

IELTS™

Ensuring quality and fairness
in international language testing



www.ielts.org



UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

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Introduction

This booklet is intended for staff in educational institutions, government and commercial organisations that make use of the results of language tests, and for language teachers. It describes some of the main features of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and how these contribute to language assessment that is reliable, fair and relevant. For more information consult the detailed information available on the IELTS website www.ielts.org and in the references listed at the back of this booklet.



IELTS overview

IELTS assesses the language ability of people who need to study or work where English is the language used in communication. It provides an accurate, relevant assessment of language skills, based on well-established standards and covering the full range of ability from non-user to a very high level of proficiency. All results are reported on a clear nine-band scale that is easily understood by test users.

More than 1.5 million people a year are now using IELTS as the test that sets the standard throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. For a list of recognising institutions and the scores they require see <http://bandscore.ielts.org>

IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL). This unique collaboration ensures that IELTS remains a truly international English language test, designed with teaching and learning very much in mind. Cambridge ESOL takes responsibility for test design and production, while the British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia provide the network of exam centres around the world and provide the IELTS examiners.

IELTS assesses the four language skills – listening, reading, writing and speaking, with separate tests of each skill. Test takers can opt for either Academic or General Training versions of the tests, according to their personal reasons for taking IELTS.

The IELTS nine-band scale

9 Expert user	Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8 Very good user	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.
7 Good user	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6 Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5 Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4 Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3 Extremely limited user	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2 Intermittent user	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1 Non user	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0 Did not attempt the test	No assessable information provided.

Tests for the real world

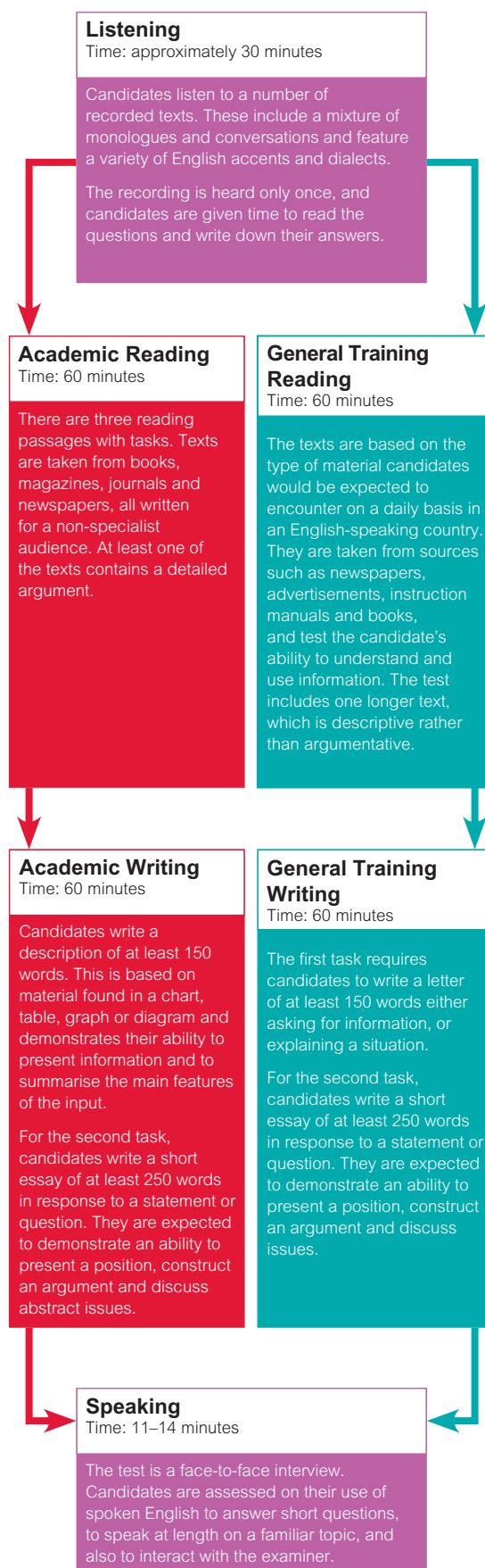
Test takers use IELTS to help them achieve their life goals. Depending on their needs, they are able to choose between two variants of the test – Academic IELTS and General Training IELTS.

Academic IELTS is suitable for people planning to study in higher education or seeking professional registration. This option assesses whether a test taker is ready to study or train in the medium of English and is a test of general academic English. Making effective use of written texts in academic work is a skill to be learnt at college or university, not one that students at all levels should be expected to possess on entry. For this reason, the IELTS tests reflect some features of academic language but do not aim to simulate academic study tasks in their entirety. This approach is widely supported by the institutions that recognise IELTS.

General Training IELTS is suitable for test takers planning to go to English-speaking countries to undertake non-academic training or work experience, or for immigration purposes. This option emphasises survival skills in a broad social and educational context.

