Guide for teachers

Test format, scoring and preparing students for the test

IELTS™

www.ielts.org

1 IELTS overview

Contents

> **"IELTS makes for a
> confident student."**
>
> *Senior Teacher, Turning Point, India*

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assesses the English language proficiency of people who want to study or work in English-speaking environments. It provides a fair, accurate and relevant assessment of language skills, based on well-established standards, and covers the full range of proficiency levels, from non-user to expert user.

There are two main versions of IELTS. Test takers can choose either Academic or General Training versions of the test. Both versions of the test consist of four separate components, assessing the four language skills – Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking.

> Find out more about IELTS Life Skills – a version of IELTS specifically developed for those applying for certain types of UK visa at www.ielts.org

IELTS results are reported on a 9-band scale designed to be simple and easy to understand. This scale has remained consistent and has acquired currency around the world over the past three decades.

• IELTS is the world's most popular high stakes English language test, with over 2.5 million tests taken last year.
• Over 9,000 organisations in over 140 countries recognise and use IELTS for selection purposes.
• IELTS is offered at over 1,000 test locations worldwide.
• Test questions are developed by testing specialists in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US.
• Test questions are based on authentic materials sourced from all over the world.

IELTS for teachers of English
IELTS is known and respected by teachers of English around the world.

This Guide for Teachers provides further information about the test, detailed descriptions of test scores and resources to assist in preparing students for IELTS.

It also has information about the professional development opportunities for teachers offered by IELTS examining and research.

> **IELTS for UK Visas and Immigration**
> Find out how the IELTS result can be used for this purpose at www.ielts.org/uk. For more information on going to or staying in the UK, visit www.gov.uk

View the materials and advice available for teachers at **www.ielts.org/teachers**

2 IELTS test format

> "Although we accept other English language tests, we always assess them by comparing them directly with the required IELTS score. IELTS test takers are thoroughly tested in the four main communication skills required for academic work."
>
> *Senior Student Recruitment Officer, The Scottish Agricultural College, UK*

View available teacher resources and materials at **www.ielts.org/teachers**

An overview of the test

Test takers can choose between IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training, depending on their academic or professional aspirations, or visa requirements.

The difference between the two versions of the test is that the Reading and Writing components of IELTS Academic have subject matter and tasks suitable for the test takers entering undergraduate or post graduate studies. The Listening and Speaking components are the same.

Listening 30 minutes
Test takers listen to four recorded texts, monologues and conversations by a range of native speakers, and write their answers to a series of questions.

Reading 60 minutes
The **Academic** version includes three long texts which range from the descriptive and factual to the discursive and analytical. The texts are authentic and are taken from books, journals, magazines and newspapers and are on academic topics of general interest. All have been selected for a non-specialist audience.

The **General Training** version requires test takers to read extracts from newspapers, advertisements, instruction manuals and books. These are materials test takers could encounter on a daily basis in an English speaking country.

Writing 60 minutes
The **Academic** version includes two tasks. Topics are selected to be of general interest and suitable for test takers entering undergraduate or postgraduate studies or seeking professional registration.

Task 1
Test takers are presented with a graph, table, chart or diagram and are asked to describe, summarise or explain the information in their own words. They may be asked to describe and explain data, describe the stages of a process, how something works or describe an object or event.

Task 2
Test takers are asked to write an essay in response to a point of view, argument or problem.

Responses to both tasks must be written in an academic or semi-formal neutral style.

The **General Training** version also includes two tasks, and is based on topics of general interest.

Task 1
Test takers are presented with a situation and are asked to write a letter requesting information or explaining the situation. The letter may be personal, semi-formal or formal in style.

Task 2
Test takers are asked to write an essay in response to a point of view, argument or problem. The essay can be slightly more personal in style than the Academic Writing Task 2 essay.

