

🎯 What to Expect in IELTS

IELTS has **rules, patterns and conventions that are not always obvious**. Knowing what to expect can help you avoid common mistakes and make better decisions during the test.

This guide gives you **48 useful things to know about IELTS** — 12 for each of the four skills. Each point explains **what to expect, what not to assume, and what this means for you in the test**.

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📖 What to Expect in IELTS Reading

1. Most questions follow the order of the text

🔵 **EXPECT:** In question types such as **multiple choice, matching sentence endings, sentence completion and short-answer questions**, the answers follow the order of the information in the passage.

🔴 **DON'T ASSUME:** Every question type works this way. Matching and some completion tasks are important exceptions.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Once you have found one answer, the next answer is often further down the passage. **Use this to narrow your search area instead of repeatedly searching the whole text.**

2. Passage 3 is usually the most demanding

🔵 **EXPECT:** The three Academic Reading sections generally increase in difficulty, so the final passage is usually the most demanding. British Council recommends approximately **15 minutes for Section 1, 20 minutes for Section 2 and 25 minutes for Section 3**.

🔴 **DON'T ASSUME:** Passage 3 will necessarily be much longer than the other passages.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Don't be surprised if the final passage requires more careful reading. **Protect enough time for Passage 3 rather than spending too long on the earlier sections.**

3. The question and passage often use different words

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS regularly tests your ability to recognise **the same idea expressed in different language**.

🔴 **DON'T ASSUME:** You will find exactly the same words from the question in the passage.

Example:
Question: *a decline in the number of passengers*
Passage: *fewer people used the service*

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Search for **meaning**, not simply matching words. Think about other ways the idea in the question could be expressed.

4. Matching Headings behaves differently

🔵 **EXPECT:** Matching Headings asks you to identify the **main idea of a paragraph or section**. Unlike many other Reading tasks, the answers do **not** follow the order of the text.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Finding the same word in a heading and a paragraph means you have found the answer.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Read for the **central idea of the whole paragraph**, not an individual word or interesting detail. A heading may use completely different vocabulary but express the same overall meaning.

5. Matching Headings always gives you extra headings

🔵 **EXPECT:** There are **always more headings than paragraphs or sections you need to match**, so some headings will not be used. A heading cannot be used more than once.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Every heading must eventually be used.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Some headings are there to distract you. **Don't force an unused heading onto a paragraph** simply because you have not chosen it yet.

6. Some matching options can be used more than once

🔵 **EXPECT:** In tasks such as Matching Information and Matching Features, **some options may be used more than once**. The instructions will tell you when this is possible.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** An option is automatically finished once you have used it.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Read the instructions carefully. If they say an option may be used more than once, keep it available for later questions.

7. Completion tasks don't all follow the same pattern

🔵 **EXPECT:** A summary, note, table or flow-chart completion task will usually relate to **one part of the passage rather than the whole text**, but its answers may **not** appear in the same order as the information in the passage. Sentence completion, by contrast, does follow text order.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** All gap-completion questions behave in the same way.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Identify the question type before deciding how to search. For a summary, table or flow chart, **locate the relevant section first** rather than assuming each next answer must appear further down the passage.

8. Technical vocabulary may be explained for you

🔵 **EXPECT:** Academic Reading passages are written for a **non-specialist audience**. If a text uses technical vocabulary, IELTS states that **it provides a simple dictionary definition**.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** An unfamiliar technical term means you are expected to know specialist vocabulary before the test.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Check whether an unfamiliar technical word **has already been defined for you**. Don't waste time trying to work out or remember specialist terminology that IELTS has supplied an explanation for.