IELTS tests balance the requirements of validity, reliability, impact and practicality, the four essential criteria which underpin all language assessments developed by Cambridge ESOL, in contexts that are relevant to the ways in which test takers will need to use English in their studies and working lives.

The IELTS partners work to help university admissions departments and other test users better understand the complex relationship between English language proficiency and subsequent academic and professional success. This includes building awareness of key influences on academic outcomes and other factors, such as provision of ongoing language and study skills and support for international students.



Strong educational impact

IELTS is run by three organisations, each with a strong educational focus. As such, IELTS is designed to have a positive educational impact – both in terms of the experience of learners once they reach higher education or employment, and in terms of the effect that the test itself has on the process of language teaching and learning.

The IELTS Impact Study Project is a programme of formal research stimulated by growing interest in the effects of large-scale tests on educational processes, and on society more generally. This research has confirmed that both teachers and learners believe that IELTS has a positive influence on the classroom and on the learning experience.

Carried out in collaboration with specialists at the University of Lancaster, the project has focused on four key issues:

- the content and nature of classroom activity
- the content and nature of teaching materials
- the views and attitudes of user groups
- the test-taking population and use of test results.

A full account of this work to date is published as volume 24 in the Studies in Language Testing series (Hawkey, 2006).

Testing integrated skills

IELTS draws on a long tradition of delivering tests with an integrated element. IELTS is a task-based integrated test covering the four skills.

The term ‘integrated’ can be applied in various ways. For example, profile scores on the nine-band scale in each of the four modules (listening, reading, writing and speaking) are reported separately but also contribute equally to an overall band score. Furthermore, although each module focuses on a particular skill, test tasks often entail the use of other skills and are thus ‘integrated’ to some degree. For example, in the Writing and Speaking modules, information which is read or heard helps shape the test taker’s own production.

Tasks in the Reading and Listening modules can involve note-taking, labelling, classification, and completion of tables or flow charts. It is important that any task (or test items) should be consistent with a likely focus for reading/listening and should encourage test takers to engage in appropriate cognitive processes. Such tasks are ‘integrated’ in terms of the relationship between the input and the cognitive processes they elicit. Validation studies help to confirm the match between task input, cognitive processing and task output.

The Writing and Speaking modules are also integrated in that they involve working with data or information provided. However, this is carefully controlled to ensure that the input does not require extensive or complex reading and listening. This is particularly important because a score for each skill is being reported and it would be unfair to test takers if their performance in one skill area was compromised by their ability in another.

Using separate tasks for each of the modules is a more equitable form of task design. It also makes it easier to control comparability of task difficulty across the many different test versions which are produced each year to meet the needs of the very large numbers of test takers, while ensuring appropriate security.

A full discussion of this issue is included in volume 19 of the series Studies in Language Testing (Taylor and Falvey, 2006).

Face-to-face Speaking test

Face-to-face Speaking tests are the most effective means of assessing speaking skills. A trained examiner is able to interact with the test taker and judge their ability to converse, and not simply to respond to spoken cues.

This approach to testing speaking is supported by a substantial body of academic research into test-taker language and behaviour (e.g. Lazaraton, 2002), which has been used to help validate and revise the assessment scales for the Speaking test.

A corpus of spoken language has been created for the IELTS Speaking test, using the large number of Speaking tests recorded each year. This is used for investigation and validation purposes relating to test format, task design, rating scales, examiner/rater behaviour, and processes for test monitoring and validation.

IELTS Speaking test – key points

- Face-to-face, one-on-one interview.
- 3 parts: Part 1 – Introduction and interview
Part 2 – Individual long turn
Part 3 – Two-way discussion.
- 11–14 minutes long.

Features:

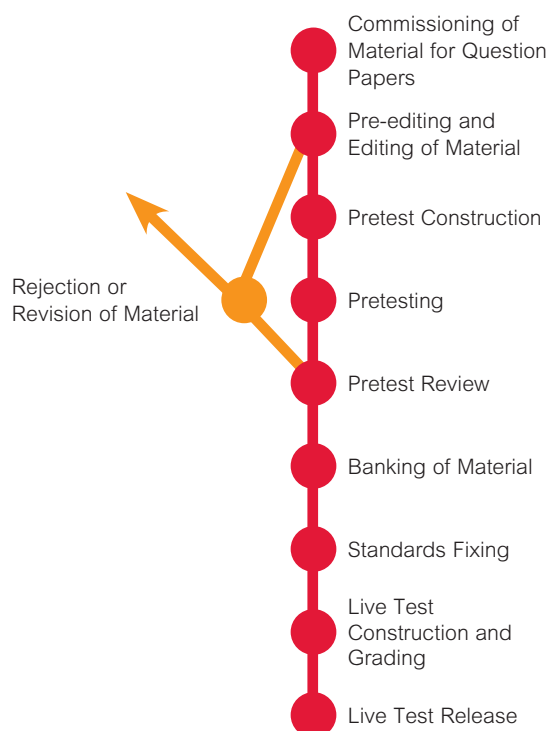
- contains a variety of tasks accessible to all levels and backgrounds
- includes assessment of social survival skills
- all tests recorded for quality control purposes
- achieves high reliability.

