

# **SELF-PREP** **WRITING**

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# A WARM WELCOME

PLEASE NOTE: We provide these pages in the hope that they will help you to get the IELTS test band you need. The tips, techniques and skills presented here are not going to take you from a Band 2 to a Band 9, of course! For large gains, there is no alternative to hours of careful study and hours of practice. However, the suggestions can help you to make small improvements here and there and possibly improve your score by 0.5, 1.0 or very occasionally 1.5 points and that can make all the difference in the world – the difference between your IELTS success or failure.

We wish the best of luck with your IELTS test.

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## HOW TO GET STARTED WITH YOUR IELTS PREPARATION

**In some ways, IELTS sounds like something we all dreamed of as school children: a test that there is no way of failing!**

Of course, in the real world, things are not that simple. True, there is no such thing as a failing grade and instead all candidates who actually take the test are placed somewhere on a scale ranging from band 1 (non-user) to band 9 (expert user). On the other hand, a “passing” grade of band 1 is unlikely to impress many people!


There will be someone somewhere who enjoys doing IELTS tests purely for the fun of it. The vast majority of people, however, take the test as a necessary step towards doing something else, such as being accepted for a place at a university or being offered a job. You probably fall into this latter category too. If so, it is essential to find out the minimum acceptable band for you to continue with your plans. Although there is no pass mark as such in IELTS, achieving this band is what counts as success for you.

Unfortunately, even this can be a little complicated. While organizations will usually set a minimum overall band score, many also set minimum band scores for particular sections, such as listening or reading.

Once you know what your overall target is, you can then think about the sub-targets you should set for yourself for each section of the test. To do this, you must take into account your own personal balance of abilities so that you can use your strengths in one area to make up for your weaknesses in another. This knowledge will allow you to make calculations about what you need to get in each part of the test.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Find out what band (or combination of bands) is the minimum acceptable for you to continue with your plans. Use this as the basis for setting your targets in the various modules of the test.



# IELTS SELF-PREP WRITING

## 1. WHAT DO YOU NEED TO GET IN THE IELTS WRITING TEST?

As in every other part of the IELTS test, candidates do not pass or fail the Writing module but are instead placed somewhere on a scale ranging from band 1 (non-user) to band 9 (expert user). If, as is likely, you are taking the exam with a specific goal in mind, such as entering a university, make sure that you know the overall band you have to get, as well as the bands for each of the four modules of the test: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Another way in which the Writing module resembles the other parts of the IELTS exam is in the time pressure that candidates are under. They have only a single hour to write two unrelated pieces of work  
– one of at least 150 words and the other of at least 250 words.

For most people, this is a challenging pace.

Remember, the 60 minutes available to candidates cannot all be spent on writing. There are other tasks that also take time, such as reading and understanding the question, reading and understanding the data, organizing ideas and proofreading.

The Reading and Writing modules of the IELTS test comes in two forms: Academic and General Training. An outline of the contents of each form of the Writing test is shown here:

		Academic	General	
TASK 1	worth 1/3 of total marks	Describe data / Process	Letter	- 150 words or more - 20 mins approx.
TASK 2	worth 2/3 of total marks	Essay	Essay	- 250 words or more - 40 mins approx

As can be seen from the chart, Task 2 is worth twice as many marks as Task 1. On the other hand, twice as much time is usually allocated to it.

In the Academic Writing test, Task 1 usually involves being shown data of some kind, such as in the form of a chart, a graph or a table. Candidates then have to write a description of the information in front of them. The General Writing test, on the other hand, involves composing a letter in either a formal, semi-formal, or informal style.

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Task 2 in both versions of the test involves writing an essay of 250 or more words, but the actual question used in each test differs, with that in the Academic test sometimes being slightly harder.

The order in which the two writing tasks are tackled is up to the candidate, so some people prefer to ensure they have enough time for Task 2 by doing it first and then tackling Task 1.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Find out what band (or combination of bands) is the minimum acceptable for you to succeed with your plans. Use this as the basis for setting your targets in the various modules of the test.

## 2. WHAT ARE YOUR TASK 1 PROBLEMS IN THE ACADEMIC TEST?

The biggest difference between the Academic and the General Training versions of the IELTS Writing test is in the type of activity set for Task 1. In the former, candidates have to compose a letter of some kind. This takes a certain amount of care, particularly when it comes to choosing language of the correct level of formality, but there is unlikely to be anything that will greatly surprise those who have done adequate preparation.

Task 1 of the Academic test is far less predictable. It involves writing a short essay to summarize or explain a set of data. The type of language required can differ greatly from test to test depending on the exact form of information given.

Without a lot of practice using a wide range of different question types, it is possible to get a very nasty surprise on exam day.

On later pages, we will look at some of the types of data that regularly appear in Task 1 of the Academic Writing test. Try to become familiar with their major features and to get a feeling for what you find easy or challenging about summarizing them. Remember to take into account all of the steps involved. After all, putting words down on paper is only one part of the writing process, and possibly not the one that you find most difficult. It may be, for example, that you have problems deciding how to structure your essays or choosing which facts to write about.

### SELF-STUDY

In order to find out where your problems lie, do an IELTS practice test without setting yourself a time limit, but taking note of how long you spend going through the various stages of providing an answer. Think too about how comfortable and confident you feel during each of these stages. Where are the problem areas?

There are a number of things that could be preventing you from getting the score you need, such as not understanding data clearly and quickly enough, not making the right decisions about what to include and what to leave out, not being able to structure your answer properly and not being able to link your ideas coherently.

Once you have some idea where your particular problems lie, take note of what is said on the pages that follow about that aspect of the test. When trying future practice tests, pay particular attention to trying to improve in those areas.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

There are a number of different reasons why you could be losing points in Task 1 questions. Use IELTS practice tests to help you identify these areas, and the information in the pages that follow to give you guidance about how to overcome these problems.



## 3. WHAT DO YOU NEED TO PRODUCE?

It is an obvious truth: if you approach a test not knowing what you are expected to do, you are going to have a hard time doing it. In other words, it is clearly in your best interests to find out as much as you can about the structure of the test and the marking system. Could you at this moment clearly and simply explain these features of the test to someone else? If the answer is no, you should keep on reading.

IELTS takes a lot of care to make sure that its process of evaluation remains consistent. Markers are given thorough training in what standards to apply when looking at the essays of candidates. Furthermore, they are retested every two years to make sure that their skills remain of a high enough standard over time.

Grades are awarded to candidates based on how well they perform in each of four areas:

- a) task achievement (Task 1) / task response (Task 2)
- b) coherence and cohesion
- c) lexical resource and grammatical range
- d) accuracy.

Putting all of this into more straightforward language, the markers check to see whether candidates properly and completely answer the question, do so in a way that is logical and easy to follow, use a range of appropriate vocabulary and grammar, and use it accurately. These four different elements are considered to be equally important.

Occasionally, candidates will try to memorize a number of model answers in the hope

that they will be able to slightly amend them on the day of the test and achieve a very high band score. This is a poor idea for a number of reasons.

For one thing, it is obviously dishonest in that any good score achieved in this way would not be a true reflection of a candidate's ability. On a more practical level, it won't work. The tests differ too much one from another so the chances are that nothing a candidate has memorized will be useful. Even in the unlikely event that something is useable, the markers are specifically trained to spot answers of this type. In other words, genuine study is a far better use of your time.