9. An unfamiliar subject doesn't require specialist knowledge

🔵 **EXPECT:** Academic passages can cover subjects you know very little about, but they are selected for a **non-specialist audience**.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Knowing more about the subject gives you permission to add information that isn't in the passage.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
The evidence you need is in the text. **Base your answers on the passage, not on what you already know or think is probably true.**

10. Word limits are exact

🔵 **EXPECT:** Some Reading tasks specify a limit such as **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER**. If you exceed the word limit, you lose the mark. A hyphenated word such as *check-in* counts as **one word**.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** An answer will be accepted simply because its meaning is correct.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Check the instructions for **every question set**. If the limit is two words, three words cannot be correct. Pay attention to exactly what IELTS counts as a word.

11. Not Given really can mean “the text doesn't tell you”

🔵 **EXPECT:** In True/False/Not Given questions, **False** means the statement contradicts the passage. **Not Given** means the statement neither agrees with nor contradicts the information provided. The same distinction applies between **No** and **Not Given** in questions about a writer's views or claims.

🔴 **DON’T ASSUME:** You should decide what is probably true.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Ask, **“Does the passage actually give me enough information to decide?”** If it doesn't, the answer may be **Not Given**. Never add information from your own knowledge.

12. A wrong answer doesn't cost an extra mark

🔵 **EXPECT:** There are **40 questions**, and each correct answer receives one mark. Marks are not deducted for incorrect answers.

🔴 **DON’T ASSUME:** Leaving a difficult question blank is safer than making your best choice.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Never leave an answer blank. If you cannot find the answer, make your best choice and move on. Don't lose time that could be used to answer other questions.

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🎧 What to Expect in IELTS Listening

1. The questions follow the recording

🔵 **EXPECT:** The questions appear in the same order as the information in the recording. The information for Question 6 comes after the information for Question 5.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You can keep working on an earlier question while the recording continues.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
If you realise the recording has moved on, move on too. Look at the next question and use it to rejoin the recording.

2. The four parts become progressively more difficult

🔵 **EXPECT:** There are four parts with 10 questions in each, and the questions become progressively more difficult. Parts 1–2 deal with social situations; Parts 3–4 move into educational and academic contexts.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** All four parts require the same kind of listening.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Expect the focus to shift from relatively straightforward factual information towards following discussions, viewpoints and academic information.

3. Part 1 often tests precise everyday details

🔵 **EXPECT:** Part 1 is a conversation in an everyday situation and commonly tests details such as names, dates, times, prices and addresses.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Understanding the general conversation is enough.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Be ready to record exact information. A single letter, number or plural ending can make the difference between a correct and incorrect answer.

4. Similar-sounding details can be easy to confuse

🔵 **EXPECT:** Part 1 may require you to distinguish very similar-sounding letters and numbers. Common problems include letters such *as B/P/V, M/N* and *G/J,* and numbers such as *13/30, 14/40, 15/50* and *16/60*. Official IELTS preparation material specifically highlights the *-teen/-ty* distinction.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Hearing approximately the right sound is enough.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Listen to the whole sound and the stress. Compare *thirTEEN* with *THIRty*. Also expect numbers to be expressed in different ways: £4.50, for example, can be spoken as *four pounds fifty*.

5. The first answer you hear may not be the answer

🔵 **EXPECT:** Particularly in conversations, you may hear more than one plausible piece of information. A speaker may correct something, reject a suggestion or change a decision.

Example:
"Is that Thursday the 14th?"
"No, the 14th is no good. Let's make it Thursday the 21st."

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** A word, date or number is correct simply because it matches something in the question.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Keep listening after a possible answer. Pay attention to language such as but, no, actually, instead and rather. What you hear first may be there to distract you from the final information.

6. Part 3 can require you to track different viewpoints

🔵 **EXPECT:** Part 3 is an educational or training discussion. You may need to follow an exchange of ideas, recognise different speakers' points of view and understand the outcome of the discussion.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Something is correct because a speaker mentions the word/number.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Keep track **of who thinks what. A speaker** may agree, disagree, make a suggestion, or respond to another person's idea, so both the speaker and the information can matter.

