'False' or 'Not Given' options.

### 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 am not sure where this statistic 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 is to use the right reading skills at the right time.

## 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, or notes. 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 matches the new format.

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

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

As with all of the tasks in the test, answering these questions involves identifying key details in the question, for example labels in the diagram, or headings in the notes, scanning for those details, skim reading to check you have found the right information, then reading in detail to answer correctly. To answer these questions, you often have to write down words from the passage. You must make sure to copy the words accurately – do not change the words and do not make any spelling mistakes – if you do, your answer will be marked wrong; there are no half marks for questions in the reading test.

### 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.

## How can I improve my reading score?

When it comes to building the skills needed for the IELTS test, the most important piece of advice is to practise using test materials that reflect the real test and so force you to use those skills. It takes a very long time to learn how

to write test questions at the right level and with only one, clear answer; if you are not using materials like this it will be very difficult to judge your weak areas.

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 your previous test scores from practice tests you have done using **authentic materials**, and note down the number of questions you got wrong in each section in a table like the one on the following page. 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										
Summary 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 can identify a problem with a particular question type, first, look again at the correct answers for each one and make sure you fully understand why your answer is wrong, and where the correct answer comes from in the passage. Then, look back at the questions on pages 68 – 69 and try to match them to any of the specific questions you got wrong, to see if there is a pattern.

For example, do you have problems with questions that are asking you, 'Why did the writer say this?' or 'What is the writer suggesting here?'

Try to identify your problem from the list on the following page and then work on the suggested solution. Try to notice the same type of question when you are doing more practice, and keep track of your progress.

Problem:	Solution:
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 (see chapters 5 and 6)

## Timing

The final stage of your practice, once you have mastered the language and skills you need, is to focus on improving 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 for the more difficult questions in sections 2 and 3, but if you are still struggling to complete the questions within the time limit, again, I recommend you stop doing test practice to focus on building language and reading skills.

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 – you can come back to it later if you have time, using the numbers as a guide to help you quickly find the information. You may also find that a detailed reading of later parts of the passage gives you a better understanding of earlier questions, and may help you to reach the conclusion you need.

## Scoring Band 7 or above

To get band 7 in reading you need to score at least 30 out of 40, though I think it is better to aim for a few more than this when you are practising. This means that, even if you are band 7 to 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 and followed a lot of my advice and about reading, but then 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 this.

### **Making the most of your resources**

The test practice materials are written very carefully and are a great resource to study from. Instead of finishing a reading test then moving on to the next one, go back after a few weeks and use the materials again in any of the following ways:

- to practice scanning and skim reading
- to study referencing and following the explanation of a main idea within the passage
- to study vocabulary – especially synonyms and collocation
- to study grammar – especially the use of articles, pronouns, tenses, prepositions, and punctuation
- to practise writing – read one or two paragraphs several times then try to write a summary of the main ideas. Try to include any of the words you can remember from the original for extra vocabulary practice.

I have produced several videos about reading that you may find helpful – you can find links to all of my videos in the reference section at the end of the book.



## Chapter 8 –The Key to IELTS Writing

### A Quick Fix for IELTS Writing

I suspect that many people will open this book and skip the previous chapters in the hope of finding a quick fix for their writing problems here. If this is what you have done, then you are likely to continue to remain stuck at the same band that you are now. So, my first advice is to go back and read Chapters 1 to 6. As with all of my books, this book is good at multi-tasking: reading it will not only teach you about the test, but it will also help you to learn the language you must produce in the test.

### Two key problems in IELTS writing

In my view, as well as causing the most anxiety, the writing test also attracts the widest range of opinions, theories, and ‘advice’. While many people attempt to write their own versions of IELTS reading tests, with the writing test this number is much greater. Such materials often do not reflect the real test questions, and in my view, a great deal of the myths and ‘bad advice’ for IELTS writing stem from examples like this.

A further problem arises from the fact that writing is a very personal skill that requires us to explain what we think and feel. For some people this feels unnatural, and can make them feel awkward and clumsy; others even describe it as a painful process. As a way of combating this, perhaps people develop more coping strategies for writing than for other skills - ways of tackling something they see as a problem task rather than an enjoyable one. As a result, people tend to hold on very tightly to any existing ideas they have about the writing test, which may be why I often find it takes a long time to convince people to try a new approach.

#### Key idea:

You may find it difficult to let go of old ideas and beliefs about the writing test. Try to keep an open mind.

### 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. Above band 6, we could say that it aims to measure how advanced or developed these skills are. Academic and professional writing involve describing and summarise facts in an objective way, and clearly explaining your own arguments and views about serious topics. These skills are assessed in task 1 and task 2 respectively.

It is important to note again 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’.

### How is the writing test assessed?

Your IELTS examiner will assess your two writing tasks 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 answers 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). 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 ( $7.5 + 6 + 6 = 19 \div 3 = 6.5$ ).

### Writing task 1

Task Achievement tells us that, a band 9 candidate will produce 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 is required for the test. You can find a copy of these at the end of this book.

If we look at the instructions that accompany **every IELTS writing 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.'

## summary

*noun [C] • UK* /'sʌm.əri/ *US* /'sʌm.eɪ.ʃən/ (FORMAL summation)

**B2** a short, clear description that gives the **main** facts or ideas about something:

While an overview is defined as:

## overview

*noun [C] • UK* /'əʊ.və.vju:/ *US* /'ou.və.vju:/

**C1** a short description of something that provides general information about it, but no details:

Thus, if you need to score band 7 or above, then **your summary must contain a clear**

**overview of the main trends, and which contains no details.** You can see an example of an overview in my sample answer on page 7. And you can find more help with identifying the main ideas and writing your overview, on pages 97-99 of The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS.

**Key idea:**

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

### **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. The descriptors for the writing task criteria 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 an overview is in task 1.

### **Why do I only have 20 minutes for writing task 1?**

As with reading, the time limit is an important factor in the test. Given more time, you would be likely to write a longer and more detailed answer. However, writing task 1 is a short task, and should aim to write a brief summary of only the main trends rather than a detailed description. Those who spend too much time on task 1 tend to write too much and include minor details from the information in the question. Remember, the instructions tell you to 'select information' to include. Try to train yourself to use the time limit to your advantage and help you focus on only the most important information.

### **What structure should I use for my summary?**

As with any formal writing, you should always begin with an introduction. However, as this is a short piece of writing, a complete paragraph is not necessary; an introductory sentence is sufficient. In some cases, where the visual information consists of several different elements (e.g. a chart and a table), it may be better introduce these in two separate sentences.

Even though this is a short task, the Task Achievement criterion tells us that, in order to achieve a high band, you must organise your answer into logical paragraphs and make sure that you support your description with accurate data. Thus, following your introduction, you should give a clear overview of the main trends and write one or two paragraphs giving the details that support your overview.

You cannot hope to achieve a clear, accurate, and logically organised summary of the information without spending a few minutes studying the information, and selecting the most relevant details to include, before you begin writing. Try to practise doing this as a quick activity 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 writing task 1. To answer the first, there is no 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 ‘the ending’ or final part of something:

### conclusion

*noun* • **UK**  /kən'klu:ʒən/ **US**  /kən'klju:ʒən/

**conclusion** *noun* (LAST PART)

 **C2** [C] **the final part of something:**

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 I often advise others to do the same simply to be sure they 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:**

When we are presenting and reporting data, 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 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.