## SELF STUDY

Go through the model answers for several IELTS tests. As you look at them, think about the marking criteria given above. Pay attention to such things as linking expressions and the strength of supporting examples and arguments. As you look over several different model answers to Task 1 of the Academic Test, take note of how the vocabulary and grammar changes according to the type of data being presented

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Make sure that you have a clear understanding of what kind of answer the markers are looking for in the IELTS Writing test.

## 4. HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE TASK 1 QUESTIONS?

"I'll be with you in two minutes!" It's a phrase you may well have used a number of times in your life – perhaps when you are in the middle of doing something and a colleague or a family member interrupts you. Politely asking another 120 seconds isn't such a big deal, is it?

Actually, sometimes it can be. In the IELTS Writing test, you only have about 20 minutes to get through Task 1, and not all of it can be spent actually putting words on the page. Time also has to be taken to look over data, plan what you will say and check your answer. Even the writing itself may be frustratingly slow since you will have to make sure that what you write is legible.

With so little time available, spending two minutes in confusion about the meaning of a question is a disaster.

It represents the loss of a massive 10% of your total time.

The more quickly you can understand what questions mean and what charts and graphs are showing you, the more time you will have to answer the question.

Task 1 questions usually fall into one of four common types: static data questions, dynamic data questions, process questions, and questions about how something works. You should make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with all four types and can recognize them as soon as you see them. (More information about each of these types is given on later pages.)

With so little time at your disposal, every single minute is a valuable resource. For this reason, you should plan carefully and try to be very organized about how long you will spend on the reading, planning, writing and checking stages when answering the Task 1 question. Above all, do not lose sight of the fact that Task 2 is worth twice as many points. This means no matter what the temptation, you should not allow yourself to spend any more than 20 minutes on Task 1. If you think this may be a problem, do Task 2 first.

### SELF-STUDY

Look over a few examples of Task 1 questions from the Academic Writing test. Do not worry about actually trying to answer the questions. Concentrate instead on recognizing the type of question and the type of information you are being asked to consider.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Time is very tight in the test, so make sure you can recognize the different types of Task 1 question as soon as you see them to avoid wasting time in confusion about what you are looking at.

## 5. WHAT IS YOUR SYSTEM FOR TACKLING TASK 1?

Many a student living away from home for the first time has discovered that it can easily take twenty minutes to iron just a couple of shirts or blouses. Someone who has been ironing for years, on the other hand, follows a set way of doing things and may get through ten or twelve shirts in the same period. There's no great mystery about this, of course. Having a system and becoming proficient with it generally leads to great increases in speed and efficiency.

Twenty minutes is also how long you will have to complete Task 1 of the IELTS writing test. If you approach it without any forethought, you may well find that when time is up, you have little to show for it but four or five clumsily written sentences. Just as with any other skill, the way to do well in Task 1 is to have a system and to practice with it until it becomes second nature.

A basic overview of a suggested system is shown below. On subsequent pages, we will go into more detail about some of the major steps. If you regularly practice using this system, your ability to write suitable answers to Task 1 questions will greatly improve.

### Step One – Understanding

Spend a few moments making sure that you clearly understand a) the question, b) the data being presented.

### Step Two – Decide what to include

This step is easy in the case of questions about a process since the main steps will already be given in the diagram. However, you may have to consider what to take as your starting point. For example, in a diagram about the water cycle, should you begin with sea or with the clouds?

If you are faced with describing data, things are a little more complicated. You will be expected to highlight important points, not give a full list of every single number or value shown. Generally speaking, the details you should look for are: a) the overall trend, b) the highest points or biggest quantities, c) the lowest points or smallest quantities, and d) anything unusual in the data.

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## Step Three – Organize your content

Decide the order in which you will present the data. Most often this will simply be the order in which the information appears unless there is some logical reason to change it.

## Step Four – Think about linking

This is a step that many candidates forget to do. Coherence is one of the main factors being marked in the essay, so it makes sense to think briefly about what language you will use to bring everything together. Will you simply be adding details one after another (also, in addition, furthermore) or will you have the opportunity to compare and contrast (while, whereas, on the other hand)? Spending even just a few seconds thinking about this question can suggest the basic direction you should take when you begin writing.

## Step Five – Writing

Once you have decided what to write, the key thing is to get on with it. Being indecisive and starting too late – or worse, changing your mind partway through your essay – will be disastrous in terms of time management.

## Step Six – Checking

Look for any vocabulary or spelling mistakes, but do not try to make major changes to content.

## 6. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POTENTIAL SYSTEM PITFALLS?

Having a system for tackling Task 1 is very important, but there are a number of possible traps you may fall into if you are not careful. Luckily, simply by being aware that these dangers exist, you are less likely to fall victim to them.

### Pitfall 1 – The Question

Candidates are sometimes so fixed on the understanding the data being presented to them that they forget to read through the question carefully enough. This raises the worrying possibility that they will base all of their subsequent work on a misunderstanding. Look at the question carefully and make sure that you understand a) precisely what data is being presented, and b) what you are being asked to do with that data.

### Pitfall 2 – The Data

Glancing over data without clearly understanding it may leave you with more time for writing, but it may also mean that what you write is largely nonsense, or at least highly incomplete. Make sure that you have analyzed the data sufficiently before you move to the next stage.

### Pitfall 3 – Planning

One of the most common mistakes made by candidates is to rush through the planning stage and try to write a final draft too soon. Unfortunately, this greatly increases the likelihood that there will be insufficient content in their plan, which can mean that after a sentence or two, they run out of ideas and are left without any clear idea about how to continue. A two-minute saving in preparation time is not much of a bargain if it leads to five minutes of panic and head-scratching during the writing stage.

### Pitfall 4 – Changing Plans in the Writing Stage

The time to make your plans is, logically enough, in the planning stage. If you have given sufficient thought as to how to proceed, there should be no reason for drastic revisions later. Making major changes to your plan in the writing stage is a major problem – and potentially a disaster – because you are very likely to run out of time

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or complete the task only by eating into the time allocated for Task 2. Don't begin writing too soon! Make sure you know what you want to say before you begin saying it. This will save you time overall.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Having a system for approaching Task 1 will help you to answer efficiently and effectively, but only if you use the system properly.



## 7. HOW SHOULD YOU APPROACH UNDERSTANDING DATA QUESTIONS?

The number twenty-five can mean many different things. Are we talking about 25% or something happening 25 times? A score of 25 out of 25 is impressive. One of 25 or 25 out of 100, not so much. Has something risen to a value of 25 or fallen to a value of 25?

What is clear is that without a thorough understanding of the context in which it appears, 25 is fairly meaningless. What is more, the context directly affects the language we use. A graph that shows changes in values up to the present day will most likely have to be described in present perfect tense. One that deals with changes in, say, the nineteenth century is more likely to require simple past tense.

Our understanding of the data also affects other aspects of our writing too.

For example, it can change the pronouns we need to use to describe a diagram. If the numbers in a graph refer to a company's turnover, the pronoun we use is likely to be "it". (It has risen to \$25 million.) If we are talking about company profits, on the other hand, we will probably need the pronoun "they".

Even the prepositions we have to use will depend on the exact nature of a statistic. Consider the case of a company that had sales of \$50 million two years ago but only \$25 million this year. If we say sales fell by \$25M, we are referring to the size of the drop. If we say that sales fell to \$25M, we are talking about the actual sales figure.

As you look over the data presented in a Task 1 question, consider the following points.