Production of test materials

IELTS test development is based on the ethical standards described in the ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) Code of Practice. This ensures appropriate qualitative standards for the production of test material involving the judgement of qualified professionals, and quantitative statistical standards for the selection of suitable test material, as well as the maintenance of consistent levels of test difficulty over time.

As part of the process, summarised in the diagram opposite, specialists in Australia, New Zealand and the UK are commissioned to provide test items which are then measured against quality standards. The commissioning, pre-editing and editing stages ensure that the material selected reflects the aims of the Academic and General Training Modules and is of proven quality.

The material is pretested with representative groups of test takers to ensure that it is appropriately challenging and that it discriminates between more and less able test takers. Finally, material is introduced to the live test in stages through a process known as Standards Fixing so that it can be related to the established IELTS metric.



The question paper production process for IELTS

Continual research-driven improvement

The success of IELTS rests on attention to four key test qualities – validity, reliability, impact and practicality. These four factors have been subjected to a great deal of research involving academics, administrators, teachers and other practitioners throughout the world over more than 30 years.

IELTS-related research activities are managed by Cambridge ESOL's Research and Validation Group and are co-ordinated as part of a coherent framework for ongoing test development and validation.

Advances in applied linguistics, language pedagogy, language assessment and technological capabilities constantly challenge test developers to review, refine and reshape their approaches to test design, development, delivery and evaluation. The steady evolution of IELTS clearly demonstrates how such factors shape the development of a large-scale, high-stakes language test.

The strength of the international IELTS partnership has led to innovative responses which seek not only to ensure the intrinsic value of the test in terms of its contemporary relevance and continuing usefulness for immediate test stakeholders, but also to contribute more broadly to the growing understanding of the nature of language proficiency and its place within linguistics and language education.

Since 1995, over 50 research studies and around 70 individual researchers have received grants under the joint-funded programme. Over a decade later, the joint-funded research programme has become a key component within the larger research and validation agenda in support of IELTS and reflects the IELTS partners' commitment to continuing improvement of the test.



Assessment in practice

IELTS is available at over 800 locations and on 48 different dates a year. The test involves extensive listening, reading and writing and an individual Speaking test with an examiner. The test takes two hours and 45 minutes to complete and results are available 13 days after the test.

Marking is carried out by trained markers and examiners, working to clearly defined criteria and subject to extensive and detailed quality control procedures. There are over 4,000 IELTS examiners worldwide, managed by the IELTS Professional Support Network, a system of recruitment, training, standardisation and monitoring for IELTS examiners. The Professional Support Network exists to:

- establish a clear framework for the professional support of IELTS examiners of Speaking and Writing
- ensure that IELTS examiners are well qualified and have the relevant professional experience
- provide effective training for examiners to enable them to carry out the task of IELTS examining
- provide ongoing support through feedback from monitoring and through standardisation and certification in order that Examiners maintain a high standard of expertise
- ensure that all examiners are given opportunities for professional development (for example the opportunity to apply to become an examiner trainer) throughout their examining career.

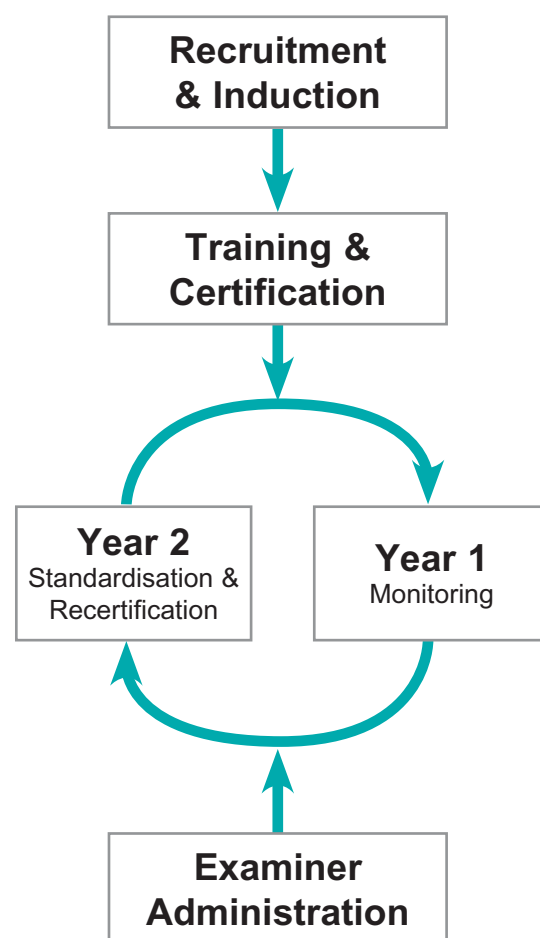
The major objectives with regard to the performance of the examiners are:

- that all examiners rate the samples of spoken and written English accurately and consistently in terms of pre-defined descriptions of performance
- that all examiners consistently apply Speaking test procedures to obtain consistent, representative, valid samples of the test taker's spoken English.