Speaking 11–14 minutes
The Speaking component assesses the test taker's use of spoken English, and takes between 11 and 14 minutes to complete. Every test is digitally recorded and consists of three parts:

Part 1
Test takers answer general questions about themselves and a range of familiar topics, such as their home, family, work, studies and interests. This part lasts between four and five minutes.

Part 2
Test takers are given a booklet which asks them to talk about a particular topic. They have one minute to prepare before speaking for up to two minutes. The examiner may ask one or two questions on the same topic to finish this part of the test.

Part 3
Test takers are asked further questions which are connected to the topic in Part 2. These questions give the candidate an opportunity to discuss more abstract issues and ideas. This part lasts between four and five minutes.
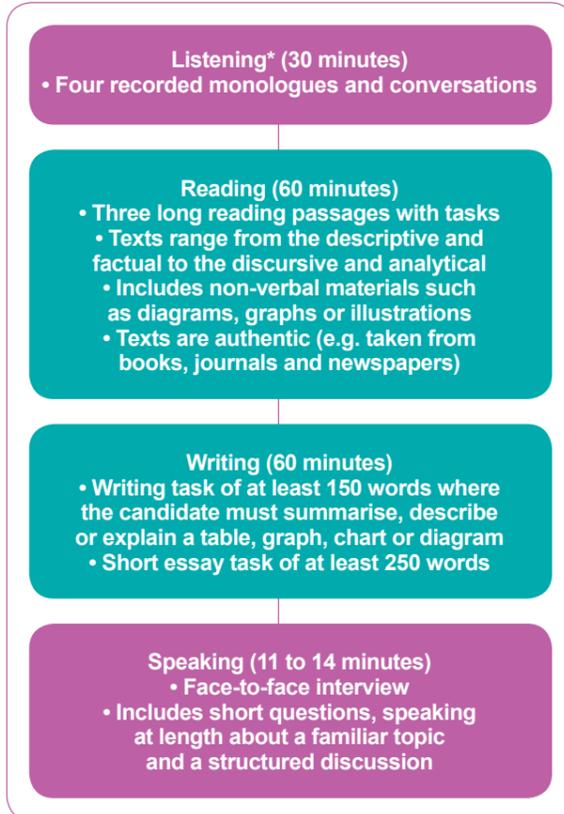
The format of the Speaking test is common across both the Academic and General Training versions. It is structured in such a way that does not allow test takers to rehearse set responses beforehand.

Read more
More information for institutions that accept IELTS scores can be found in the *IELTS Guide for Institutions*, available at: **www.ielts.org/institutions**
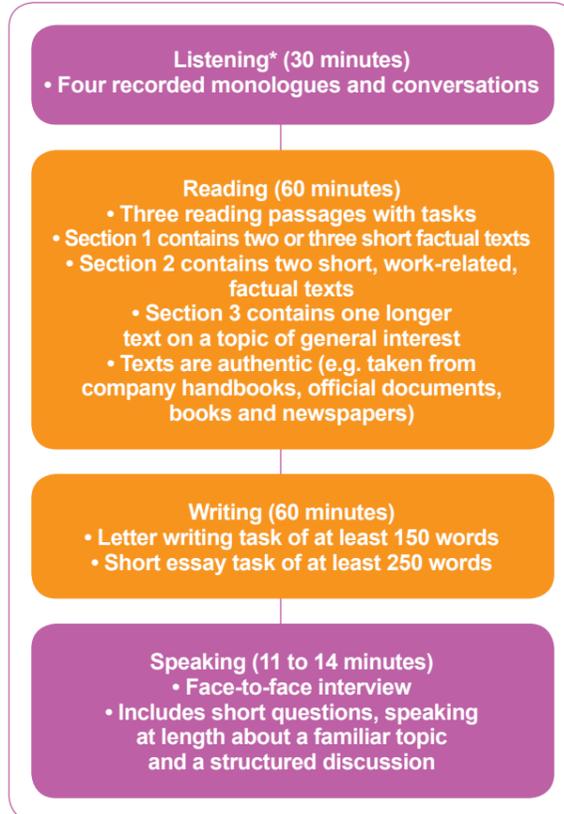
IELTS Academic

IELTS Academic measures English language proficiency needed for an academic, higher education environment. The tasks and texts are accessible to all test-takers, irrespective of their subject focus.