What do the numbers represent? (*Percentages? Frequencies? Durations?*)

What units are the numbers in? (*Dollars? Seconds? Millions of years?*)

What time is being referred to? (*The completed past? The past until now? The future?*)

What is the subject? (*This should usually be clearly stated in the question.*)

## SELF-STUDY

Being able to understand charts and graphs quickly can often be a tricky task, particularly if you are not used to it. Look through a number of Task 1 data questions. Don't worry about actually answering the questions. Focus instead on understanding and what you are looking at as quickly as possible.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Numbers and data mean little if you don't understand the context in which they are presented.

It is difficult to say anything very sensible about a number if you have no idea what it represents.

## 8. HOW SHOULD YOU SELECT CONTENT IN TASK 1 QUESTIONS?

A diagram, a graph or a chart presents everything all at once in a visual form. In writing, however, this is not possible. We have to choose how we will divide information up, what things to focus on, what things to ignore completely, and the order in which we should go about presenting these facts.

Imagine, for example, a line graph that shows changes in the sales of different genres of popular music over a number of decades. Should the information be broken down by genre or by decade? Either way is possible. How should we decide which is better?

Often the wording of the original question can give us guidance on this point. Are we being asked to describe the situation in each decade or the changes in popularity of each genre?

Whatever the emphasis in the original question, that is the emphasis you should go with in your answer.

It is also a good idea to consider to what extent we will divide up the data. Trying to present everything at once may overwhelm the reader. On the other hand, going through each of ten different decades in exhaustive detail may make things unnecessarily long-winded. Getting through it is also likely to be a thoroughly boring challenge for the marker. Even worse, giving too much detail is extremely expensive in terms of writing time.

It is usually better to break the information in a chart or graph into a small number of sections – perhaps two or three. Summarizing the key facts in each of these sections then becomes a more manageable task and an easier read. Remember, the four points we should try to mention are: a) the overall trend, b) the highest points or biggest quantities, c) the lowest points or smallest quantities, and d) anything unusual in the data. Doing much more than this is likely to mean cutting into our limited time.

### SELF-STUDY

Go through some example from the IELTS Writing Test. Don't worry about trying to

answer the questions completely. Instead, focus on looking for and noting the four main types of information noted above.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Trying to include every single detail in your description of data is unnecessary and risks overwhelming the reader. Break up the information into a small number of parts and then mention overall trends, highest and lowest values, and anything unusual in the data.

## 9. DOES IT MATTER WHETHER THE QUESTION PRESENTS STATIC OR DYNAMIC DATA?

Imagine a pie chart that shows the market share of six different car manufacturers. Now imagine a line graph showing the same thing. Surely there's not much difference between them, right?

Actually, wrong. The way you would describe the information would be very different in each case. Why? Because a pie chart is static. It shows the situation at one particular point. A line graph, on the other hand, is dynamic. It shows how things change over time.

This is a difference that matters very much indeed when it comes to explaining what you can see.

With a question that presents you with static data, you are likely to need expressions such as, *comprises, is made up of, amounts to*, and so on. The tense you use is most likely to be either simple past (if the data refers to a past situation) or present simple (if it refers to a current one). It is unlikely that you will need a perfect tense (*e.g. has fallen, had risen*) since these describe changes over time.

When it comes to questions that present you with dynamic data, on the other hand, things are very different. The vocabulary you need will largely be connected to movement of some kind (*e.g. rose, climbed, dropped, fell*) or lack of movement (*e.g. remained steady, continued unchanged*). If there are two or more different items being tracked over time, you may also need expressions to show the relationship between them (*e.g. narrowed, widened*).

Most tenses are possible, so you have to be very careful to ensure that you know whether the period you are talking about is completely in the past, continues up to the present, is in the middle of happening, or is projected to happen in the future. Since discussing such data often involves describing changes between one point in time and another, perfect tenses are common.

Another important fact to notice is that whereas pie charts are clearly static and line graphs are clearly dynamic, bar charts may be either. This means that when you are faced with a bar chart, you must look at it particularly carefully to see what kind of information it contains. Does it track change over time. If so, it is dynamic. If not, it is static.

## SELF-STUDY

Look over the Task 1 questions of a number of different practice tests. It is not necessary to try to answer the questions. Instead, simply decide as quickly as you can whether the information you are being presented with is static or dynamic. Decide also what kind of language you would use to describe it and what tense or tenses would be most suitable.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

The information presented in Task 1 questions will either be dynamic or static. It is important to be able to distinguish quickly and clearly between the two because this will have a major effect on the language you will have to use in your description of what you see.

## 10. WHAT SHOULD YOU MENTION WHEN TALKING ABOUT STATISTICS?

*“Excuse me, I’m ready to order.”*

*“That’s all, thank you very much.”*

Look at the sentences above. The first is a very natural and polite way to initiate a conversation in a restaurant. The second is a very natural and polite way to conclude a conversation in a restaurant. Notice anything missing? How about the order?

Beginning an essay and finishing an essay are both important, but there is no denying the fact that it is the body paragraphs in the middle that do most of the hard work when it comes to giving the facts and figures.

When you write your essay, it is a good idea to begin with the body paragraphs.

Use them to give the important details and examine the patterns, trends, important similarities or key differences in the graph, chart or table you have in front of you.

There is no perfect number when it comes to writing body paragraphs and to some extent it depends on the type of information you are attempting to explain. In the majority of cases, a two-paragraph middle section is probably enough to explain the key details, but don’t be afraid to use three paragraphs (or even more) if this makes it easier to explain the information clearly.

There are several typical ways that trends and changes can be described, such as by using expressions comprising an **adjective + noun** (*a sharp rise*) or a **verb + adverb** (*rose sharply*). Both are possible, but it may sometimes sound more sophisticated to use the latter – particularly if you list a number of changes in the same sentence.

*There was a moderate increase, a small fall and then a sudden big increase in income between 2005 and 2010.*

*Incomes increased moderately, fell slightly, and then increased sharply between 2005 and 2010.*

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Another point related to vocabulary is the use of dramatic turns of phrase such as “*skyrocketed*”, “*plummeted*” or “*flatlined*”. Generally speaking, expressions of this kind are more suitable in headlines for popular newspapers rather than in formal essays. Using more restrained language, such as “*increased dramatically*” is more likely to be appropriate.

A final point is that you should remember to include the actual numbers. Without them, your writing will be omitting vital information. Imagine if a government bulletin said “sales tax will increase sharply next year”, but didn’t mention whether the increase was from 3% to 5% or from 3% to 50%. It makes a difference.

## SELF-STUDY

Look over the model answers in some IELTS practice tests. Highlight the language used to describe statistical changes. Take note of the ADJECTIVE + NOUN and VERB + ADVERB combinations and try to get a feel for the slight difference in tone this can sometimes convey.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

The language you use to describe the data given in charts and graphs should be appropriate in terms of register and should include the actual numbers.



## 11. WHAT SPECIAL CHALLENGES ARE THERE WHEN LOOKING AT TABLES OF DYNAMIC OR STATIC DATA?

Although pie charts, line graphs and bar charts have their problems, they also have one very great advantage: they all show information visually. It is much easier for the human brain to recognize patterns when they are presented in the form of a picture of some kind rather than a series of numbers. This is, after all, the whole point of using charts and graphs in the first place.

Look at the table shown on this page. What do you numbers tell you? After a few seconds, you may notice that the first row shows a falling trend and the second row shows a rising one. Did you realize, however, that the rate of the former is constant whereas the rate of the latter is quickening? Probably not.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
90.5	75.4	63.1	48.6	38.4
40.6	43	52	65	95

The lesson is that you must be particularly careful when describing tables. In the table above, it is clear that the information looks at a change over time and so is dynamic. In some other tables, however, it may be harder to tell immediately whether it is dynamic or static, so this is something you should always look at carefully.

