START IELTS • FREE TOPIC GUIDE

What Comes Up in IELTS Writing and Speaking?

An analysis of 494 questions reported by test takers, 2018–2024

Every test taker wants to know which topics to prepare. IELTS does not publish this information, so we counted. We sorted 377 Writing Task 2 questions and 117 Speaking Part 2 cue cards reported by test takers. Here is what we found – and what it means for your preparation.

377
Writing Task 2 questions analysed

#1
Education – the most common topic, at 13.5%

77%
of Task 2 questions came from just eight topic areas

117
Speaking Part 2 cue cards analysed

📊 Writing Task 2: How Often Each Topic Appeared



Share of 377 student-reported questions, July 2018 – January 2024. Each question was placed in one main topic. Source: our analysis of the IELTS Podcast question archive [4].

What this means: no topic is above 14% – the topics are spread widely. There is no shortcut – you cannot prepare only two or three topics and hope for the best.

But you **can** prepare smartly: build vocabulary and ideas for the eight most common areas, and you will feel familiar with most questions you meet.

Writing Task 2: The Topics in Detail

🗂️ Topics, Typical Themes and Where to Practise

Topic	Typical themes	Qs	Practise with
Education	online or classroom learning, university or vocational training, the purpose of school	51	Vocabulary: Education
Family, Children and Ageing	raising children, older people in society, young people and independence	39	Speaking: Part 3 Discussion
Health, Food and Fitness	fast food and obesity, taxing unhealthy food, local or imported food	39	Vocabulary: Health and Fitness
Technology	phones and social contact, personal data, technology and the rich–poor gap	34	Vocabulary: Technology
Work and Business	long working hours, job security, uniforms and dress codes	34	Vocabulary: Work and Jobs
Lifestyle, Money and Consumerism	money and happiness, buying brands, shopping as a pastime	33	Vocabulary: Shopping and Spending
Environment	fossil fuels, plastic and packaging, who should pay for pollution	30	Vocabulary: Environment
Media and Advertising	advertising to children, celebrity and fame, good and bad news	30	Vocabulary: Media and Communication
Arts, Culture and Traditions	funding the arts, disappearing traditions, spending on weddings	27	Writing: Task 2 Essay Types
Sport	banning dangerous sports, the Olympics, sport and national pride	21	Vocabulary: Sport and Activities
Cities, Housing and Transport	growing cities, old or new buildings, public transport	21	Vocabulary: Towns and Cities
Crime and Law	prison or education, youth crime, technology and crime	13	Writing: Paragraphs and Cohesion
Travel and Tourism	mass tourism and its effects on local people	5	Vocabulary: Holidays and Travel

🔁 Questions That Keep Coming Back

Some themes were reported again and again, in different exam periods.

8× **Phones and social contact**
2018–2022

7× **Online or classroom learning**
2018–2022

6× **Local or imported food**
2018–2023

6× **Long working hours**
2019–2023

6× **Celebrity and fame**
2018–2020

5× **Banning dangerous sports**
every year, 2020–2024

5× **Spending on weddings**
2018–2022

5× **Uniforms at school and work**
2018–2024

5× **Throwaway society and waste**
2018–2019

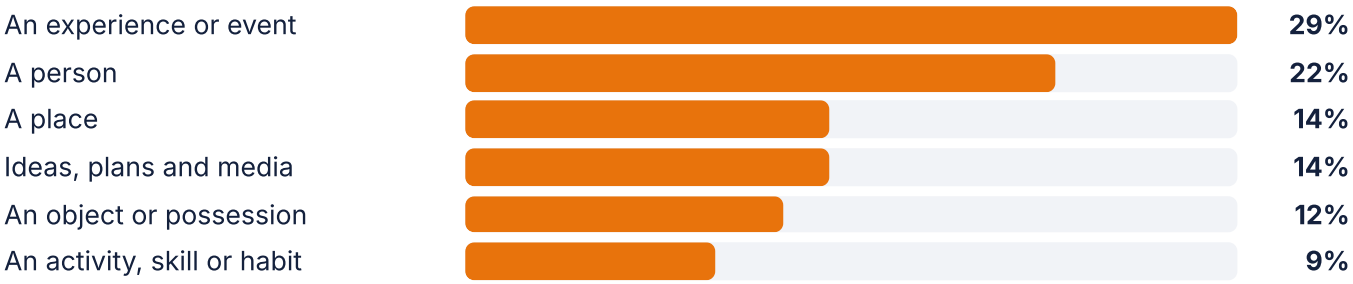
4× **Taxing unhealthy food**
2018–2020

Based on reported questions – not official IELTS data

Speaking Part 2: What Kind of Cue Card?

In Part 2, you get a task card, one minute to prepare and up to two minutes to speak [2]. We sorted 117 cue cards reported by test takers between 2020 and January 2024 by **what they ask you to describe**.