Listening* (30 minutes)
• Four recorded monologues and conversations

Reading (60 minutes)
• Three long reading passages with tasks
• Texts range from the descriptive and factual to the discursive and analytical
• Includes non-verbal materials such as diagrams, graphs or illustrations
• Texts are authentic (e.g. taken from books, journals and newspapers)

Writing (60 minutes)
• Writing task of at least 150 words where the candidate must summarise, describe or explain a table, graph, chart or diagram
• Short essay task of at least 250 words

Speaking (11 to 14 minutes)
• Face-to-face interview
• Includes short questions, speaking at length about a familiar topic and a structured discussion

IELTS General Training

IELTS General Training measures English language proficiency in a practical, everyday context. The tasks and texts reflect both workplace and social situations.

Listening* (30 minutes)
• Four recorded monologues and conversations

Reading (60 minutes)
• Three reading passages with tasks
• Section 1 contains two or three short factual texts
• Section 2 contains two short, work-related, factual texts
• Section 3 contains one longer text on a topic of general interest
• Texts are authentic (e.g. taken from company handbooks, official documents, books and newspapers)

Writing (60 minutes)
• Letter writing task of at least 150 words
• Short essay task of at least 250 words

Speaking (11 to 14 minutes)
• Face-to-face interview
• Includes short questions, speaking at length about a familiar topic and a structured discussion

Key similarities
• The **Listening** and **Speaking** components are the same for both versions. The distinction between 'academic' and 'general' literacy has traditionally been seen as most marked in relation to reading and writing skills. The more socially-oriented language skills of listening and speaking are equally important in an academic study or professional context
• The same amount of time is allocated to complete the Listening and Speaking components in both the General Training and Academic Versions
• The **Reading** and **Writing** components are the same length in both versions
• Both versions have the same minimum word requirement
• The same assessment criteria and 9-band scale is used to grade both versions.

A detailed breakdown of the test format can be found in the *Guide for educational institutions, governments, professional bodies and commercial organisations* and the *Information for Candidates* booklets, both available at www.ielts.org

Differences
The **Reading** component of the Academic and General Training versions is differentiated in terms of:
• the choice of texts (topic, genre, length, number, etc)
• the level of difficulty of the 40 test items. The Academic Reading component has more items pitched at bands 5-8, whereas the General Training has more items pitched at bands 3-6. This is a reflection of the different demands of Academic and General Training.

For **Writing**, the Academic and General Training versions are differentiated in terms of:
• the content and nature of the two writing tasks
• the contextual parameters of the tasks.

However, given the level of differentiation described above, this does not mean that the scores across Academic and General Training Reading or Writing components are interchangeable.

A test of four skills

IELTS is a task-based test covering the four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). IELTS test takers receive individual scores for each of the four test components. The average of the four provides the overall band score.

Each of the four components is carefully designed to focus on one particular skill. This makes it easier to control task difficulty across the many different test versions produced each year and results in a fairer test design when compared with tests that assess multiple skills simultaneously.

Organisations that rely on IELTS as proof of English language proficiency benefit from knowing that the score given for each component of the test is a clear and fair reflection of the test taker's ability in that skill.