Another problem is that the key facts you have to provide – overall trends, highest values or largest amounts, lowest values or smallest amounts, and any unusual or noteworthy points – do not jump out at you in the same way that they do with charts and graphs. This means it is very easy to overlook something important and lose points.

The easiest solution to this problem is simply to take a few moments to draw out the data on a graph or chart of your own so that you can get a clear visual representation of what the numbers actually mean. You will not be marked on this diagram, so there is no need to spend ten minutes trying to turn it into a masterwork of artistic excellence. Something rough and ready will do perfectly well as long as it presents the information clearly.

### SELF-STUDY

Find some Task 1 questions containing tables. Practice making quick diagrams based

on these.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

It is easy to miss important information when looking at tables, so draw a rough graph or chart based on the numbers given in order to make such oversights less likely.

## 12. HOW SHOULD YOU COMPARE AND CONTRAST IN TASK 1 QUESTIONS?

If you told some friends that an athlete finished the New York City Marathon in two hours and twenty-three minutes, how would they respond? Probably with a shrug of the shoulders and the question, “Did she win?” Knowing about the runner in isolation does not mean much. It is her performance in comparison to the other competitors in the race that people care about.

Similarly, when a chart, graph or table presents the same kind of information for two or more entities (countries, say), the natural thing to do – not to mention the most interesting one – is to make comparisons and look for contrasts. In such cases, it is not enough to talk about each item in the table separately. You must talk about it in relation to the other the other items around it.

There are two main ways to talk about how the different entities in a table stand in relation to one another.

We can either talk about the ways in which they are the same (compare them) or the ways in which they are different (contrast them).

The former approach uses expressions such as *similarly*, *likewise* and *as well as*. Those for the latter include *whereas*, *however* and *in contrast*. In the same essay, we might include a mixture of both types.

It is also possible to explain the same facts in more straightforward or more complex ways. For example, imagine a chart showing historical Old World populations (in millions). We could express the same basic facts at several different levels of sophistication, as shown below. (*The example sentences have been given here without numbers to make the differences in language clearer. In the test, you should also add the actual values.*)

*The population of Asia rose a lot but the population of Africa only rose a little between 1500 and 1750.*

*Between 1500 and 1750, the population of Asia more than doubled whereas that of Africa rose only slightly.*

*The marked population increase in Asia in the century and a half up to the year 1750*

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*was in stark contrast to the barely noticeable one in Africa over the same period.*

Using fancy language correctly is fine if you can do it, but it is far more important to explain the information clearly.

## SELF-STUDY

Look through the model answers from some IELTS practice tests. Underline the language being used to make contrasts and comparisons. Memorize a small number of such expressions (taken either from the practice tests or from other sources) and work on being able to use these perfectly. This will help you far more than using a large number of expressions badly.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

When you are given facts and numbers about two or more entities, compare and contrast them

## 13. HOW SHOULD YOU LINK CONTENT IN TASK 1?

*Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the West Line decreased from 250 million to 150 million people. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the North Line increased from 90 million to 210 million people. Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the South Line remained unchanged at 30 million people.*

The sentences are accurate and grammatical, so an IELTS essay written in this style would be loved by the markers, right? The answer, of course, is no. IELTS markers would hate an essay like this, and would actually find it hard work to get through. The problem is that there is no linkage of ideas. Every fact is given its own isolated sentence, without the slightest acknowledgement that the other sentences even exist.

Good writers use expressions that link the ideas in an essay together in ways that both avoid repetition and makes relationships clearer.

There are many different techniques for this, such as using conjunctions (*and, but, whereas*), adverbs (*however, moreover*), relative clauses (*the number who, the people that*), demonstratives (*those passengers, these figures*), pronouns, (*it, they,*) omitting repeated expressions, and so on. Notice the linking in the following example sentences about a chart showing the passenger numbers in millions of four subway lines in an imaginary city.

*Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the West Line dropped from 250 to 150 million people **whereas** the number of passengers on the North Line grew from 90 to 120 million.*

*Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the West Line dropped from 250 to 150 million people. **The number** on the North Line, **on the other hand**, grew from 90 to 120 million.*

*Between 2000 and 2005, the number of passengers on the West Line dropped from 250 to 150 million people **whereas** the number **who used** the North Line grew from 90 to 120 million **over the same period**.*

*Over the period 2000 to 2005, the fortunes of the West Line **contrasted sharply with those** of the North Line. **Whereas** passenger numbers for **the former** dropped from 250 to 150 million over **this period**, **those** for **the latter** rose from 90 to 210 million people.*

# IELTS SELF-PREP WRITING

## SELF-STUDY

Look through some Task 1 model answers from the IELTS practice tests. Underline any example of linking that you find.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Your essay will be easier to read and understand (and will be scored more highly) if you link your ideas together, making clear what relationships exist between the various facts and statistics you are discussing.

## 14. HOW SHOULD YOU WRITE YOUR OPENING STATEMENT?

How would you feel if someone knocked on your door and then, the moment you opened it, suddenly began shouting numbers and percentages at you? Wouldn't you at least one to know what the subject was?

It makes sense to begin your essay with an opening statement that clearly introduces the information you are about to discuss.

In most cases, the easiest way to do this is simply to slightly reword the title of the graph or chart that you have been asked to describe.

In order to avoid wasting time wondering about how to begin an essay, it is a good idea to learn one or two highly adaptable expressions (e.g. *show, illustrate, make clear*) and use them to help you get through your opening and onto the details as quickly as possible.

Another thing that you may want to include in your opening is an overview of the data you are about to discuss. Admittedly, it is not clear that this is strictly necessary. IELTS have always been somewhat vague about what should go into the opening and closing statements for in Task 1 essays and indeed whether they are necessary at all. After all, the entire essay is short enough to be considered an overview of the data in itself.

On the other hand, playing safe and adding an overview will at least not lose you any points. It may cost you a little time, however, so if you do decide to include one, make sure that it doesn't do much more than give a one-sentence summary of the overall trend. It is not necessary to add any numbers at this point since this would simply mean you were repeating yourself a sentence or two later.

### SELF-STUDY

Look over the Task 1 questions for several IELTS practice tests. Don't worry about answering the entire question but focus instead on writing opening statements. Compare what you have with the opening statements given in the model answers and take careful note of any differences.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Learn a few suitable expressions that you can use to help you write an opening statement quickly and clearly.



## 15. HOW SHOULD YOU APPROACH QUESTIONS ABOUT PROCESSES?

In some ways, essays about processes are easier to write than ones based on charts or graphs. This is because there can be so much information in the latter, some of it has to be omitted, leading to tricky decisions about which details to include and which to drop. With process questions, on the other hand, this problem is taken care of for you. There is no question about which stages to include: you should include all of them.

Another advantage is that the order in which you should give information is also determined already.

The logical place to begin is with the first step. After this, you then follow the process through until you reach the last step. If the diagram you are describing is very complex, however, it may take you a few moments to discover where these starting and ending points are.

Sometimes there are complications when it comes to deciding where to begin or end your explanation. This can happen when the process in question is circular, which is to say it has no actual start or end point. Consider the water cycle, for example. At different times, the water may be in the clouds, in rivers or in the sea. It isn't obvious that any of these points is any more of a beginning than the others. In such cases, there is nothing that can be done but to begin somewhere that seems logical and follow the process round.

The linking of ideas in essays describing processes tends to be very simple. Heavy use is made of expressions for ordering information (first, next, after that, etc) and most of the time, simple present tense is sufficient to explain what happens at each step. Since in many cases, the actions taken are more important than knowing the identity of the person who takes the action, passive voice is often natural.