We can sum up what you **must** do in writing task 1 as follows:

- you must write at least 150 words
- you must select the main features in the visual
- you must summarise the main features giving a clear overview of the main trends
- (if relevant) you must make comparisons between the main features

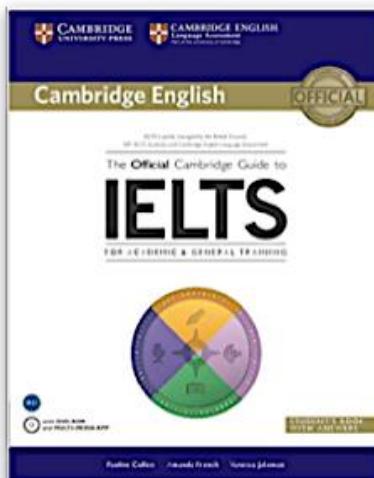
The last point tells us you need to make comparisons **only if** this is relevant to the question. So, if your task is to describe a process, or a flowchart, then a comparison may not be

necessary.

It is very important to note that, if your own list of what you ‘must’ do in task 1 includes anything extra, then you are effectively writing your own version of the Task Achievement criterion and so your practice may not be helpful.

<b>IELTS Writing</b>	
<b>1 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing a chart, table or graph</b>	p91
1 Understanding graphs, tables and charts	p93
2 More complex charts	p96
3 Improving your Task Achievement score	p97
<b>2 Academic Writing Task 1 – Comparing and contrasting graphs and tables</b>	p100
1 Avoiding repetition	p100
2 Comparing and contrasting data	p102
3 Grammatical Accuracy – describing numbers and figures accurately	p104
<b>3 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing diagrams</b>	p106
1 Understanding a diagram	p106
2 Describing a process – coherence and cohesion	p107
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

In The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS, there are 4 units (21 pages) of exercises devoted to each type of writing task 1, including how to write about maps, diagrams and different types of charts. (see pages 91-112). You can find information about GT writing task 1 on pages 113-118)



You can also find more help for writing task 1 in my other books: Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS, Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced, and Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate.

### What language should I use in writing task 1?

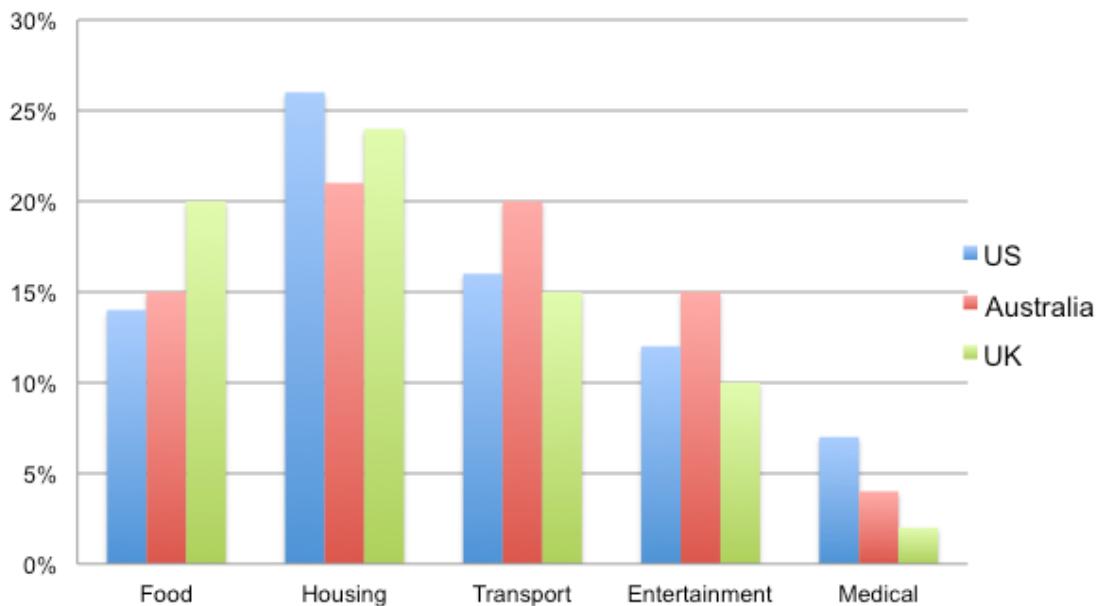
For a more detailed explanation of the most common language problems in writing task 1, look back at chapters 4 and 5. A further note I will make here is that people often think of writing task 1 in terms of describing data, a map, or a process etc. However, every writing task has a topic, and it is your ability to report on that topic in an impersonal way that is being assessed. You may need to do this using the language of data and numbers, or by explaining how something is made, or how something has changed over time. But the same problems related to vocabulary, and the need to study a wide variety of general topics apply 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. Here is the writing task:

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.

**Household Expenses**



And this 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 accurately. Below you will find the sample answer I wrote and shared for this same task. You can find many more examples like this on my IELTS Weekly with Pauline Cullen Facebook page by looking through the photos on the page.

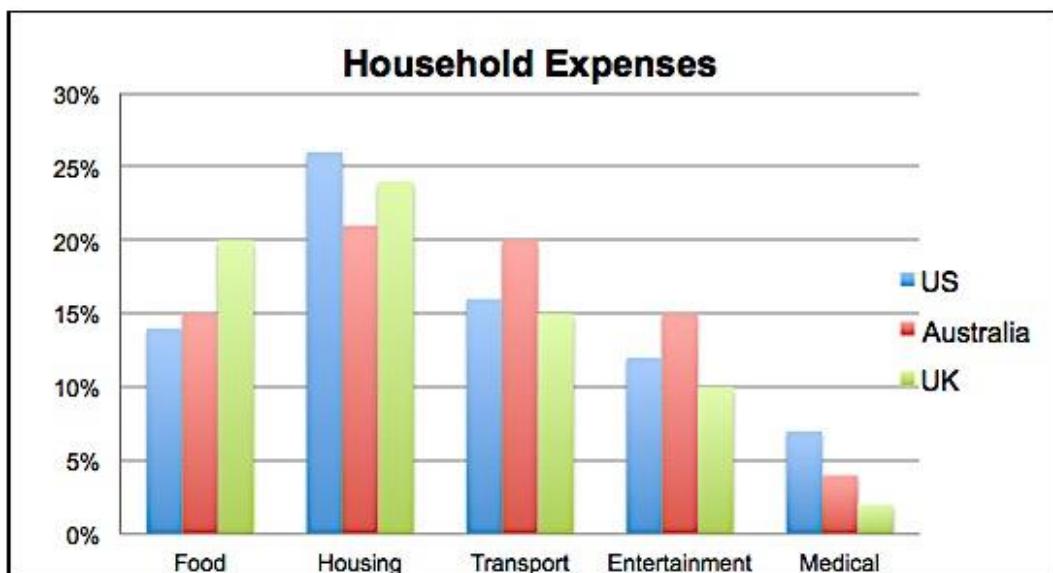
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twitter: @CullenPauline

***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.



#### Sample Answer

The bar chart compares household expenditure in five different categories, in three countries. Overall, households in these countries spend the greatest proportion of their budget on housing, while medical costs are the lowest expense. However, if we look at the three countries in more detail, there are some noticeable differences in terms of spending.

Firstly, while accommodation is by far the greatest expense in the US, in both the UK and Australia it is only slightly greater than the cost of food. Secondly, transportation in Australia makes up 20% of the total budget, which is only slightly less than their housing costs and is equal to the food costs in the UK. Entertainment is also a more significant expense in Australia compared to the other countries, with households there spending up to 10% of the budget in this sector, a third more than in the UK.