This is particularly important in academic and professional settings where one skill is deemed to be more important than others.
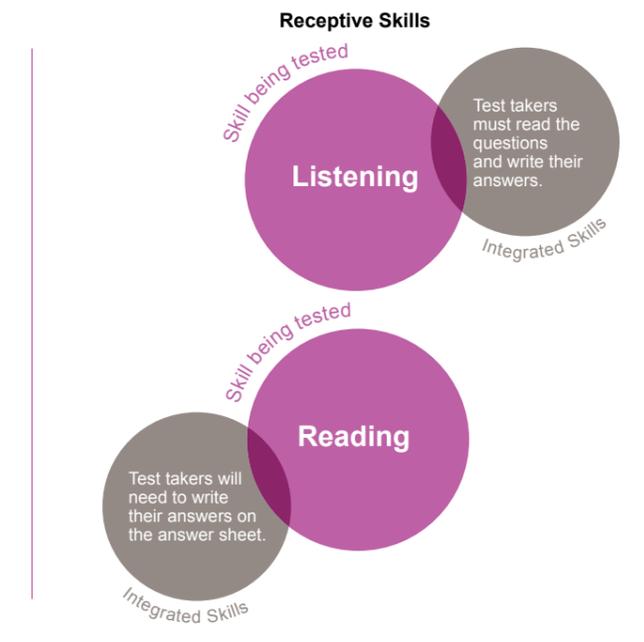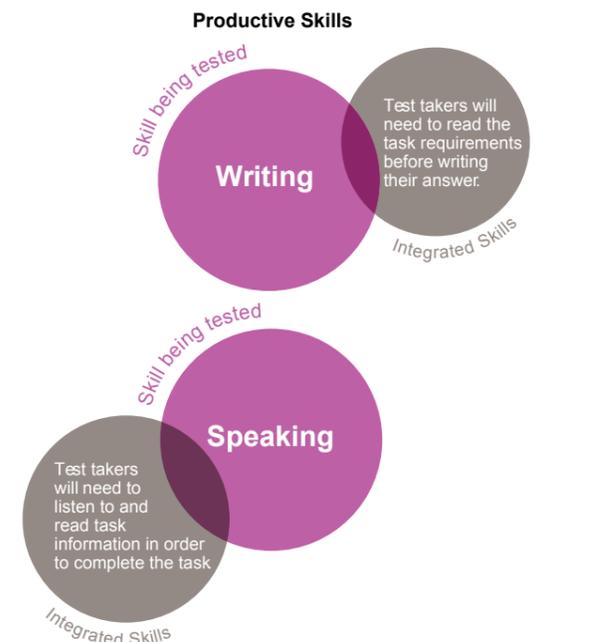
For example, in Canada nurses are required to achieve a higher band score in their IELTS Speaking and Writing tests, while teachers in Australia are required to achieve higher scores in their IELTS Speaking and Listening tests

While IELTS focuses on testing the four skills individually, there is inevitably an element of integration in each component, in the same way that language skills are integrated in the real world. Test tasks often entail the use of other skills and are therefore 'integrated' to some degree, for example:

• In the Writing and Speaking components, information that is read or heard helps shape the test taker's own production. However, this is carefully controlled to ensure that the test taker is not required to carry out extensive or complex reading and listening in order to respond to the task. This is particularly important because a score for each skill is being reported and it would be unfair to test takers if their performance in one skill area was compromised by their lack of proficiency in another.

• Tasks in the Reading and Listening components can involve note-taking, labelling and completion of tables or flow charts. Nonetheless, it is important that any task or test items should focus on reading or listening and should not require detailed writing.

Productive Skills

Skill being tested

Writing

Test takers will need to read the task requirements before writing their answer.

Integrated Skills

Skill being tested

Speaking

Test takers will need to listen to and read task information in order to complete the task

Integrated Skills

Receptive Skills

Skill being tested

Listening

Test takers must read the questions and write their answers.

Integrated Skills

Skill being tested

Reading

Test takers will need to write their answers on the answer sheet.

Integrated Skills

3 IELTS scores and interpretation

The IELTS 9-band scale

9	Expert user	Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8	Very good user	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex, detailed argumentation well.
7	Good user	Has operational command of the language, although with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely limited user	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent user	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non user	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	No assessable information provided.