All IELTS examiners in every IELTS centre around the world are supported by this system.

Recruitment of examiners is a transparent process. Applications are assessed against a formal set of Minimum Professional Requirements and all applicants go through the same recruitment process. Shortlisted applicants are then interviewed and if successful complete an **induction** process.

Applicants who successfully complete induction proceed to **training** which is carried out by a certificated examiner trainer and lasts four days.



Monitoring takes place for new examiners (and those who have not recently worked as IELTS examiners) and is repeated a minimum of once every two years. Monitoring for Speaking and Writing examiners is carried out by examiner trainers. All examiners receive written feedback on their performance and are required to take corrective action if any issues are raised regarding their performance.

Standardisation sessions are held every two years and are led by an examiner trainer. Standardisation is completed at the centre and takes place as close as possible to the two-yearly **recertification** of the examiner.

The Professional Support Network is supported by a database which handles the information required to manage the work of examiners and examiner trainers worldwide.

These systems are designed to be responsive to change and are updated regularly. Systems are audited on a regular basis to ensure their effective operation.

Support for teachers, learners and stakeholders

The IELTS partners publish a wide range of information and support materials for people interested in IELTS, including a detailed Information for Candidates brochure and Official Practice Materials covering each part of the test. Extensive information on IELTS is available online at www.ielts.org

Face-to-face advice and support for test takers is available through the worldwide network of IELTS centres.

A DVD – IELTS Scores Explained – helps recognising institutions understand what IELTS band scores actually mean in terms of language proficiency and set appropriate standards for matriculation, recruitment, etc.

Teachers preparing students for IELTS can access a wealth of information via the IELTS Teaching Resources website. The site includes classroom activities, designed to give students practice in the skills needed for the exam, as well as sample tasks, tips for exam success and ideas for skills development. www.CambridgeESOL.org/teach/IELTS

A large number of independent publishers also produce materials to help learners and teachers of IELTS.

International standards

Test users frequently ask how IELTS scores compare with scores from other exams and how they map onto the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), published by the Council of Europe (2001).

Although it is not possible to give exact comparisons across different types of tests and test scores, further information about the relationship between IELTS and the Common European Framework of Reference is available at www.ielts.org.

The current alignment is based upon a growing body of internal research, combined with long established experience of test use within education and society, as well as feedback from a range of test stakeholders regarding the uses of test results for particular purposes.



Further information

Publications

- Clapham, (1996) *Studies in Language Testing Volume 4 – The development of IELTS: A study of the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension*, Cambridge: UCLES/ Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2001) *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hawkey, (2006) *Studies in Language Testing Volume 24 – Impact theory and practice: studies of the IELTS test and Progetto Lingue 2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL/ Cambridge University Press. [forthcoming]
- Lazaraton, (2002) *Studies in Language Testing Volume 14 – A qualitative approach to the validation of oral language tests*, Cambridge: UCLES/Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, and Falvey, (2006) *Studies in Language Testing Volume 19 – IELTS collected papers: research in speaking and writing assessment*, Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL/Cambridge University Press. [forthcoming]

Websites

- IELTS website – www.ielts.org; includes detailed information on test performance
- IELTS Teaching Resource – www.CambridgeESOL.org/teach/IELTS
- Many articles on IELTS research and related issues have been published in Cambridge ESOL's Research Notes publication, available online at www.CambridgeESOL.org/research

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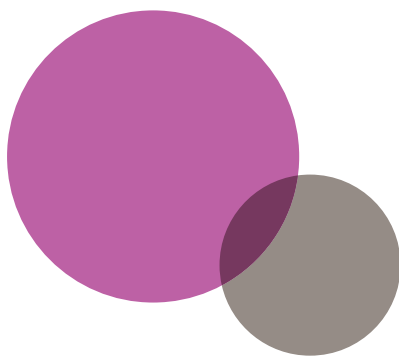
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IELTS is jointly managed by British Council, University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) and IDP: IELTS Australia. The IELTS test is designed and set by some of the world's leading experts in language assessment to give a true picture of a candidate's language skills.

IELTS is accredited by OFQUAL, the government's regulator for examinations in England, and by its counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland.