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48 Things to Know Before Your IELTS Test

The rules, patterns and traps that are not always obvious – and what to do about them.

📖 Reading 🎧 Listening 🗣️ Speaking ✍️ Writing

Knowing what to expect helps you avoid common mistakes and make better decisions under time pressure. This guide gives you 12 points for each skill.

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💡 How to Read Each Tip

🔵 **EXPECT** what really happens in the test
🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** the mistake many candidates make
🟢 **IN THE TEST** what to do about it

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IELTS READING

📖 12 Things to Know

Find answers faster and avoid the traps

12

1 Most answers follow the order of the text

🔵 **EXPECT** In multiple choice, True/False/Not Given, sentence completion and short answers, the answers come in the same order as the passage.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** This is true for every task. Matching Headings, Matching Information and Matching Features do not follow the text order.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** When you find answer 3, start looking for answer 4 just after it. If you cannot find one answer, skip it – the next answer will show you where to look.

2 There is no extra time to transfer your answers

🔵 **EXPECT** In the paper test, you write your answers on the answer sheet within the 60 minutes. Listening gives you extra transfer time; Reading does not.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You can write everything on the question paper and copy it at the end.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Write each answer on the answer sheet as you go, or stop with 5 minutes left to transfer. On computer, type your answer straight into the box.

3 The question and the passage use different words

🔵 **EXPECT** IELTS tests whether you can recognise the same idea in different language. This is the main skill in almost every Reading task.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You will find the exact words from the question in the passage.

Question: *a decline in passengers*

Passage: *fewer people used the service*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Before you search, think of two or three other ways to say the key idea. Search for the meaning, not the word.

4 In Matching Headings, the same word is often a trap

🔵 **EXPECT** A heading describes the main idea of the whole paragraph. The wrong headings often share a word with one sentence in the paragraph.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A word that appears in both the heading and the paragraph shows you the answer.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Read the first two sentences of the paragraph and decide the main idea in your own words. Then look for the heading that matches it.

5 Some headings are never used

🔵 **EXPECT** There are always more headings than paragraphs. If the instructions show an example, that heading is already used.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You must use every heading – or you can use one twice.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Cross out the example heading first. Do the easiest paragraphs first, then choose between fewer headings for the difficult ones.

6 In matching tasks, an option can come up again

🔵 **EXPECT** In Matching Information and Matching Features, the instructions may say **You may use any letter more than once**.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Once you have used a letter or a name, it is finished.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Read the instructions for every question set. When a letter can be used again, keep it in play.

7 Summary completion is in one part of the text

🔵 **EXPECT** A summary, note, table or flow-chart usually covers one section of the passage, but the answers may not be in order.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** All gap-fill tasks work the same way.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use the summary title and first sentence to find the right section. Then read that section carefully – not the whole passage.

8 Your answer must use the words from the passage

🔵 **EXPECT** In completion tasks, the answer comes from the passage. You copy the word – with the same spelling and the same form.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You can use a synonym or change the word to make the sentence sound better.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Check the grammar around the gap: do you need a noun, a verb, a plural? Then copy the word exactly. A spelling mistake loses the mark.

9 Word limits are strict

🔵 **EXPECT** **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** means one or two words. Three words is wrong, even if the meaning is right. A hyphenated word such as *part-time* counts as one word.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A correct idea is enough to get the mark.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Count your words for every answer. Leave out small words if the answer still makes sense: *healthy diet* rather than *a healthy diet*.

10 Not Given means the text does not say

🔵 **EXPECT** False means the passage says the opposite. Not Given means the passage does not tell you either way. The same is true for No and Not Given.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You should choose the answer that is probably true.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Ask: *Can I point to the words that prove it?* If you can prove it is wrong, it is False. If you cannot prove anything, it is Not Given.

11 Small words can make a statement false

🔵 **EXPECT** Statements often include words such as *all, only, always, never, most* or *first*. These words are often the reason the answer is False or Not Given.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** If the topic of the statement matches the passage, the answer is True.

Statement: *All students use the library.*
Passage: *Many students use the library.*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Underline the small limiting words in each statement. Then check that the passage says exactly the same – not more, not less.

12 A wrong answer costs nothing

🔵 **EXPECT** Each of the 40 questions is worth one mark. You do not lose marks for a wrong answer.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Leaving a question blank is safer than guessing.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Never leave a gap. If you are stuck after a minute, write your best guess, mark the question and move on.

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IELTS LISTENING

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Hear the answer, not the trap

1 The answers come in order

🔵 **EXPECT** The questions follow the recording. The answer to question 6 always comes after the answer to question 5.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You can keep thinking about a question you missed.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** If you miss an answer, let it go and listen for the next one. Guess the missed answer at the end.

2 Paper and computer tests give you different time

🔵 **EXPECT** On paper, you get 10 minutes at the end to transfer your answers to the answer sheet. On computer, you type as you listen and get only 2 minutes to check.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You will always have time at the end to write your answers neatly.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Know which test you are taking. On computer, type each answer straight away. On paper, write clearly on the question paper as you listen.

3 The pauses are for reading ahead

🔵 **EXPECT** Before each part, and sometimes in the middle, you get time to look at the questions.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** This time is for checking the answers you have just written.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use every pause to read the next questions. Underline the keywords and predict the answer: a number? a name? a place?

4 Part 1 starts with an example

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 1 usually begins with an example that is already answered for you.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You need to write an answer for the example.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use the example to get used to the voices and the topic. Then focus on question 1.

5 The first answer you hear is often wrong

🔵 **EXPECT** Speakers change their minds, correct themselves or reject an idea. The first number or day you hear may be a trap.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A word that matches the question must be the answer.

Speaker 1: *Is that the 14th?*
Speaker 2: *No, the 14th is no good. Let's make it the 21st.*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Keep listening after you hear a possible answer. Words such as *actually, sorry, no, instead* and *rather* often come before the real answer.

6 Numbers and letters sound alike

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 1 tests names, numbers, prices and addresses. Pairs such as 13 and 30, 15 and 50, or M and N are easy to confuse.

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

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Listen for the stress: thir**TEEN** but **THIR**ty. Learn how speakers spell names: *double S*, *double E*.

7 Write numbers as figures

🔵 **EXPECT** You can write numbers as figures or as words. A number written in figures counts as a number, not a word.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Writing *fifteen* and *15* are the same for the word limit.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Always write figures: *15*, not *fifteen*. It is faster, and it keeps you inside the word limit.

8 Write the words you hear

🔵 **EXPECT** In completion tasks, the answer is the word you hear, and it must fit the gap.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You should change the word into a better or more grammatical form.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Before you listen, read the words around the gap and predict the type of word. Then write exactly what you hear.

9 British or American spelling – both are fine

🔵 **EXPECT** Spelling is marked, but both British and American spellings are accepted. Capital letters do not matter.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Small spelling mistakes are accepted if the examiner knows what you mean.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Learn to spell common test words: *accommodation, environment, library, Wednesday, February*. Check plurals: *-s* can win or lose the mark.

10 Part 3 is about who thinks what

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 3 is a discussion between two to four people about study or training. Questions often test opinions and decisions.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** If a speaker mentions an idea, they agree with it.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Listen for agreeing and disagreeing: *That's true, but... I'm not so sure... Exactly.* The final decision often comes after a disagreement.

11 Part 4 has no break

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 4 is a talk by one speaker on an academic subject. It is played without a pause in the middle.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You will have time in the middle of Part 4 to read the second half of the questions.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Read all ten questions before the talk starts. Follow the signposts: *firstly, moving on to, another reason, finally*.

12 You will hear different accents

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

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Taking the test in the UK means you will only hear British accents.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Listen to podcasts and news from different countries. Choose one accent you find difficult and listen to it every day for a week.

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IELTS SPEAKING

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Speak clearly, develop your answers and stay calm

1 Part 1 answers should be short – but not too short

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 1 has about 12 quick questions in 4–5 minutes. A good answer takes around 15–20 seconds.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A one-word answer is fine – or you should give a long speech.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use a simple pattern: **answer + reason + example**. *Yes, I do, mainly because... For example, last week...*

2 In Part 1, the examiner can repeat but not explain

🔵 **EXPECT** If you do not understand a Part 1 question, you can ask the examiner to repeat it. They usually cannot explain it or use different words.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** The examiner will help you understand any question.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Ask once: *Sorry, could you repeat that, please?* If you still do not understand, say what you think it means and answer that.

3 In Part 3, you can ask what a question means

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 3 questions are more abstract. Here the examiner can rephrase a question if you ask.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Asking for help will lower your score.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use natural phrases: *Do you mean...? Sorry, what do you mean by...?* It shows good communication, not weak English.

4 Your notes are for you – not the examiner

🔵 **EXPECT** In Part 2, you get one minute and a pencil to make notes. You can look at your notes while you speak.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You should write full sentences – or keep your eyes on the examiner without looking down.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Write 2–3 keywords for each point on the card. Glance at them to move to the next point.

5 Part 2 has no prompts – you keep going

🔵 **EXPECT** You speak for one to two minutes without help. The examiner stops you at two minutes.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** If you stop early, the examiner will ask you questions to help.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Plan a short story with a beginning, middle and end. Add feelings and reasons – they are easy to extend.

6 You do not have to cover every bullet point equally

🔵 **EXPECT** The task card gives you points to talk about. They help you plan, and it is fine to spend more time on some points than others.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You will lose marks if you spend more time on one point.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use the bullet points as a plan. Spend the most time on the part with the best story or the most vocabulary.

7 Being stopped is normal

🔵 **EXPECT** The examiner follows a strict timer. In Part 2 they stop you at two minutes; in other parts they may move on before you finish.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Being stopped means you said something wrong.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Stop, smile and listen to the next question. It simply means the time is up – it says nothing about your score.

8 Part 3 needs ideas about people in general

🔵 **EXPECT** Part 3 links to the Part 2 topic, but the questions are about society: causes, comparisons, the future.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Part 3 is more questions about your own story.