So, while there are generally similarities, the UK spends most on food, the US spends the most on housing and medical costs, while Australian families spend the most on Transport and entertainment.

(178 words)

## Is it ok to repeat the same vocabulary and grammatical structures in task 1?

In task 1, you are given a lot of information in the test question. For your introductory sentence, and throughout your answer, it is important not to simply copy the information or the exact words from the question. Nevertheless, some key words do not have commonly used synonyms. For example, if you are given information about a hospital, then you would need to use that same word in your answer. Similarly, you should not try to replace words like 'pie chart', or 'table', and even the verb 'show,' which often appears in the question because it is the most natural verb to use. Rather than trying to replace **every** word in the question, it is often better to simply try to rephrase it. You can do this by changing some of the words, or the word order, 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 can't rewrite this without using some of the same words, but we can make sure that it is different, like this:

***The two maps show how a village called Stokeford changed between 1930 and 2010.***

As I mentioned earlier, a common problem that I see is people trying very hard to avoid using the verb 'show', but this is often the most natural or accurate verb to use. If you look for synonyms for the verb 'show' you will find a long list of verbs, but a list of words cannot give you enough information. On page 10, you will find an image from my Facebook page that shows why many of these alternatives are not appropriate for most writing task 1 questions.

## I am worried that my answer sounds repetitive

As we saw in chapters 5 and 6, your writing will also be assessed based on the language that you use in your answer. If your language is repetitive, both in terms of the vocabulary you use, and the structures you use, then this will lower your score. Authentic IELTS writing tasks have several different elements that force you to use a variety of structures and vocabulary in your summary. If you look at the writing task I shared on the previous page, you will see that you need to compare the way that money is spent in 3 different countries and on 5 different household needs. Describing this involves writing about food, accommodation, transport, entertainment and medical costs.

However, many of the free 'IELTS' test questions you can find online force you to write in a repetitive way, because they are too narrow in their focus and do not contain enough variety. For example, a task that compares the number of books borrowed from 4 different libraries will force you to only write sentences about how many books were borrowed. I don't know many synonyms for 'books' 'libraries' or 'borrowing' that can be used naturally. Thus, your answer to a question like this will force you to practise being repetitive (see chapter 11 for more problems with resources like this). As with all parts of the test, it is important to look for

authentic, well-written IELTS test material when it comes to useful and beneficial test practice.

### **How can I practise for 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 within 20 minutes).

When practising for 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 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 a percentage or number. Ask a friend to listen to the recording and to 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 friend or partner who can do this, listen to the recording yourself a few weeks later to see if you can recreate the main trends using only your description. If you are not happy with the result, then repeat the exercise until you are.

You can use this same idea to help practise the specific language needed to 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 they are confused at any point, then perhaps your language is not precise enough? This can be a good way to see what gaps there are in your language.

You can go on to write out your description in full then edit it and make any changes or corrections. 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.

## Words often misused in task 1 as synonyms for 'show'

### Show and Tell

**Indicate** = shows that something is true

**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)

**Tell** = give information (n.b. it needs an object – tell someone something)

**Indicate** = show 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

### 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.

## WRITING TASK 2

### The aim of writing task 2

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 about writing task 2:

- You will be given a topic and a question (NB 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.

Many people tell me that this is not enough information. They would actually like these broad ideas to be much more detailed, and so much narrower, which thus makes preparation for the test easier. But such descriptions of the task **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 narrower descriptions of the test might seem convenient, these will not accurately describe the 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.

### What does task 2 consist of?

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 the following 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. I have seen several examples recently where people have misunderstood the language of the question, so pay close attention to any phrases that are included to help you.

Secondly, the initial statements give you something to react to and form an opinion about. Ignoring these statements will mean you lose marks in Task response. The idea that the initial statements are merely background information comes from examples that do not reflect the actual test. Someone recently sent me the following example, which has several key problems.

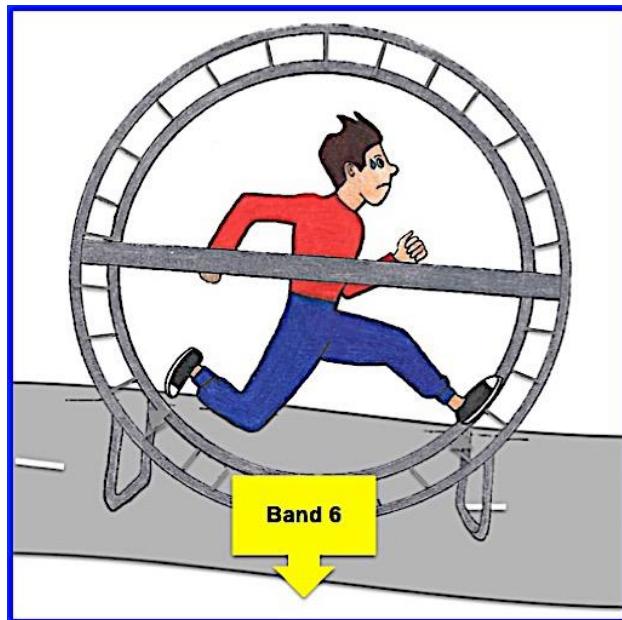
**These days, many university courses are offered through the internet. Some people think that online teaching has more advantages than conventional classroom teaching or lectures, while others claim that there are significant disadvantages.**

**Do the benefits of online teaching outweigh the disadvantages?**

Firstly, the question is not linked to the initial statements, so you could easily write an answer to this without referring to them, which will affect your Task response score. Secondly, the topic itself is confusing. It begins by talking about university courses being offered online, then changes to talking about teaching, and whether online teaching has more advantages or disadvantages. Because of this confusion in the question, your answer is also likely to be confusing, which will affect your Coherence and cohesion score. Not only is this topic unclear, but it is also unfair, because the vast majority of candidates have no experience of teaching or the impact the internet has had on this profession.

The image below shows how using materials like this can mean that you are practising writing at band 6, because you are practising writing in a confusing way and ignoring part of the task:

Task response	
Band 6	Band 7
<p><i>This is what you are doing wrong.</i></p> <p>1. addresses all parts of the task, although <b>some parts may be more fully covered than others.</b></p> <p>2. presents a relevant position, although <b>the conclusions may be unclear or repetitive.</b></p> <p>3. presents relevant main ideas, but <b>some may be inadequately developed / unclear</b></p>	<p><i>This is what you must do.</i></p> <p>1. addresses <b>all parts of the task.</b></p> <p>2. <b>presents a clear position throughout</b> the response.</p> <p>3. presents, <b>extends and supports main ideas</b>, but there may be a tendency to overgeneralize and/or supporting ideas may lack focus.</p>



**In my experience, many candidates are working very hard to stay at band 6.  
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.

Both of these together make up your task

**More and more universities now have courses online and students are spending less time in the classroom.**

**Do the benefits of this development outweigh the disadvantages?**

This question helps show you how to approach **giving your position on the very specific topic you have been given**.

In the version above, the initial statement now relates to something you would have experience of, and so is much fairer. The question also makes it very clear what your focus should be and the task is very clear. Always look for authentic test practice materials if you need to achieve a high score in the test.