7. Part 4 has only one speaker

🔵 **EXPECT:** Part 4 is a monologue on an academic subject, similar to a lecture. There is no conversation between speakers.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You will hear the same conversational changes of mind and speaker-to-speaker corrections that you may encounter earlier in the test. The lecturer can still contrast, qualify or correct information.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Listen for signposting language such as *firstly, however* and *another reason*. These signals help you follow how the lecture is organised.

8. You will hear several English accents

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS uses a range of accents, including British, Australian, New Zealand and North American English.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Taking IELTS in Britain—or through the British Council—means you will hear only British accents.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Prepare with speakers from different English-speaking backgrounds. Don't become dependent on one accent that you find particularly easy to understand.

9. You hear each recording only once

🔵 **EXPECT:** Every recording is played once only.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You will get another opportunity to hear something you missed.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Use the time provided to read ahead and anticipate what information you need. If you miss an answer, recover quickly—the next answer is still coming.

10. Completion answers may have to be the exact words you hear

🔵 **EXPECT:** In some completion tasks, you select words from the recording to fill the gaps. IELTS states that in these tasks you do not change the words from the recording in any way.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You should improve, paraphrase or grammatically change an answer yourself.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Use the grammar around the gap to predict what you need, then listen for the expression that fits. If the task requires words from the recording, write what you hear rather than rewriting it in your own words.

11. Word limits are exact

🔵 **EXPECT:** A question may say, for example, **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER**. Writing more than the permitted number loses the mark. Hyphenated expressions such as *check-in* count as **one word**.

🟠 **DON’T ASSUME:** An answer will be accepted simply because its meaning is correct.

What this means in the test:
Check the instructions for each question set because the permitted number of words or numbers can change. Don't carry the word limit from one task into the next.

12. Spelling matters — capitalisation doesn't

🔵 **EXPECT: Spelling is considered** when your answers are marked. British Council states that **capitalisation is not**.

🟠 **DON’T ASSUME:** *enviroment* will receive the mark because the examiner knows you mean *environment*, or that you will lose a mark because you typed an answer in capitals.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Check spelling and endings carefully. Don't waste time worrying about upper and lower-case letters.

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🗣️ What to Expect in IELTS Speaking

1. The Speaking test is short and tightly structured

🔵 **EXPECT:** The test lasts 11–14 minutes and has three parts. Part 1 takes 4–5 minutes, Part 2 takes 3–4 minutes including preparation, and Part 3 takes 4–5 minutes.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** It is an open-ended conversation in which you can spend as long as you like on an answer.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
The examiner controls the timing and moves the test forward. Answer the question directly and then develop your answer naturally.

2. Part 1 is about you and familiar topics

🔵 **EXPECT:** The examiner asks general questions about you and familiar areas such as home, family, work, studies and interests. Part 1 lasts only 4–5 minutes.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need long, complicated answers to relatively simple questions.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Answer naturally and add enough information to develop your response. A reason, explanation or example can extend an answer without turning it into a mini-speech.

3. The examiner may stop you or move on

🔵 **EXPECT:** The examiner follows a timed test format. In Part 2, they stop you when the time is up, even if you could continue speaking.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Being stopped means that you have made a mistake or that the examiner dislikes your answer.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
When the examiner stops you or asks another question, stop and listen to what comes next. Don't try to finish the answer you were giving.

4. You get one minute to prepare for Part 2

🔵 **EXPECT:** The examiner gives you a task card, paper and a pencil, and you have one minute to prepare before speaking for up to two minutes.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need to write complete sentences during that minute.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Write **keywords and short phrases**. IELTS guidance recommends making notes on the points on the card rather than trying to write out your answer.

5. Part 2 is your long turn

🔵 **EXPECT:** Once you begin Part 2, you are expected to speak at length for one to two minutes. The examiner stops you when the time is up and may then ask one or two questions on the same topic.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** The examiner will keep asking questions to help you continue if you run out of things to say.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Practise developing a topic yourself. Add details, reasons, examples and experiences so that you can keep talking without relying on prompts from another person.

6. The Part 2 bullet points tell you what to include

🔵 **EXPECT:** The task card gives you a topic and tells you what points you should include in your talk.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need to spend exactly the same amount of time on every bullet point.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Try to cover the points on the card, but develop them naturally. Use your preparation minute to make at least a brief note for each point so that you don't accidentally miss one.

7. Part 3 moves from personal to more abstract discussion

🔵 **EXPECT:** Part 3 is connected to the broad topic of Part 2, but the questions become more general and abstract. You may need to explain opinions, analyse, discuss and speculate.

Example:
Part 2: *Describe a park you enjoy visiting.*
Part 3 might move towards public spaces, urban development or how cities may change in the future.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Part 3 will simply ask for more details about the experience you described in Part 2.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Be ready to compare, explain causes and effects, discuss advantages and disadvantages, and speculate about possibilities rather than relying only on personal experiences.

8. Your opinion is not being marked

🔵 **EXPECT:** You may be asked whether you agree or disagree with an idea or what you think about an issue.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** There is a "correct" opinion that the examiner wants to hear. The assessment focuses on your language and communication, using four criteria: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Give an opinion that you can explain and support clearly. You do not need to guess what the examiner thinks.

9. You can ask the examiner to repeat or clarify a question

🔵 **EXPECT:** If you don't understand a question, you can politely ask the examiner to repeat or clarify it. British Council states that doing this does not affect your score.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You have to answer a question that you did not understand.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Ask for clarification when you genuinely need it. In Part 2, if you don't understand a word on the task card, IELTS guidance says you can ask the examiner what it means at the beginning of your preparation time without losing marks.

10. Memorised answers can work against you

🔵 **EXPECT:** Familiar IELTS topics will appear, particularly in Part 1, but the questions require you to respond to the question you are actually asked.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Memorising complete model answers is a safe way to prepare. British Council warns that examiners are trained to recognise rehearsed responses and that these can limit your score.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Prepare ideas, vocabulary and useful expressions, not complete speeches. Practise adapting what you know to different questions.

11. You don't need a particular English accent

🔵 **EXPECT:** Pronunciation is one of the four assessment criteria. IELTS assesses whether you can speak in a way that can be understood without too much effort.

🔴 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need to sound British, Australian or like a native English speaker.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Concentrate on clear sounds, word stress, sentence stress and intelligibility rather than trying to imitate a particular accent.

12. The Speaking test is the same for Academic and General Training

🔵 **EXPECT:** Unlike Reading and Writing, the Speaking test is the same whether you take IELTS Academic or IELTS General Training. The Listening test is also shared by both versions.

🔴 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need different Speaking preparation because you are taking Academic rather than General Training IELTS.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Use IELTS Speaking practice materials for either test type. The same three-part structure, timings and assessment criteria apply.

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✍️ What to Expect in IELTS Writing

1. Task 2 is worth twice as much as Task 1

🔵 **EXPECT:** You have 60 minutes for two tasks, but they do not contribute equally to your Writing score. Task 2 contributes twice as much as Task 1. IELTS recommends approximately 20 minutes for Task 1 and 40 minutes for Task 2.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Spending half the test on each task is a sensible way to divide your time.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Protect your Task 2 time. If Task 1 is taking too long, move on rather than sacrificing a large part of the more heavily weighted task.

2. 150 and 250 words are minimums, not targets you must hit exactly

🔵 **EXPECT**: Academic Task 1 requires at least 150 words and Task 2 at least 250 words. IELTS does not penalise you simply for writing more than the minimum.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Your answer must finish at exactly 150 or 250 words—or that writing considerably more automatically improves it.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Write enough to complete the task properly, but remember that extra writing takes time and creates more opportunities for irrelevant information and errors.