There may be difficult academic or scientific language required to explain some of the steps in a process, but the words you need will usually be labeled somewhere in the diagram, so there should be no excuse for making spelling mistakes.

# IELTS SELF-PREP WRITING

## SELF-STUDY

Go through some examples of process questions in IELTS practice papers. Note the use of passive voice and the simplicity of the linking.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Process questions tend to be fairly straightforward to write about since the tenses usually used to describe them are not complex and there is no need for any difficult decisions about which stages of the process to include or omit. The main decision you may have to make when it comes to structuring your answers is do decide what to take as your start and end points.

## 16. HOW SHOULD APPROACH TASK 1 OF THE GENERAL WRITING TEST?

The main way in which the General version of the IELTS writing test differs from the Academic one is that instead of being given 20 minutes to write a description of statistical data, candidates are given the same amount of time to write a letter. Although it is probably fair to say this is an easier activity, it is not without its own challenges and it would be foolish to attempt to tackle it with little or no preparation.

The letter may be in one of three different registers: formal, semi-formal or informal. Making a mistake and writing in an inappropriate style will cost points, so it is important to fully understand the situation presented in the question. When you begin your letter, you should be clear about: a) who the letter is addressed to, b) what this person's relationship is to you, and c) the purpose of the letter.

It is very important to keep this purpose in mind since writing about things unrelated to it may not only cost you points for irrelevance, but will also waste time that could have been spent doing something more useful.

If the letter you are asked to write is a job application, a business letter or a letter of complaint, the language you use should be formal. If you are asked to write a personal letter, the language may be semi-formal or informal depending on who you are writing to and why you are writing. For example, a letter to your landlord, your teacher or your doctor might be semi-formal, whereas one to your best friend or your uncle will usually be informal.

The level of formality and whether or not you know the name of the person you are writing to will affect how you begin and end your letter. Formal letters to a person whose name you do not know usually end with the expression "Yours faithfully". Those to someone whose name is known, on the other hand, end with "Yours sincerely".

Formality also has a major influence on word choice and the use of structure, with formal English avoiding contractions (I'm, we're, etc.) and colloquial expressions (guy, cool, loads of), but making more use of passive voice, educated vocabulary and more complex sentences.

# IELTS SELF-PREP WRITING

Since letters are something that most of us feel at least somewhat familiar with, a major danger to avoid is writing immediately without having given sufficient thought to what you will say. Running out of ideas halfway through a paragraph and having to begin again could prove disastrous in terms of wasted time.

Before starting your essay, spend four or five minutes in the planning stage mapping out how many paragraphs you will need and what the rough contents of each of them will be. Take sufficient time to make sure your structure will work and then stick with it. Do not panic and try to rearrange everything once you have started writing.

## SELF-STUDY

Look through the model answers and take notice of how formality affects the way things are expressed. Underline any examples you find of word choice, sentence structure or grammar that reflect the formality (or informality) of the letter.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

When tackling Task 1 in the General Writing test, make sure to allow adequate time to plan out what you want to say and then keep to this structure. Ensure that the formality of the letter you write is suitable and consistent throughout.

## 17. WHAT DO YOU NEED TO PRODUCE IN TASK 2 OF THE WRITING TEST?

Task 2 of the Academic and the General versions of the IELTS Writing test are similar enough to be considered together. In both cases, you will have to write at least 250 words about a topic, taking great care to keep your essay relevant and well supported with facts and examples.

Depending on the particular question set, Task 2 is a test of such things as a candidate's ability to present a solution, evaluate ideas, present evidence and justify an opinion. Points are awarded based on an essay's relevance, coherence and cohesion, range of vocabulary and grammar, and accuracy.

There is a great deal of disagreement about how many different types of question there are in Task 2 of the IELTS Writing test. To a certain extent, it is a matter simply of how to label them. It is fair to say, however, that Task 2 questions typically ask candidates to do one of the following things:

say the extent to which they agree with something

discuss the case for/benefits of something and the case against/drawbacks of it

discuss two different views on a topic

discuss two different views on a topic and then give an opinion

discuss the causes of a particular problem and suggest possible solutions

discuss two related questions about a topic (Both questions must be answered.)

give an opinion on a topic

# IELTS SELF-PREP WRITING

No matter what kind of essay a candidate is asked to write, there are several things that should be borne in mind. The first is that it is essential to read the question clearly. Candidates must be very clear about what they are being asked to do. They will lose points if they provide an outstanding answer to a question they were not asked.

Using advanced vocabulary or difficult grammatical structures is of course wonderful for those who can do it accurately, but more important is clarity, coherence and cohesion. It should be easy for the marker to understand the points being made and see how these follow logically from one another.

## SELF-STUDY

Look through the Task 2 questions from several different practice tests. Don't worry about actually answering the question. Instead, focus on trying to understand as quickly as possible what it is that you are being asked to do.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Make sure you are familiar with what the markers are looking for in Task 2 essays and the major question types that may appear.

## 18. WHEN SHOULD AND WHEN SHOULDN'T YOU ADD YOUR OWN OPINION ABOUT AN ISSUE?

Give your opinion to a Task 2 questions when you are asked for it. Don't give it when you are not. It sounds easy, but unfortunately it may not be, because the wording of the question itself may not always make it immediately obvious whether or not your opinion is required. Similarly, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether you are supposed to include the opposing viewpoint.

Look at the following questions and decide: a) whether or not they are asking for an opinion, and b) whether it is necessary to discuss both sides of the issue in question.

*a. Some say that globalization has made the world a better place while others disagree. What arguments can be made on both sides of the issue?*

*b. Do you agree that globalization has made the world a better place?*

*c. "The invention of the personal computer has improved society." Consider reasons why some people might agree and others disagree with this statement, and then give your own view.*

*d. What are the advantages and disadvantages of nuclear energy?*

*e. Some people strongly support the death penalty for certain crimes. Others strongly disagree. Discuss both views and give your opinion.*

*f. Has the impact of the computer on society been mainly a negative or a positive one?*

*g. Do the advantages of nuclear energy outweigh the disadvantages?*

*h. Some people feel that the death penalty is the only acceptable punishment for murder. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this position?*

All of the questions above fall into one of three categories described below. Look carefully at each of these categories and then again at the exact wording of each question. Notice how even small changes in the way a question is phrased change the way in which you must answer it.

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## *TYPE 1 (Questions a, d and h)*

*These questions ask for a discussion of both sides of an issue, but not for your opinion.*

## *TYPE 2 (Questions c, e and g)*

*Questions of this type require that you discuss both sides of an issue and then give your opinions.*

## *Type 3 (Questions b and f)*

*Questions like this ask you directly for your opinions. In such cases, you are expected to give reasons for your own opinion, but it is not necessary to give the opposing point of view.*

A further point to note is that in questions in which you are asked to give an opinion, you are being assessed only on how well you explain yourself. It does not matter whether the views you express are something that you actually believe. In other words, you are free to give whatever opinion you feel is easiest to explain. You should take full advantage of this fact in order to get the best possible score.

## **SELF-STUDY**

Look over the Task 2 questions for the IELTS practice test. It is not necessary to actually answer the questions. Instead, decide in each case whether or not you are being asked to provide an opinion. Read the model answers to check whether or not your interpretation of the instructions was right.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

You must be careful to always give your opinions when they are asked for and not give them when they are not.