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

Let us again remember that the aim of this test is to show that you have the writing skills needed for university study. This means you need to develop the same writing skills that a

native-speaker high school student 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 when I was struggling to write my French essays. Even though she was writing in her native tongue, she had not yet developed the writing skills needed to produce an effective essay. Interestingly, many of her early problems reflected those I see in non-native speaker essays; she would write rambling sentences that covered many lines; 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 fill in a page.

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 4-6 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 writing skills she needs and, perhaps even more importantly, 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 my daughter's most recent 6-page essay in answer to this question: 'How appropriate are low interest rates at a time of high inflation?'

~~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 6-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. Notice that native-speaker writers also struggle to use commas accurately. There is also an important element to the structure of her paragraph, which I will refer to later. For the moment, let us look at the key problems in writing task 2.

### Task response

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 the following key problems with Task response.

### Problem 1 – 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 some of the most common writing test claims that I am asked to verify. The first three in the list relate to the idea of how to answer specific question ‘types’, which is one way 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 positive or negative development” <b>we should only agree on one side of the argument and never discuss the other side.</b> ”
2	But in the question type “to what extent do you agree/disagree” we could consider both sides of the argument <b>as the question states this phrase “to what extent”</b>
3	The other concern is that 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> And other examiners say that in order to get band 7+, you have to summarize the two main points in the thesis.
5	“Also, 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 ....” <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 any question 'type'. The vast majority of the band 6 or 6.5 answers I see are written by people following this idea of different question types. The claim is so pervasive that many think that I made a mistake in 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, who was 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; 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 these 'types' of question '**must be answered**' in the Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS, the Cambridge Practice Test books, or indeed in any books written by real IELTS experts, 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 false 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 after many attempts.

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

**Key idea:**

There are no special 'types' of essay question in IELTS. Task 2 is a discursive essay in which you must make your own position clear, i.e. an essay which requires a careful blend of discussion and opinion.

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

The difference between these questions is that the former is used in the Academic module while the latter are used in General Training. As far as I can tell, there appears to be a common misconception that these questions are asking you to write something called '**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 true. This question is merely asking you to consider the issue you are given, 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 every issue 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**'. In fact,

you must do that to achieve band 7 in Task response. This mistake causes candidates to remain stuck at band 6 because they ‘address all parts of the task although **some parts may be more fully covered than others.**’ (Band 6 Task response). If you know someone who persists in believing this, please ask them to show you where this information is in the criteria used to assess your answer. Nothing is being hidden from you, which is a common excuse used to help spread myths about the test.

A similar problem happens with the essay type that someone has decided to call ‘**a discussion essay.**’ For these, I am frequently told that, ‘**You must not give your opinion.**’ This idea is even more damaging 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 (i.e. ‘**you must write your opinion in the introduction**’) 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 table). Your position is made clear throughout by your argument, and your language. Reread the chapters on Vocabulary and Grammar to understand how to do this. Remember, this is a test of how skillfully you can use language to clearly and precisely express your ideas.

### 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.**

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, and practise, 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:

You must go into every test with the aim of discussing the very specific issue you are given in a balanced way while making your own position on that issue clear.

## Problem 2 – The thesis statement and 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. There are different ways to write an essay, and there is never only one correct ‘answer’ to any essay question. When it comes to organisation, and essay-writing conventions, these can vary between different English-speaking countries. Thus, the US and Canadian approach tends to differ to that of the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. As IELTS is an international test, it is very important that all of these different approaches are accepted. This idea provides the answer to many of the questions I am asked about where to write your opinion, or your ‘thesis statement.’

I often avoid using terms like ‘thesis statement’ or ‘topic sentence’ 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 these terms mean. However, as so many people ask me about these, 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 between different academics within institutions (in the reference section you can find a link to a discussion about this). A thesis statement is a sentence that can be used to do any of the following: state your main ‘thesis’ (in other words, 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. In spite of this, many people appear to see a thesis statement very narrowly as ‘**the sentence that gives your opinion.**’ As you can see, it is in fact much broader than this.

### 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 Facebook. 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 probably 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. 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 clear conclusions, and make your position clear throughout your essay.

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 (which briefly introduces the topic)
- write 2 or 3 body paragraphs (which present, and explain your main points)
- finish with a conclusion (which 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; this is dependent on only one thing: your ideas on the day.

**Key idea:**

The structure for every task 2 essay should be:

- **an introduction** (which briefly introduces the topic)
- **2 or 3 body paragraphs** (which present, and explain your main points)
- **a conclusion** (which 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 or sentences there should be in each paragraph, or where to write your thesis statement, tend to think in terms of ticking boxes instead of communicating ideas. 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 this '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 criteria should signal this very clearly.

However, 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. But there is an added problem in that many focus too much on trying to please the examiner. Often, when I answer a question about the test, people will then ask '**Yes, but, which one will the examiner prefer?**' A follower from Iran recently sent me 4 thesis statements asking me to tell him, 'Which would achieve the highest score?' As this is such a high-stakes test, and the result carries all of your hopes and dreams inside it, I realise that this is difficult advice to hear, but if your main aim is to try to please the examiner then it is likely you will not write in a natural or persuasive way, and so you will continue to remain stuck. You have

to care a little less about the examiner, and focus on yourself, and your own ideas, in order to achieve the result you need.

**Key idea:**

Don't write to try to please the examiner, write because you have something to say.

The following 4 'thesis 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.

(The language problems are shown **in red**. Can you correct them?)

In assessing each statement, we must consider that these were all written as part of an introduction, so they must help perform the function of an introduction, in other words, help introduce your essay to the reader. So, we need to consider whether these sentences explain the writer's thesis and also belong in an introduction. Sentences 1, 2 and 4 certainly appear to do this, but I would change the end of sentence 2 to 'for *several* reasons,' or 'for two *important* reasons.' The first because this is less definite, and the second to indicate why there are only two reasons given in the essay (for the same reason, sentence 4 would appear odd if it said, 'There are two problems...').

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

With example 3, this 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. Adding an extra 'magic ingredient' will never 'boost' your score. This example consists of two sentences containing three main ideas. As a result, example 3 is closer to a very short body paragraph and looks out of place in an introduction. Attempting to cram these three ideas into the introduction has created a cohesion problem that would lower, not raise, your score.

Remember, there is only one correct approach to every IELTS writing task 2 question, and

that is to write an essay that will meet the criteria described in Task response, in other words, one in which you present a balanced, logical argument, and make your position clear.

### Problem 3 – 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 who are 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 often 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.

### Problem 4 – A lack of ideas

People often try to 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 like this, and during the test, they simply complete the sentences based on the topic in the question. I link associate this approach with the notion of writing ‘a topic sentence.’

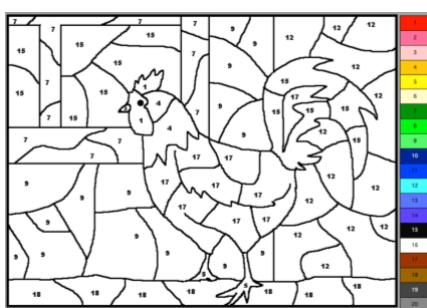
Personally, I dislike the term ‘topic sentence’ even more than ‘thesis statement.’ Again, I find it unhelpful; telling someone to begin your paragraph with ‘a topic sentence’ is as helpful as saying ‘write an idea.’ As we saw with thesis statements, the resulting sentences often do not present the main idea of the paragraph, and so do not perform the promised function. This is likely to be because of the use of pre-learned phrases, which candidates use without fully understanding. The origin of these has perhaps been teaching exercises commonly used to help students at bands 4 and 5 to ‘get started’ with 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. These templates consist of phrases to begin each paragraph and act as a framework for the students’ ideas. This is similar to attaching training wheels to a bike to help a child learn to ride. But the same technique will not help you to achieve a score above band 6.