🗣️ Cue Cards by Type



Share of 117 student-reported Part 2 cue cards, January 2020 – January 2024. Source: our analysis of the IELTS Podcast recent Speaking questions [3].

What this means: half of all cue cards ask you to describe **an experience** or **a person**. Prepare these first.

One good story can answer many cue cards. A story about a trip with a friend could work for *a journey*, *a friend you'd like to travel with*, *a time you were happy* or *an outdoor activity in a new place*.

🔁 Cue Cards That Keep Coming Back

4×	Giving or receiving a gift	3×	An event that changed your life for the better
3×	A special day out that cost little money	3×	A happy event you organised
2×	An advertisement	2×	A new shop in your town
2×	An interesting neighbour	2×	A very intelligent person
2×	Something broken that was repaired	2×	An ambition you haven't achieved

Speaking Parts 1 and 3 – and How to Prepare

💬 What to Expect in Parts 1 and 3

Part 1 – about you

The examiner asks about familiar topics, "such as home, family, work, studies or interests" [2]. Expect everyday themes: your hometown, free time, food, weather, shopping, transport and technology.

Part 3 – ideas and society

The examiner discusses "issues related to the topic in Part 2 in a more general and abstract way" [2]. A cue card about a gift may lead to questions about money, shopping and celebrations in your country.

The same themes run through both papers. Gifts, advertising, shops, food, family, education, technology, plastic waste and sport all appear in our Writing **and** Speaking data. Vocabulary you learn for one paper helps you in the other.

🎯 Six Ways to Prepare

1. **Prepare broadly.** Build ideas and vocabulary for the eight biggest Writing topics, starting with Education.
2. **Learn topic phrases, not model answers.** Examiners notice memorised answers. Learn phrases you can use in any answer on that topic.
3. **Read the question carefully.** The official advice is to focus on the exact aspect of the topic in the question [1]. A question about online learning for adults is not a general question about education.
4. **Prepare stories for Part 2.** Have three or four flexible stories ready: a person, a place, a memorable day and something you own.
5. **Practise the repeat themes.** Use the "keep coming back" lists for timed practice.
6. **Expect the unexpected.** About one Task 2 question in ten came from the three smallest topic areas. Good planning skills will help you with any topic.

👩‍🏫 For Teachers

Use the topic chart to plan a course that covers the most common areas, and the "keep coming back" lists for mock tests and homework.

The cue-card types make a useful speaking warm-up: give students a type – *a person*, *a place* – and ask them to adapt one story to three different cue cards.

How We Did This – and What to Remember

🔍 How We Did This

Writing: we used a public archive of Task 2 questions that students reported after their tests, from July 2018 to January 2024 [4]. We removed exact repeats within the same exam period, which left 377 questions.

Speaking: we used a public archive of reported Part 2 cue cards from January 2020 to January 2024 [3]. After removing repeats within the same period, 117 cue cards remained. We sorted them by what they ask you to describe.

We placed each item in **one** group, first by keyword and then by checking every item by hand. Many questions mix two topics; for example, *online learning* could be Education or Technology. In these cases, we chose the topic the question focuses on.

⚠️ Please Note

- This is **not official IELTS data**. IELTS does not publish how often topics appear.
- The questions were **reported from memory** by test takers, so the wording is not exact, and some may be inaccurate.
- The data covers **Writing Task 2** and **Speaking Part 2** only, and stops in early 2024. It may not reflect the newest questions. The Speaking sample is smaller.
- Sorting questions into topics involves **judgement**. Other people might group them differently.
- **Past frequency does not predict your test.** We cannot guarantee that any topic will or will not appear.

📚 Sources

1. IELTS. *IELTS Academic: Writing test format*. ielts.org. Accessed 10 October 2026.
2. IELTS. *IELTS Academic: Speaking test format*. ielts.org. Accessed 10 October 2026.
3. IELTS Podcast. *Recent IELTS Speaking Questions*. Student-reported cue cards, 2020–2024. ieltspodcast.com/ielts-speaking/recent-questions. Accessed 10 October 2026.
4. IELTS Podcast. *250+ IELTS Writing Task 2 Questions: Recent Exam Topics*. Student-reported questions, 2018–2024. ieltspodcast.com/sample-ielts-task-2-questions. Accessed 10 October 2026.
5. IDP IELTS Australia. *Question types in the IELTS Academic Writing test* – Task 2 topics "are related to areas of general interest". ielts.com.au. Accessed 10 October 2026.

🎯 **Want to prepare these topics?** Start IELTS has lessons on Education, Technology, Health and Fitness, Environment, Media and Communication, Work and Jobs, Sport and Activities and more – plus Speaking lessons for all three parts. Find them at **startielts.co.uk**.

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