## 19. WHAT IS YOUR SYSTEM FOR TACKLING TASK 2?

Just as in Task 1 of the of the IELTS Writing test, doing well in Task 2 means having a system and sticking to it. A suggested system is given in outline below. More details about some of the individual steps will be discussed on some of the pages that follow.

### Step One – Understanding

Spend a few moments making sure that you clearly understand the question. In particular, decide whether you are expected to a) discuss both sides of an issue but express no point of view about it, b) discuss both sides of an issue and then give your point of view, c) discuss your point of view about an issue with no need to mention the opposing viewpoint, or d) answer a two-part question about a topic.

### Step Two – Getting Ideas

The first step in the creative process is come up with a number of ideas that you can then use as the raw material for your essay. On a later page, we will look at a couple of useful techniques that can help you to generate the ideas that you need.

### Step Three – Decide what to include

Once you have a list of different ideas in front of you, the next step is to select which of them you want to include in your essay. Just because you have thought of a clever or interesting point about something does not mean that you should include it. If it is not relevant or cannot be connected to the rest of your essay in a logical way, you should discard it, no matter how profound an insight it may be.

### Step Four – Organize your content

Look over the notes you took in the previous step and consider how you will arrange them. In most cases, your essay will have either two or three body paragraphs. Questions that ask candidates to discuss both sides of an issue without giving an opinion can often be answered rather neatly by an essay with two body paragraphs. Those that ask for both sides of an issue and an opinion tend to be answered more comfortably by an essay with three body paragraphs.

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When trying to decide how many paragraphs you need, note that questions such as the following actually ask two different things: *“Pity is a common human emotion. How does pity affect the behaviour of individuals? Is pity a positive or a negative quality?”* The most straightforward structure for questions of this type is to have an introductory paragraph, a body paragraph for question one, a second body paragraph for question two, and a concluding paragraph.

## Step Five – Write your essay

If you have done the planning stage carefully enough, you should have a fairly clear idea of the basic shape of your essay before you start writing it. Begin with the body paragraphs first. Next, move to the conclusion. Ensure that it makes sense and follows logically from what you have already said. Finally, write your introduction.

## Step Six – Checking

Look for any vocabulary or spelling mistakes. Do not try to change content at this stage.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Use a system to make sure you write your essays as efficiently and effectively as possible.

## 20. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF YOUR SYSTEM FOR TASK 2 QUESTIONS?

The system for answering Task 2 questions will work well if it is used properly, but avoid the following pitfalls.

### Pitfall 1 – Starting too soon

It is always a bad idea in an IELTS test to pick up your pen and start to write without having given real thought to what you want to say. There are at least four steps you must follow before you get anywhere near the writing stage: check that you understand the question, generate a number of ideas, select from these ideas, and finally give some thought to how you will arrange these ideas in an essay. It sounds like a lot of work, but with practice, you should be able to get through the entire planning stage in no more than ten minutes.

### Pitfall 2 – Starting with the introduction

At first sight, it might not be immediately obvious why starting with the introduction is a bad idea. After all, the reader starts with the introduction, so why shouldn't the writer? There are two basic reasons why you should avoid doing it.

The first is that if you stick to your introduction rigidly, you may find that it sends you unwillingly down a certain path and restricts your freedom as you write. If you have planned properly, you will already have a fairly good idea of the overall structure of your essay, but having an introduction makes this structure too rigid from the outset, giving you little chance to amend things as you go.

Of course, you can choose not to stick rigidly to your introduction and make whatever adjustments you feel are necessary. However, if this happens, you will then have to go back and rewrite your introduction, eating up yet more of your precious time.

Adding the introduction last means your essay will always follow on from it smoothly. It is rather like the old joke about drawing your target around the arrow after you have fired it.

## Pitfall 3 – Changing ideas after the planning stage

Of the forty-minute period available to you for Task 2, you should be prepared to spend up to about ten minutes of it on the planning stage for your essay. The whole point of taking this much time – up to a quarter of the total – is to give you a clear idea of how you will structure your essay. Changing things after this point will probably mean that you run into time problems. In addition, any major new structuring ideas that you come up with are likely to be far less good than what you already had since you will have had little chance to consider them properly.

## Pitfall 4 – Not linking things properly

You must be careful as you are writing to ensure that ideas follow on logically from one another. As mentioned on an earlier page, you should memorize some key expressions for linking ideas. Rather than trying to remember a vast number of these but not be able to use them properly, it is better to have a small selection of expressions at your fingertips that you can use quickly and accurately.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Use the plan suggested on the previous page to help you get through Task 2 questions more efficiently, but be careful to avoid the various pitfalls mentioned on this page.

## 21. WHAT PROBLEMS MIGHT THERE BE WHEN TRYING TO UNDERSTAND QUESTIONS?

In the IELTS exam, confusion is a major enemy. There is very little time available for puzzling over the meaning of sentences, but there are also obvious dangers in rushing ahead if you still have doubts about what you are actually being asked to do. After all, it is hard to give a sensible reply if you don't understand the question. Here are a few tips you can try if you run into comprehension problems with questions.

### TIP 1 – Remove unnecessary adjective and adverbs

Look at the following group of words, “*Unsurprisingly... quickly... delicious-looking...*” This is what is left from a sentence when you take away the nouns and verbs. Using only the words that remain, it is difficult to have any real idea what the sentence is about.

But look what happens if we bring back the nouns (plus articles) and verbs and take away the adjectives and adverbs, “*the children... ate... the dessert.*” This is obviously much clearer. It is normal for the basic meaning of a sentence to be carried by the nouns and verbs, with the adjectives and adverbs adding precision and detail. Sometimes, you can use this fact to your advantage. If you are finding a sentence hard to follow, taking out the adjectives and adverbs may help you to focus in on the essential point being made.

### TIP 2 – Use simpler synonyms

It can sometimes be a little hard to follow a sentence comprised of many big or difficult words – even when you know the meaning of all of them individually. As an extreme example, consider the following sentences. Which version do you find easier to understand?

A.) *Do you concur with the almost universally-held notion that an overconsumption of confectionary takes its toll on our physical well-being?*

B.) *Do you agree with the common idea that eating too many sweets is bad for our health?*

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If you are finding a sentence a bit difficult to understand, try substituting some of the words for easier alternatives and see if that makes any difference.

## TIP 3 – Split the sentence up into grammatical sections

If a sentence is long and complex, it can sometime make sense to break it up into more manageable sections. For example, one common approach is to try to understand the grammar of a sentence by finding the main verb and working from there. This quite often reveals that the underlying structure is actually rather more basic than it at first appeared. Often the confusion stems from a lengthy subject or object. Look at the following (rather poorly-expressed) example.

*Those children who play too many video games become anti-social is a common belief. Do you agree?*

This example is probably too inelegantly written to ever make it into the test, but it illustrates the point. It is initially very confusing, but on realizing that the main verb is the word “is”, it becomes clear that the structure is actually very simple: “X is a common belief. Do you agree?” Everything up to the word “is” belongs to the subject.

## SELF-STUDY

Look over Task 2 questions from some IELTS practice test. Practice simplifying the questions. (Try this for practice, even if you are fairly certain of the meaning of the questions already.)

## THE BOTTOM LINE

When questions are difficult to understand, there are techniques you can use to simplify them.

## 22. HOW CAN YOU GET IDEAS FOR YOUR ANSWERS?

Once you are sure that you understand the question, the next step is to generate the ideas you need in order to help you answer it. Generally speaking, it makes sense to separate the process of *creating* ideas from that of *selecting* ideas to use. This is because it is better to generate more points than you actually need so that you will have the luxury of choosing the best of them. Two common methods are *brainstorming* and *open questioning*.

