



International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Essential FAQs

What makes IELTS a good test of English language proficiency?

IELTS tests the complete range of English language skills that will commonly be encountered by students when studying in an English-speaking environment. Assessment of performance in IELTS depends on how the test taker's ability in English relates to the language demands of courses of study, not on reaching a fixed "pass" score. A particularly attractive feature of the IELTS is the live, face-to-face interview during which time the examiner, an experienced ESL professional trained, certified and monitored by IELTS to deliver the speaking component, evaluates the student's English speaking abilities.

How is the test administered?

IELTS is jointly owned by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, and Cambridge English Language Assessment. In the US, IELTS USA manages recognition of the exam and the US network of test centers. IELTS tests are administered at global test centers. There are currently more than 1000 centers in over 140 countries. Test centers supervise the local administration of the test and provide qualified and trained examiners, test proctors and clerical markers. More than 3,000 American academic institutions accept IELTS for admission purposes; 9,000 institutions recognize IELTS around the world. In 2013, more than 2.2 million IELTS tests were taken.

How is the test structured?

The test is designed to cover the full range of ability from "non-user" to "expert user." Test takers are tested in all four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The first three modules – listening, reading and writing – must be completed in one day. The speaking module is usually taken on the same day, but depending on cultural conventions in some regions of the world, may be taken in the period seven days before or after the other modules. To reflect different learning and test taking styles, IELTS uses a variety of question (task) types: short-answer questions, sentence completion, note/summary/diagram/flow-chart/table completion, labeling a diagram which has numbered parts, classification, multiple choice and matching.

How is the IELTS scored?

IELTS provides a profile of a test taker's ability to use English. Test takers receive scores on a band scale from 1 to 9. A score is reported for each module of the test. The individual module scores are then averaged to produce an overall mean band score. Overall band scores and individual skill scores are reported in increments of half bands (e.g., 5.5, 6.0, 6.5, etc.).

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.

Scoring is carried out at the test center by trained, certified clerical markers for the listening and reading sections and certified IELTS examiners for the writing and speaking. All markers and examiners around the world are closely monitored by senior examining team members and by Cambridge ESOL. Test results are available 13 calendar days following the test. Official Test Report Forms (TRFs) are sent directly from the test center where the test taker took the exam to the receiving institution. Each test taker also receives one personal paper copy for his/her records. A free electronic score download system is also available for all recognizing institutions upon their request. A free TRF Verification Service is also available for extra security for all recognizing institutions to verify the authenticity of paper forms. Test takers can send up to five copies to institutions of their choice for the original test fee, and can send additional copies for a nominal administrative fee up to two years following the date of the exam. As a general rule, based on research in the area of language attrition, it is recommended that a TRF more than two years old only be accepted as evidence of level of ability if accompanied by further support that a test taker has actively maintained or tried to improve his/her English language proficiency.

How should IELTS scores be interpreted?

Both the overall band score and the scores recorded for each individual module should be considered when assessing applicants' English proficiency. The appropriate band score required for a given course of study is ultimately something that must be decided by the institution in the light of knowledge of the level of difficulty of the courses and the experience of international students taking them. Language skills should be matched to particular expectations, needs and programs/courses. For example, if a course has a lot of reading and writing, but no lectures, listening comprehension might not be quite as important, and a lower band sub-score in listening might be acceptable if the overall band score met the minimum requirement set for admissions.

However, for a course where there are frequent lectures and spoken instructions, a lower sub-score in listening might be unacceptable even though the overall band score met the minimum admission requirement.

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