Learning templates like this may make you feel safer, but 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. This is like a chef arriving at a cooking competition with a can of soup and using it even if the given task is to make a cake. If your strategy or approach to the writing test is to focus on quantities (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 are likely to stay stuck at band 6 or 6.5. Candidates who rely on these patterns, appear to ignore parts of the question or not to have read it at all - the formula they have invested so much time in learning takes priority over

reading and answering the question carefully. Thus, candidates like this refer to 'both of these views' when only one view has been given. Alternatively, they will begin their second body paragraph with, 'On the other hand' even if they are not introducing a contrasting argument or idea, or 'Secondly,' when the paragraph is not a second argument following on from the first paragraph.

Thinking of language first, then trying to fit an idea into that language is like putting the cart before the horse. Clearly, any test that can be mastered using a simple 'cut-and-paste' technique like this would not be a reliable one. Attempting to learn and then apply a fixed structure like this to your answers would only work if IELTS truly was a test with only a few possible essay questions. In reality, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of possible variations on IELTS questions. Time and again, I have seen that using a fixed approach to answering question 'types', as well as set phrases used as a paragraph 'template', results in an answer that does not respond in the right way to the test question, which is a common factor in band 6.5 writing. Using a fixed response 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.

### Don't take a paint-by-numbers approach to your essay writing



#### Key idea:

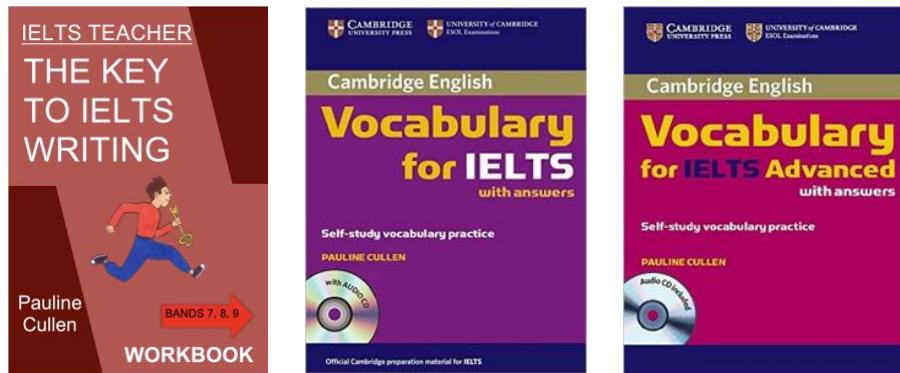
If you want to achieve band 7 or above, you **must** think of ideas first, before thinking of the language you need to express those ideas. Using a formula means you cannot write in a flexible way and respond appropriately to the task you are given.

### How can I get ideas for my essay?

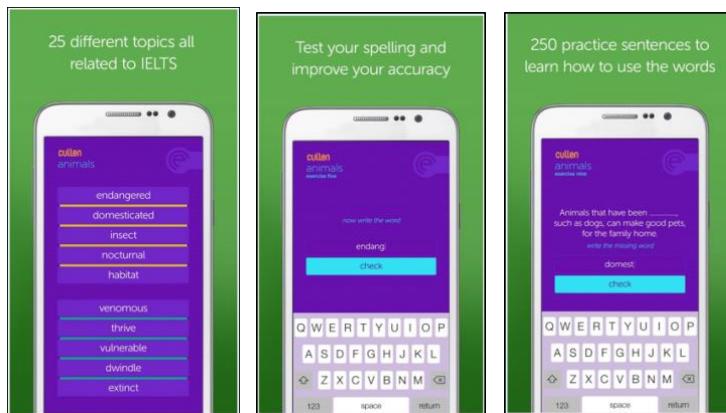
Like my daughter, native-speaker writers also have to come to the realization that what you write matters much more than the amount that you write. In fact, people who teach writing skills to native speakers often have to address the same problems that I raised in the vocabulary chapter: those with few ideas often try to disguise this by using long, confusing sentences and fancy words. When you write more simply, your ideas are clearly revealed, and as a result, those ideas matter even more.

With my daughter's writing, she can only now produce long essays in a timed situation because she knows her subject: **she is writing about what she knows.** In IELTS, candidates from all cultures and all fields of study have to be catered for and given an equal opportunity to show their writing skills. We can create lists of broad topics that are accessible to all, but within each topic, there are many subtopics and many different issues that can arise. I will be teaching you how to think, plan, and write, as well as giving lots of

practical exercises in my next book: '**The Key to IELTS Writing Workbook.**' And you can find all of the topics relevant to IELTS in my two Vocabulary books:



and my vocabulary teaching apps:  
**Cullen IELTS Vocab 7+ and 8+**



### A lack of ideas often leads to repetitive writing

Look at the following task 2 question I posted on my Facebook page, and the introduction and first body paragraph produced by one of my followers:

**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.**

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words.

### **Part of a Band 6 candidate response**

*People almost always try to enhance their skills in their areas of interests or hobbies such as playing certain musical instrument. Some people argue that by education and practicing anyone could reach a professional level in his or her hobbies; whereas, others believe that inherited talent is the sole responsible for achieving any advanced level in any skill. This essay will discuss both of these views, before reaching a reasonable*

conclusion.

*On one side of the argument, some people are of the opinion that superb people in any field reached that level because of their hard work and the perfect education they got. This means that the more practice people have on any skill and the better education they have, the more outstanding level they will reach. It is obvious that supporters of this idea rule out the role of genetics and inherited talents as a determining factor for brilliants, and they focus only on hard work.*

There are several language problems, but if we correct these we can see that there is also a key problem in terms of the ideas presented (I have used different colours to show this). The introduction restates the question, which is exactly what you must do in the test. However, the first body paragraph also simply restates the same two ideas:

*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; whereas, 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.*

This means that there is no progression, or ‘development’ of ideas. This 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.’ While 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.

**Key idea:**

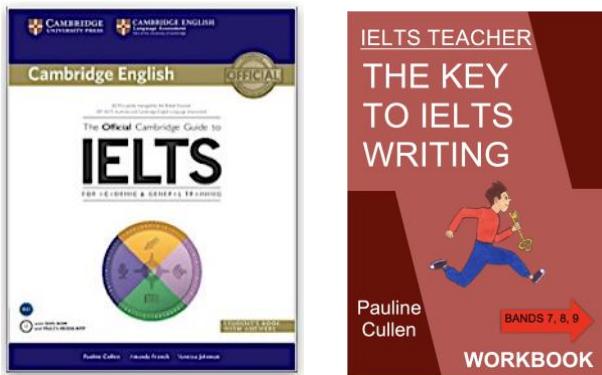
To achieve band 7 or above, you **must** present, extend, and support your own ideas and views on the topic you are given.

**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 second problem can occur if your education did not train you to be an independent learner who was encouraged to question ideas. In many countries, teachers give their students all of the information they require, and students must then simply regurgitate this rather than questioning or discussing it. Both of these issues can affect your approach to writing task 2, so it is important to stop for a moment and consider whether this describes your own background.

Think for a moment how you would approach an answer to the above essay question in your own language – would you talk around the topic, or would you present a logical, linear argument? If the latter is true, then it is important to be aware that you must train yourself to write essays differently, and not simply to focus on language learning. In **The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS**, there are 4 chapters devoted to showing you how to develop an argument like this. My next book, '**The Key to IELTS Writing Workbook**', will also offer plenty of practical exercises to help you develop these skills yourself.



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

In the extract I gave earlier, you may have noticed that I removed the final sentence from the end of the introduction. Some people refer to these as 'scope' sentences. Writing such sentences in your introduction may be a US convention, or it may be that these sentences have come from EAP study. My view is that I would only expect to write something like this in the introduction to a very long document or dissertation, or in the abstract of a research paper. 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, they are a waste of 13 or more words that you could use much more effectively elsewhere.

### Using examples

The key issues surrounding the use of examples appear to be whether or not these must be 'academic' and whether or not it is appropriate to invent them. Again, to find the answer, let us remember the aim of the test, and the instructions given for the task. The test aims to find out if you have the writing skills needed to undertake higher education and, as we have seen, the test must cater for candidates from all fields. It is not possible to be aware of

research studies related to every possible topic that can occur in the test. Because of this, you are not expected to use academic references, or hard evidence, to support of your ideas. To help counter this, 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, therefore, 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 that I see in essays people send me.

Here are a few common 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.](#)’

‘The [American theory of scientific education plays a good example here.](#)’

(NB ‘The American Theory of scientific education’ and ‘[plays a good example here](#)’ are both examples of poor collocation.)

The last sentence in particular I have seen many times. These ‘facts’ and statistics are all clearly invented. This is clear from the fact that the statistics and details often sound rather odd, particularly ‘the American theory of scientific education.’ When you attempt to create fake facts like this, you add an extra, unnecessary step to the writing process: inventing feasible, relevant statistics to support an idea. Perhaps in an effort to save time in the test, people appear to learn these beforehand and then force them to fit into their essay. Unsurprisingly, this is as unsuccessful as using the paint-by-numbers approach mentioned earlier. In every example I have seen, the result is not convincing, and worse, the examples are often not relevant to the idea. So, people write these simply to tick the box next to ‘write an example in each paragraph’ rather than to support their ideas.

Invented examples like this do not help to develop your ideas, and as such they will not help you to reach band 7. 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**

The essays I see generally have at least two very clearly invented examples. When these are not statistics, they are examples involving family members or friends. So, these sentences will always begin ‘For example, my uncle / my cousin / a friend of mine...’ If you happen to have some concrete example either 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, examples like this work best when they are authentic; when these are invented simply to fill in a gap in the paragraph, they are generally not effective. If you don’t have experience related to the question, then there are other ways to support your ideas.

To show this, look at the following extract from a recent essay I received and my comment on the example. Again, I have corrected the language so that we can focus only on the ideas presented.

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:

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 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 concrete examples if they are relevant and help to 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 on Facebook are trained doctors. Even if they don't tell me this in the beginning, it usually becomes clear through the examples that they use, and a common problem I see in their writing 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. The writing task question was as follows:

**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 question, 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 using the video as an example. The following paragraph shows one of the attempts I received. The first is the writer's original version, this is followed by a corrected, less medical version

**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 video 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 can have a positive effect when treating people who are paralysed, or who have self-limiting beliefs that result in 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 uses very high-level vocabulary, the sentence structures and descriptions are overly complex, which causes confusion for the reader. In the vocabulary chapter I mentioned that you should avoid using 3 words when one would be better, and there are several examples of this here. I strongly advise you to reread that chapter if you have forgotten this important point.

For doctors, or anyone trying to use their specialist knowledge in the writing test, I think there is also a tendency for their examples to distract them. As a result, their ideas move further and further away from the very specific topic in the question, as we can see in the above example. Be careful to limit the medical language you use. Make sure to explain your ideas clearly, as though to a non-specialist, and only include them if they are truly relevant to the question.

**Key idea:**

If you are a doctor or a specialist in any field, remember to explain your ideas clearly, as though you are writing to someone who is not an expert in your field. Don't let your specialist knowledge distract you from the specific question you are given.

**Problem 4 - Misunderstanding the level of bands 7 to 9**

Several of the people who have contacted me have spent many hundreds of dollars on their IELTS preparation. In several cases, this included paying for writing correction services where they were told 'Your level is band 8' and given only minimal feedback on their writing mistakes. If your IELTS test result is telling you that your writing is band 6.5, yet these people are telling you that you are band 8, it is little wonder that so many people reach the conclusion that the test is cheating them. Feedback like this encourages you to have another go at the test, even though your language level has not developed enough to achieve a higher score. Part of this problem may come from people who do not fully understand the different band levels, or how writing assessment works. Here are several examples that show this.

The first comes from a website which promises to show you how to reach band 8. The website tries to illustrate the difference between band 6 and band 8. According to the website:

**This is Band 6 writing:**

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

**This is what Band 8 writing looks like:**

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.

In actual 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 first 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 so-called '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 native speaker, band 9 language looks like this:

Band 6 or 6.5 language:	Band 9 language:
<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>

The website tells people they must write sentences that are as long and complex as possible to achieve band 8. If we look more closely at the 'Band 8' sentence, we can see why sentences like this create so much confusion for the reader, and actually ensure a band 6.5 score. Here, I have highlighted the main idea in the sentence. Notice how many other ideas have been added in between. This has the effect of hiding this main idea and making it very difficult to follow (a good definition of band 6 coherence and cohesion problems).

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 make it easy for the reader to get lost and lose the thread of the message. The message is made particularly difficult to follow through the use of so many different connectors, namely: and, which, both, such as, as well as, and. A 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, helping them to develop life-skills such as problem-solving, and enhancing their intellectual development. (23 words)

Compare the band 6.5 'audio and visual games which are designed to be played on the computer' with the much more natural 'computer-based games.' Rather than 'boosting' your score, adding these unnecessary words will lower your score as the effect is to make your language unnatural and your ideas unclear. Hopefully you can see that the shorter, simpler version is not basic or simple at all, but it is a lot easier to understand.

A second example from such sites is to give advice like this:

1. You have to have 6 instances of collocation (Adverb + Adjective + Noun: a highly contentious issue) one in the introductory paragraph, two in each body and one in the concluding)
2. You have to have at least two instances of inversion.
3. You have to have two instances of reduction.
4. You have to have two instances of conditional inversion.
5. You have to have, at the very least, three instances of passive sentences.

This list again shows a lack of understanding of how assessment works and even how language works (it certainly shows a lack of understanding of collocation). Your examiner is looking for clear communication or ideas, not counting, or even looking for any of the things mentioned in this list. What is more, just as we saw with the topic sentence and thesis statement problems, if these appear in your essay simply to tick a box in a list like this, then you can be sure that they will not be used effectively or naturally. Following advice like this means you are working very hard to stay at band 6 or 6.5

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

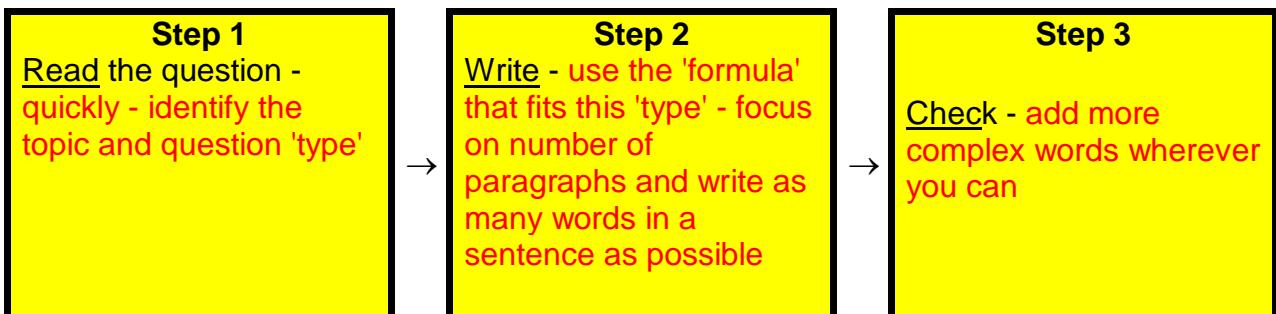
**Key idea:**

Essays written by higher level candidates are not complex and difficult to read. They achieve a high band because their ideas are relevant and easy to follow.

**How should I practise for writing task 2?**

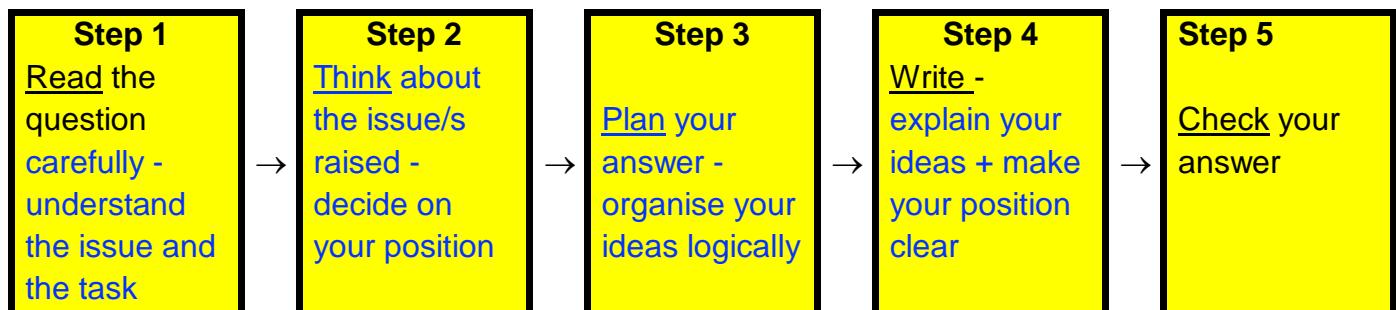
Writing an essay is a process, and candidates at Bands 6 and below tend to see that process as follows:

**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 these automatically and relatively quickly in the test. Think of this as improving your fluency in writing so that, like my daughter, you can develop your own IELTS writing voice. Again, 'The Key to IELTS Writing Workbook' will offer 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 through 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**

It is a good idea to train yourself to think carefully about what the test question means. Too often I see people missing an important point in the question, and the result is an essay that loses a lot of marks in Task response. Be careful not to make a quick decision about what the question means. Two essays I saw recently are a good example of this. One was in answer to a question about increasing anti-social behaviour in young people. But rather than writing about them playing music too loudly, or destroying property, he had written about young people being shy or not wanting to socialise. Another essay was about whether parents or schools should teach children to be good members of society. And the writer had interpreted this as learning how to eat in expensive restaurants and talk in a well-mannered way. A good way to work on this is to find someone to work as a partner in your essay writing. Try to discuss the question and what you think it means before you begin writing. Seeing the question from another point of view can be very helpful.

### **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 it is very important to read widely on topics that are related to IELTS. Through reading widely, you will learn how other people think and feel about different topics or issues.

Try to find an article or book that presents a position on a topic (use the suggested resources at the end of this book to help with this). As you read, think about the writer's position. Can you briefly explain what the writer believes or thinks? If you can, then they have made their position clear. Look back at the text a second time to see how they did this; think about whether it was through the choice of vocabulary or through the use of grammatical structures. 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 help you to learn how to use such phrases accurately, but it will also give you a context to help you to remember the phrase itself.

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

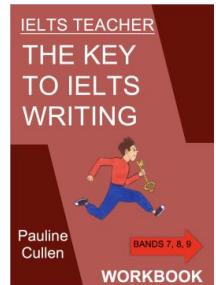
way you should also approach the thinking stage in the test. Try to train yourself to think on a small scale at first, then build up to a larger scale. So, your thoughts would gradually develop, like this:

How do I feel about this issue? How does this affect:

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

You should find that the 'large-scale' ideas you have help you to write your topic sentences (the main point or idea within each paragraph). While the 'small-scale' ideas will help to provide your support and examples.

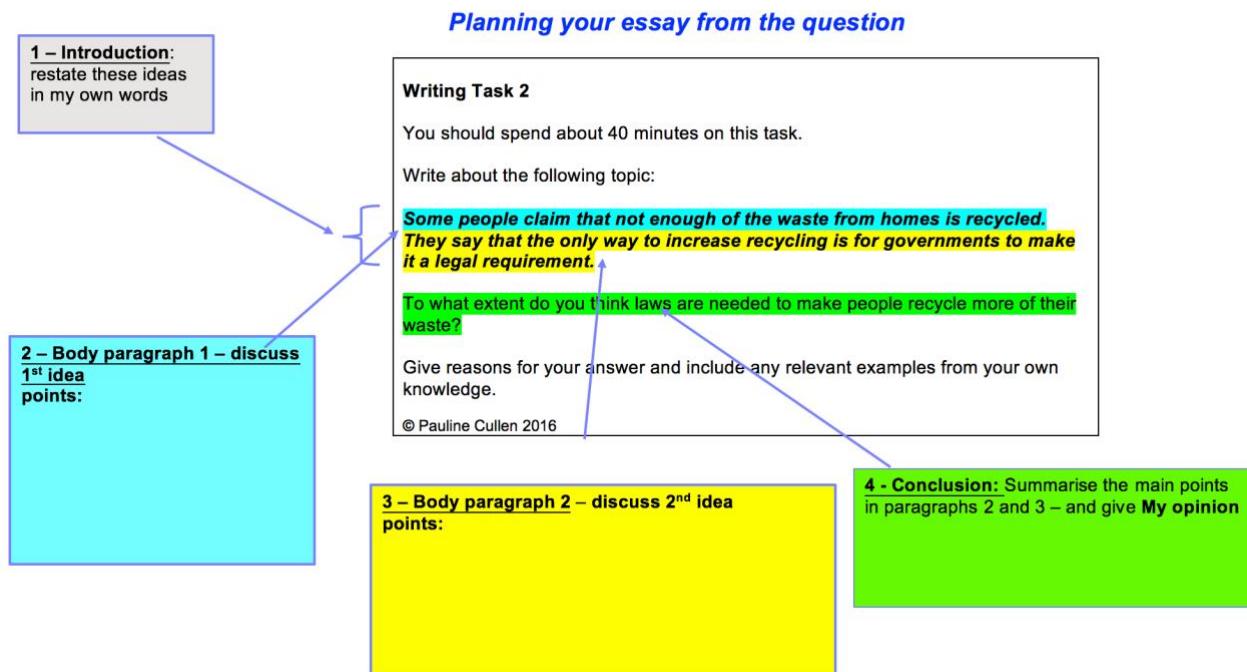
Again, in **The Key to IELTS Writing Workbook**, I will be teaching you how to do this, so that it becomes a natural part of your writing.



The only way to do this type of thinking quickly in the test is to get into a habit of doing it often, and by making sure you work on a wide range of topics. If you do this often enough, 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 listen to my advice about writing a plan and then ignore it and remain stuck at band 6.5. The most common excuse I hear is 'I don't have time to plan.' However, if you need band 7 or above, **you cannot afford to write without a clear plan**. Because of this common complaint, I devised the following quick method of planning using the essay question you are given on the day. This is how it works:



The benefit of this method of planning is that it forces you to **cover every part of the question in a logical, balanced way** and ensures that you **complete the task**. Every time someone contacts me to say 'I finally got band 7.5' I ask which advice they found the most useful. A candidate in Australia, who went on to score band 8 in writing, said that this advice about planning quickly was by far the most useful on the day of the test.

**Key idea:**

A lack of planning is a key reason for candidates to remain at band 6 or 6.5 in writing.

To practice your planning, look back at all of the past questions you have answered. Looking only at your answer, try to write a plan of the main ideas it contains. Can you see any problems in the ideas you used? Are there any areas that you did not discuss? Or did you include ideas that are not relevant? Now look at the question and write a new plan using the method I have suggested above.

To achieve a good score in Coherence and cohesion, your ideas must be logically organised into clear paragraphs. Try to see your paragraphs as a 'map' that the reader uses to follow your argument. Rewrite your essay until you are satisfied with your Task response and your coherence and cohesion.

**Stage 3 - Writing your essay – the missing link in IELTS writing**

Stephen King also 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. Paragraphs are 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. 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’. Look back at her paragraph to see how her final sentence does this.

The paragraphs in my daughter’s essays are extremely long, and the focus of her test is not on language and communication 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. Many of the band 6 and 6.5 essays I see simply repeat the same idea as the question, which they have already rephrased in their introduction. The point you will make will be new and will be based on your own response to the question.

This means that, for each paragraph, you should

- make a **Point**
- **Explain** this point
- **Expand** on this point or give a relevant **Example** to support it
- **Link** this idea back to the question

I often think of this final idea as ‘the missing link’ as it is usually missing from band 6 or 6.5 answers. Without this link, a paragraph feels unfinished or incomplete – the reader isn’t sure what the paragraph is aiming to show, or how it fits in with the essay. This link explains the relevance of the point you are making.

The final sentence of the previous 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 does not link the main point to the question, which was about whether there are only disadvantages to the use of computer games. In my version, I made the link very clear: ‘**Thus, we could argue that video games can actually serve a very useful purpose and are not always detrimental to our health.**’ To practice this, look back at your previous essays to see if you have linked your ideas to the question. If not, then change your final sentences to make this link clear.

## Mechanical writing

Nevertheless, this should not be seen as a quick ‘trick’ that will suddenly ‘boost’ your score. What I am suggesting is easy to say, but it requires skill to carry out effectively. Skill that must be practised and developed. 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. Thus, you should see it as a way to train yourself to write in a logical and linear way. If you try to simply follow a set structure like this, then you may not respond in a natural way to the task you are given, and the result can be what is described in band 6 Coherence and cohesion as ‘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 when needed, while the other operates either the clutch or the brake. Learner drivers struggle with this initially and have to really focus on these basic actions. Even then, the car will often jerk or hop, and their driving is not smooth. But after a lot of practice, these moves become automatic, and skilled drivers operate these pedals without thinking about them at all. Only once the actions have become automatic and natural does the car travel 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.

Try to practise your writing using a structure like this until it becomes automatic and natural for you. Then, during the test, you will be able to focus on where your argument is going and adapt to the specific question you are given on the day. But also try to vary your approach.

To help with ideas, 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. A band 9 native speaker can often achieve these things in a very natural and subtle way, and this is the skill you should aim to develop if you need to achieve a higher band.

### Key idea:

The key steps in each paragraph you write are: make a point, expand on it, and show how it links to the question.

This level of writing **can** be achieved through deliberate practice of these skills. You should try to do this on a daily basis if possible. Try spending 15 minutes writing 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 and 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.

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. To reach a high level in any language, it is important to see how different language skills are linked. So, you can find more help for your writing in the chapters about listening and speaking.

When you have deliberately practiced thinking of ideas, planning your answer, and writing paragraphs, you will be ready to practice writing complete essays. To achieve this within the time limit of the exam, you need to develop a level of fluency in writing that will only come from deliberate practice.

#### Stage 4 - Checking your essay

It is important to leave time at the end for checking your essay. The Official Guide, as well as **Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate** give you lots of practice with this. At this stage, you should check that your handwriting is clear. This image shows common problems caused by writing quickly. Make sure you are aware of your own handwriting problems so that when you are checking your writing you can look for these.

#### Common Handwriting Problems page 1

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

Original	Typed version
<p>First of all, I believe that one of the key reasons why people are increasingly buying private cars is the uneffectiveness and the poor 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 be using 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.</p>	<p>First of all, I believe that one of the key reasons why people are increasingly buying private cars is the uneffectiveness and the poor 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 be using 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.</p>

Common Handwriting Problems page 2

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

First of all, I believe that one of the key ~~reasons~~ why people are increasingly buying ~~private~~ cars is the ~~ineffectiveness~~ and ~~poor~~ performance of the public transport system. In my country, for instance, public buses ~~are~~ over crowded and unclean. Trains are also usually inaccurate with their schedules which puts people off using public ~~motor~~ transport. Working on these ~~problems~~ and ~~over~~ing in ~~more~~ using the public means of transport would encourage people to ~~be~~ ~~been~~ commuting by them rather than driving their ~~car~~ as it would save them the trouble of driving in the over crowded streets and the ~~how~~ consumed by traffic jams.

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', which also looks like the letter 'e'.

1) 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'.

## 1) Starting a word at the end of a line: if your handwriting is poor this makes it difficult for the reader (i.e. the IELTS examiner) to decipher individual letters and notice the 'dash' which indicates a word is not finished. As a result, it is also more difficult to follow your arguments and ideas.

It is very difficult to spot mistakes in your 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. It is much easier to spot problems in someone else's essay, and we are much more critical of someone else's work. Look back at the Grammar chapter to help identify common problems you have and try to vary the way you deal with these so that it doesn't become boring and repetitive. You may find the following ideas helpful:

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

Try to focus on the fossilized errors you know you have, such as the use of articles and plural or singular nouns, or typical spelling mistakes you make (see the appendix for a list of the most common spelling mistakes made in IELTS).

A good way to help work on your cohesion and repetition of 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, then this may be a good indicator of a

writing problem. Once you're more confident in your writing, practice 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. You must devote 40 minutes to task 2 in order to complete the task to your best ability. Moreover, writing task 2 is worth **double** the marks of task 1, and so you must aim to spend double the amount of time on your answer. Many people tell me that they begin with task 2 in order to make sure they don't become too engrossed in their task 1 answer and steal too much time for it. Another tip related to this try to find ways to save time in counting your answer. Your examiner will count your words, remember, and every word, whether long or short, is counted. You will be penalized if you do not write at least 150 words for task 1 and 250 words for task 2.

Make sure to 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. Write an essay and then count how many words are on each line – find the average and use this to help 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 – don't count any partial lines, e.g. at the end paragraph. Try this a few times to make sure you are meeting the target number and adjust your average if necessary. During the test, do still count your words if you have time, just to be on the safe side.