Part 2: *Describe a park you enjoy.*
Part 3: *How will cities change in the future?*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Move from *I* to *people*: *Many young people nowadays… In my country…* Use **it depends**: give two different situations.

9 Your opinion is not marked

🔵 **EXPECT** The examiner marks your language – fluency, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation – not your ideas.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** There is a correct opinion the examiner wants to hear.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Choose the opinion that is easiest to explain in English, even if it is not your real view.

10 Self-correction is fine

🔵 **EXPECT** Everyone makes mistakes when they speak. Correcting a mistake quickly shows control of the language.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** One mistake will ruin your score – so you should speak slowly and carefully.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** If you notice a mistake, correct it and keep going: *I go – I went there last year.* Don't stop to apologise.

11 Memorised answers can lower your score

🔵 **EXPECT** Examiners are trained to notice rehearsed answers. They often sound unnatural and do not fit the question.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Learning model answers by heart is a safe way to prepare.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Prepare **phrases and ideas**, not speeches. Practise using the same phrase to answer different questions.

12 Clear is better than a perfect accent

🔵 **EXPECT** Pronunciation is about being easy to understand: clear sounds, word stress and sentence stress.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You need to sound British or American to get a high score.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Stress the important words and pause between phrases. Record yourself once a week and listen for unclear words.

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IELTS WRITING

✍️ 12 Things to Know

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Answer the task, organise your ideas and manage your time

1 Task 2 is worth twice as much as Task 1

🔵 **EXPECT** You have 60 minutes for both tasks, but Task 2 counts for twice as many marks. IELTS suggests 20 minutes for Task 1 and 40 for Task 2.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You should spend half the time on each task.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Some candidates write Task 2 first. Whatever order you choose, stop Task 1 at 20 minutes.

2 Short answers lose marks

🔵 **EXPECT** Task 1 needs at least 150 words and Task 2 at least 250. An answer under the minimum loses marks for Task Response.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Writing much more than the minimum gives you a higher score.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Aim for 170–190 words in Task 1 and 260–290 in Task 2. On computer, the word count is shown on screen.

3 Copying the question does not help

🔵 **EXPECT** Words copied directly from the question show no vocabulary, and examiners may not count them in your word count.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Repeating the question in your introduction is an easy way to add words.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Paraphrase the question: change the keywords and the sentence structure. *young people* → *the younger generation*.

4 Task 1 is not always a graph

🔵 **EXPECT** Academic Task 1 can be a line graph, bar chart, pie chart, table, map or process diagram – or two of these together.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** If you can describe a line graph, you are ready for Task 1.

Graph: *Sales rose sharply.*

Process: *The bottles are washed and then filled.*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Practise all types. For maps and processes, you need different language: the passive, sequencing words and location words.

5 Task 1 needs an overview

🔵 **EXPECT** The overview is a short summary of the main trends or features. Without one, it is very difficult to get above Band 5 for Task Achievement.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Describing all the details is enough.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Write two sentences that someone could understand without seeing the chart. Start with *Overall, ...*

6 Choose the important details

🔵 **EXPECT** You are not expected to describe every number. IELTS asks you to select and report the main features.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A good answer mentions every figure in the chart.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Choose the highest and lowest figures, the biggest changes and any surprises. Group similar items together.

7 Task 1 is not your opinion

🔵 **EXPECT** Everything you need is in the chart. You describe and compare – you do not explain.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You should give reasons for the changes you see.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Never write *because* unless the chart gives the reason. Report the facts and make comparisons.

8 Task 2 questions often have two parts

🔵 **EXPECT** Many questions ask two things: *Discuss both views and give your opinion*, or *Why is this? Is it positive?*

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Writing a good essay about the topic means you have answered the question.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Underline every part of the instruction. Give each part its own paragraph, and tick it off in your plan.

9 Two developed ideas beat five weak ones

🔵 **EXPECT** Task Response rewards ideas that are explained and supported, not a long list.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** More ideas mean a higher score.

Idea: *Public transport reduces traffic.*
Developed: *...because one bus can replace forty cars, as in...*

🟢 **IN THE TEST** For each main idea, explain **why** and give an **example**.

10 You don't need statistics or expert knowledge

🔵 **EXPECT** Topics are general. Examples from your own experience and country are completely acceptable.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** You need real research or numbers to support your ideas.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Use a short personal or local example: *In my city, for example, ...* Don't invent statistics – they don't add marks.

11 Notes and bullet points are penalised

🔵 **EXPECT** Your answer must be in full sentences and paragraphs.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** A clear list of points is acceptable, especially in Task 1.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Plan with notes, but write in paragraphs. Leave a clear line or indent between paragraphs.

12 Grammar and vocabulary are only half the score

🔵 **EXPECT** Each task is marked on four equal criteria: Task Achievement or Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy.

🟠 **DON'T ASSUME** Long words and complex grammar can make up for a weak answer.

🟢 **IN THE TEST** Spend 3–5 minutes planning. A clear answer with simple, accurate English often scores higher than a complicated, confusing one.

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