### Brainstorming

This is a well-known and widely-used technique in many fields. The basic idea is to note down whatever ideas come into your mind about a topic. You should try to be as creative and free-thinking as possible. For this technique to work, it is important to turn off your “*critical filter*”. In other words, you should accept anything that comes into your head, no matter how wild or unrealistic it seems.

Once you have a number of ideas written on the page, your critical filter can be switched back on. You can look through what you have, and keep only those ideas that seem useful.

The good point about brainstorming is that it can help lead you towards ideas and examples that you would never ordinarily have thought about. The bad point is that it is very unfocussed. The quality of the material you will generate is very unpredictable. This is less of a problem in situations in which you have a great deal of time, but in an exam, there is a danger of spending critical minutes using this technique and then having nothing worthwhile to show for it once you have finished.

### Open Questioning

A second way for helping you to produce useable ideas is to ask open questions about the topic under discussion. For example, imagine that candidates are asked to consider whether it is a good or a bad idea to ban the use of bicycles in city centres. Open questions that might be asked about this topic include, but are not limited to:

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*Who would this proposal affect?*

*How would it affect these people?*

*What would be the knock-on results of these effects?*

The advantage of using open questions to generate ideas is that the end results tend to be often less scattered and random than the results of brainstorming. The disadvantage is that it may be more difficult to arrive at truly original solutions, examples or arguments.

## SELF-STUDY

Both brainstorming and open questioning are things that candidates become better at with practice. Try looking through the Task 2 questions from several IELTS practice tests. It is not necessary to actually answer the questions, but try instead to generate ideas – first by brainstorming, and then by asking open questions. As you do this, notice the difference in the kinds of idea that each method typically throws up.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Use brainstorming and open questioning to help you come up with ideas to use in your essays.



## 23. HOW SHOULD YOU SUPPORT YOUR IDEAS?

*Cats are better than dogs.* Have I convinced you? Probably not. Simply stating that something is true is not a good way to encourage people to believe you. If you want to persuade others that you are right about something, you have to provide evidence of some kind. This of course also applies to your Task 2 essay in the IELTS Writing test. Each point you make should be supported by reasons, examples or facts if you hope to impress the marker.

However, it is also important to realize that not all types of support are equally strong.

Only the youngest children think, “Eat your vegetables *because I say so!*” is a compelling argument. In other words, it is not enough simply to write “because” or “for example” and then adding the first random fact you can think of. If your arguments and examples don’t support the point you are trying to make, the markers *will* notice.

Imagine an essay in answer to the question, “*To what extent do you agree with the belief that modern lifestyles have made growing up more difficult for children?*” Let’s look at some possible sentences made in response to this question.

*Children today often grow up with poor social skills and find it difficult to interact with other people. Many children used to play football, for example.*

This is very weak. What people used to do in the past is not the issue at hand. We want to know about children nowadays. The example is irrelevant. Let’s look at another.

*Children today often grow up with poor social skills and find it difficult to interact with other people. For example, they play video games and listen to podcasts.*

At first sight, there seems to be a logical connection between the claim and the supporting example. Closer examination reveals a problem, however. “Playing video

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games and listening to podcasts” are being presented as examples of *finding it difficult to interact* with others, but are they? After all, someone listening to a podcast is not actually having any difficulty interacting; he or she is not even trying to interact!

If we substitute another activity that people usually do by themselves, the problem becomes clearer. How convinced would you be by the following sentence? “Children today... find it difficult to interact with other people. For example, they brush their teeth.”

Let’s look at one more sentence.

*Children today often grow up with poor social skills because many of their favourite activities are done alone, such as playing video games and listening to podcasts.*

This is better. The reader may or may not be convinced by the argument, and there is always the point that some video games are interactive, but at least the writer has given an example that matches the claim and presented this link clearly to the reader.

## SELF-STUDY

Look over the model answers given to IELTS tests. Look at each major claim made and then underline the supporting arguments and examples. Note how they strengthen each point.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Give supporting evidence for each claim you make and make sure that it is clear and relevant.

## 24. HOW SHOULD YOU ORGANISE YOUR IDEAS?

There are many highly unusual ways to write a successful essay. This does not mean the IELTS Writing exam is a good place to go looking for them. After all, the number of unusual ways to write an *unsuccessful* essay is vastly greater. Most wild experiments are therefore likely to end in disaster. Your safest bet in the exam is to stick with a structure that is already known to work well.

Of course, your essay should have an introduction and a conclusion. On later pages, we will consider how to approach these. However, the heart of your essay will be your body paragraphs, setting out your main points and explaining them. There is no set rule about how many points there should be in an essay, but three is often a good number since it usually results in a piece of writing long enough to please the examiners but short enough to be completed in the time.

Once you have made a list of some potential ideas to use in your essay, the next step is to choose three or more from among them. Although it is theoretically possible that all of your points will be equally strong, it is much more likely that you will be able to rank them from most to least convincing.

Generally speaking, essays usually flow well if you begin with your strongest point, continue with your weakest one, and then finish with your second-strongest.

In this way, you will not only have a big opening, but also make a memorable impression on your reader through your ending.

Of course, it is not enough simply to make a point and then leave it at that. You must expand on each point in some way – usually through giving supporting details and examples. You must also ensure that these ideas and examples don't sit in isolation but are properly linked to one another so that the flow of your argument is clear.

Here is an example of someone's basic outline notes for an essay on the topic of whether or not it is a good idea to ban bicycles in city centres.

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*Introduction* – Use paraphrased version of question to make the introductory sentence. State my opinion that banning bicycles would be a bad idea.

*Reason 1* - Use of bicycles = fewer cars on the roads. Demand for bicycles high – example, successful bike sharing schemes in London and many other cities. Lead to reduced congestion, noise, and pollution.

*Reason 2* - Families can cycle to city centre as fun day out. Allow parents to teach road skills under supervision.

*Reason 3* - Cheap and convenient city centre bicycle parks can be set up. Allows bicycles to be stored neatly. Raises money for council. Example in my home town. Money can be put back into building cycle lanes, increasing number of users. Creates virtuous circle.

*Conclusion* - Restate, bicycle in city centres good for cyclists and all city centre users

## SELF-STUDY

Go through the Task 2 questions for some IELTS practice tests. Focus on generating ideas and then planning out an essay. (It is not necessary to actually write the essay based on these notes.)

## THE BOTTOM LINE

One very successful structure for Task 2 essays is to give and then expand on three main points.

## 25. HOW SHOULD YOU LINK YOUR IDEAS?

To get good marks in the IELTS test, it is not enough simply to state the points you want to make. It is not even enough to make the points you want to make *and* provide strong supporting evidence. To get good marks, you have to link everything together in a way that is both logical and clear.

There are many ways to do this, ranging from the obvious to the more subtle. But why do we need to link ideas at all? Let's look at a paragraph that uses very little linking.

*Some people feel that sports stars make good role models for children. Becoming a top sports star is not easy. Becoming a top sports star takes dedication and effort. From sports stars, children can learn that becoming successful takes dedication and effort. Some sports stars play in team sports. People playing in a team sport don't work alone. Being successful in a team sport means working with other people. Children can learn the importance of working with other people from sports stars who play in a team sport.*

Writing of this kind tends to be dull, long-winded and highly repetitive. Without clear linkages between the various ideas being discussed, the sentences seem to jump about from subject to subject and the reader is forced to make a lot of effort trying to work out how everything is connected. Luckily, there is a lot that can be done to improve the situation. Here are some common ways in which ideas are often linked.