3. Academic Task 1 is not always a graph

🔵 **EXPECT:** You may be asked to describe one or more graphs, charts or tables, or a diagram showing an object, device, process or event.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Preparing only for line graphs, bar charts and tables covers Task 1.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Be prepared to describe data, processes and other visual information. The language you need will depend on what the task actually shows.

4. A process diagram may change the grammar you need

🔵 **EXPECT:** A Task 1 diagram can ask you to describe stages in a process or how something works. In many man-made processes, the important information is what happens to something, not who performs the action.

Example:
*The bottles **are transported** to the factory.*
*The material **is heated** to 100°C.*

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Every Task 1 answer needs the same grammar as a graph or chart.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
For a process, decide whether active or passive forms best describe each stage. Don't try to force graph language such as *increased* or *fell* into a completely different task.

5. Task 1 needs an overview

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS specifically assesses your ability to give a well-organised overview of the visual information. British Council guidance tells candidates to include an overview summarising the main trend or feature.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Describing individual figures or stages is enough.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Step back from the details and identify the main features, overall changes or important comparisons. Make these clear in your answer.

6. You are not expected to describe every detail in Task 1

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS asks you to identify and describe the most important information. Its official guidance explicitly says you may leave out some minor points or details.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** A good answer mentions every number, year, category or small feature shown.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Select. Look for significant features, such as major changes, similarities, differences, highest and lowest figures or important stages.

7. Task 1 gives you the information you need

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS states that in Academic Task 1, all the information you require is given in the graph, chart, table or diagram.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need to explain *why* something happened if the visual doesn't give that information.

Example:
If car ownership rises, don't invent an explanation such as *because people became wealthier*.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Report and compare **what the visual shows**. Don't add opinions, explanations or background knowledge that the task hasn't supplied.

8. Task 2 may contain more than one thing you must answer

🔵 **EXPECT:** Task 2 can require you to present and justify an opinion, compare different views, discuss advantages and disadvantages, or propose solutions to a problem.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Writing generally about the topic means that you have answered the question.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Before writing, identify every part of the task. If it asks two questions, both need to be addressed. If it asks you to discuss two views and give your own opinion, don't quietly omit one part.

9. Task 2 doesn't test specialist knowledge

🔵 **EXPECT:** Writing topics are designed so that you do not need specialist knowledge, and IELTS allows evidence and examples to come from your own experience.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** You need statistics, academic research or expert knowledge to support your argument.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Use relevant explanations and examples you can express clearly. You are being assessed on how effectively you develop your response, not on whether you are an expert on the subject.

10. Having an idea is not enough — you need to develop it

🔵 **EXPECT:** Task Response assesses how well you develop your argument, including relevant supporting evidence and examples.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** A long list of undeveloped ideas will necessarily produce a stronger Task 2 answer.

Example:
Public transport reduces traffic.

That is an idea. Developing it means explaining **how or why** it reduces traffic and, where useful, supporting the explanation with an example.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Give yourself enough space to explain and support your main ideas rather than continually introducing new ones.

11. Your final answer must be connected prose

🔵 **EXPECT:** IELTS requires Writing answers in full sentences as a connected piece of text. Notes and bullet points are not acceptable as your final response.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Because a Task 1 question contains bullet points or visual information, you can answer it with a list.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
You can use notes while planning, but your submitted answer should use sentences and paragraphs. IELTS explicitly states that answers written as notes or bullet points are penalised.

12. Grammar and vocabulary are only half of what is assessed

🔵 **EXPECT:** Each Writing task is assessed using four equally weighted criteria:

- **Task Achievement/Task Response**
- **Coherence and Cohesion**
- **Lexical Resource**
- **Grammatical Range and Accuracy**

The score for the task is the average of these four criteria.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME:** Impressive vocabulary and complicated grammar can compensate for not answering the task properly or organising the response effectively.

🟢 **What this means in the test:**
Think beyond language accuracy. You also need to answer what you were asked, develop the response and organise it clearly.

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