### Conjunctions

Words like *and*, *but*, and *because* are easy to use, but that doesn't mean we should look down on them. Even adding a single conjunction can sometimes lead to a tremendous improvement. Look, for example, at how we could rewrite the second and third sentences of the example paragraph above as follows:

*Becoming a sports star is not easy and takes dedication and effort.*

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Even this one simple change cuts through a lot of the repetition and brings connected ideas together into a single sentence.

## Transition Markers

In addition to conjunctions, there are a whole range of expressions that function as transition markers and act as signposts to the reader about the points you are trying to make and the connections between them. These include such things as common one-word adverbs (*e.g. however, moreover*) and longer, multi-word expressions (*e.g. on the other hand, on the contrary*).

*Some sports stars play in team sports. However, people playing in a team sports don't work alone.*

## Pronouns

One of the most effective ways to avoid excessive repetition in writing is to use pronouns. For example, the sentence used in the last example would sound even better if it were slightly reworded to read:

*Some sports stars play in team sports. However, they don't work alone.*

## Relative Clauses

Often, two or more sentences about the same topic can be joined together into a single sentence by using a relative clause headed by a pronoun like “which” or “that” or an adverb like “where”. Using relative clauses effectively makes a piece of writing sound much more sophisticated.

*Furthermore, stars who play in a team sport don't work alone.*

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## Participle Clauses

This is another way of linking different ideas together into a single sentence. Such clauses are headed by either a present participle (*e.g. eating, falling, swimming*) or a past one (*e.g. eaten, fallen, swum*). The former has an active meaning and the latter a passive one.

*Seeing their favorite sports stars working with others in order to succeed, children will learn the importance of teamwork*

By using all of these different ideas in combination, we can greatly improve the coherence and cohesiveness of a piece of writing.

*Some people feel that sports stars make good role models for children. They argue that since becoming a top sports star is not easy, children can learn from the example of those who do make it that becoming successful takes dedication and effort. Furthermore, stars who play in a team sport don't work alone but instead rely on interaction with others in order to do well. Seeing this, it is argued, children can learn the importance of teamwork.*

## SELF-STUDY

Look through the model answers from some IELTS practice tests. Underline any example of linking expressions that you see and draw lines to show what they are referring to.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Using various techniques to link your ideas will make your writing clearer and easier to read.

## 26. HOW SHOULD YOU WRITE INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS?

When a Hollywood studio makes a movie, they hardly ever begin by shooting from page one of a script and then continuing through the remaining pages in turn. Instead, they do things in whatever order they consider to be the most effective and efficient.

Although the level of complexity is obviously very different, the same basic principle applies to your essay in the IELTS test. It is actually more effective and efficient to write an introduction *after* you have finished your body paragraphs and conclusion because by this point you know for certain what will come. This means you can ensure that everything in your introduction is entirely relevant.

An introduction usually has two main parts. The first is a sentence introducing the theme. (This is often a rewording of the original question.) The second part of the introduction depends on the type of question you are answering. If you have been asked to give an opinion on a topic, this is the place to state what your opinion is. If instead you have been asked to outline an issue, it is here that you should give some indication of how you intend to do this or what topics you will cover.

A concluding paragraph should be a one-sentence restatement of the position you have taken in your essay, together with a brief recap of the reasons. No new information should be added at this stage. Needless to say, your introduction and your conclusion should fully match.

Consider the Task 2 question shown in the box. The candidate intends to write against a video game ban by making the following three points:

*Point 1: There are millions of copies of such games, but not millions of instances of aggressive behaviour. Most players of video games do not behave aggressively.*

*Point 2: Violent people may like violent video games, but this does not mean games*



*are the cause of their violence.*

*Point 3: Violent video games allow people an escape from their daily life and thus relieve stress – a more likely source of violent behaviour.*

Now let's look at some possible introductions (I) and conclusions (C) to accompany these points.

(I-1) In recent years, some have argued that violent video games contribute to the problem of aggression in society and should therefore be banned. I believe these claims are highly controversial.

At first sight, this paragraph looks good and there is no doubt that the opening sentence introduces the theme well enough. However, the second sentence is misleading. It does not actually state whether the candidate agrees or disagrees with the ban. After all, it is possible to support something even though it is controversial, so it is not clear what side of the argument the candidate is on.

(I-2) In recent years, some have argued that violent video games contribute to the problem of aggression in society and should therefore be banned. I believe that these claims are overblown and completely disagree that there is any adequate justification for such a ban.

This introduction is better. It both introduces the theme and makes the candidate's views very clear. Now let's look at a few concluding paragraphs.

(C-1) In conclusion, banning video games would mean infringing on people's right to

spend their time as they want to and so there is simply no legitimate reason for a ban on violent video games.

Looking again over the three points mentioned in the body paragraphs, it is clear that this candidate has suddenly pulled a new (a rather poorly explained) argument from thin air. The concluding paragraph should not be used to introduce new ideas, only to recap things previously mentioned.

(C-2) In conclusion, I believe that people who enjoy violent video games do not act aggressively. In other words, there is simply no legitimate reason for a ban on violent video games.

At first glance, this conclusion seems to match the introduction and rest of the essay, but on closer inspection, we can see that it is actually making a far bigger claim. A careful look at our favoured introduction (I-2) and body paragraphs show that they do not deny the possibility that some people who play video games may act aggressively.

(C-3) In conclusion, it seems to me there is little evidence that violence in video games is a major cause of aggressive behaviour. Indeed, it may even help to deter it. In other words, there is simply no legitimate reason for games featuring violent scenes to be banned.

This concluding paragraph is far better. It neatly sums up the main argument being made by the candidate and provides a clear answer to the question originally asked.

## 27. WHAT SHOULD CHECKING INVOLVE?

Imagine you are an assistant in a supermarket who has just spent the last twenty minutes stacking tins of beans on top of one another in an elaborate and attractive display. You are just about to finish, when suddenly you notice that one of the tins at the bottom of the tower has a torn label. You decide you will take it out and replace it with another tin.

CRASH!

As the noise of falling bean tins should warn you, in any project that involves a complex arrangement of parts, there comes a point when it is simply too late to make major adjustments.

Your IELTS essay is a clear example. By the time you get to the checking stage, you will almost certainly have spent more than half an hour carefully building up a highly interconnected arrangement of sentences and paragraphs. Making a major change to any one part of this structure may quickly lead to a chaotic mess around your feet.

Another major danger to beware is to continue writing until the last minute and spend no time checking your essay at all. In one way, the urge to do this is understandable. In a writing test, there will always be a temptation to try to add just a few more sentences in the hope of squeezing every last point possible from the examiner.

The truth is, however, that a more efficient way to increase your score is to stop with about five minutes to spare and proofread your content. While it is true that this means you will not be writing anything that could bring you additional points, it will also give you the chance to find and amend the grammar mistakes and spelling errors that will otherwise cost you points. These are virtually certain to exist, no matter how careful you have tried to be.

One final thing about checking is that you should be careful not to rely too heavily on your eraser. In some cultures, children are taught to completely erase and then re-write misspelled words or badly written sections of essays. This takes up precious time however, and is not necessary in the IELTS exam. A candidate's writing has to

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be legible, but not a great example of penmanship. If you clearly score out a word or phrase with a line, this is enough for the marker to disregard it.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Spend the last five minutes or so of the test period to check your work and correct minor, localized errors, such as problems with spelling and grammar. Do not use it to make large-scale structural changes to your essay.