There is no pass or fail in IELTS. Each band corresponds to a level of competence in English. All parts of the test and the overall band score are reported in whole or half bands, e.g. 7.0, 8.5.

Test takers receive an overall band score as well as individual scores for each test component (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking).

The IELTS test provides an accurate picture of a candidate's language skills and abilities at a certain point in time. Skills and abilities inevitably diminish over time if not used. It is recommended that a Test Report Form more than **two years** old should only be accepted if it is accompanied by evidence that a candidate has actively maintained or improved their English.

How to interpret IELTS

Test takers receive scores on a band scale from 1 to 9. A profile score is reported for each skill. The four individual scores are averaged and rounded to produce an overall band score. Overall band scores and scores for each component (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking) are reported in whole bands or half bands.

Overall band score

Test takers receive a Test Report Form including or listing their overall band score and their sub-scores on each of the four components: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. Each of the component scores is equally weighted. The overall band score is calculated by taking the mean of the total of the four individual component scores.

Overall band scores are reported to the nearest whole or half band. The following rounding convention applies; if the average across the four skills ends in .25, it is rounded up to the next half band, and if it ends in .75, it is rounded up to the next whole band.

Thus, a test taker achieving 6.5 for Listening, 6.5 for Reading, 5.0 for Writing and 7.0 for Speaking would be awarded an overall band score of 6.5 (25 ÷ 4 = 6.25 = Band 6.5).

Likewise, a test taker achieving 4.0 for Listening, 3.5 for Reading, 4.0 for Writing and 4.0 for Speaking would be awarded an overall band score of 4.0 (15.5 ÷ 4 = 3.875 = Band 4.0).

On the other hand, a test taker achieving 6.5 for Listening, 6.5 for Reading, 5.5 for Writing and 6.0 for Speaking would be awarded band 6 (24.5 ÷ 4 = 6.125 = Band 6).

Understanding IELTS scores

IELTS scores are reported on the nine-band scale. The Academic and General Training tests are marked using the same criteria.

• The tasks and grading used for the Listening and Speaking components are the same for IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. The more socially oriented language skills of listening and speaking are equally important in an academic study or workplace context.

• The tasks, test content and grading of the Reading and Writing components differ between IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. This is because the distinction between 'academic' and 'general' literacy has usually been seen as most marked in reading and writing skills.

Setting IELTS band score requirements for recognising organisations

IELTS test scores are just one element of the assessment of a test taker's suitability to enrol at an institution or to join an organisation. The level of English needed for a test taker to perform effectively in study, work or training varies from one situation to another. That is why each individual organisation sets its own minimum IELTS score for applicants, depending on specific requirements. Admissions professionals may also wish to take into account whether their organisation provides ongoing language support to students or employees to improve their English.

The IELTS *Scores Guide DVD* provides detailed descriptions of the test components and sample test materials. The DVD contains real examples of test takers' writing and speaking performances at different band score levels.

Listening

The IELTS Listening test contains 40 questions. Each correct item is awarded one mark. Band scores, ranging from Band 1 to Band 9, are awarded to test takers on the basis of their raw scores.

Band score	Raw score out of 40
8	35
7	30
6	23
5	16

Reading

The IELTS Reading test contains 40 questions. Each correct item is awarded one mark. Band scores, ranging from Band 1 to Band 9, are awarded to test takers on the basis of their raw scores.

Band score	Raw score out of 40
8	35
7	30
6	23
5	15

Writing

Examiners use detailed performance descriptors to award a band score for each of four assessment criteria:

Criterion	Weighting
Task achievement (Task 1)/ Task response (Task 2)	25%
Coherence and cohesion	25%
Lexical resource	25%
Grammatical range and accuracy	25%

Speaking

Examiners use detailed performance descriptors to award a band score for each of four assessment criteria:

Criterion	Weighting
Fluency and coherence	25%
Lexical resource	25%
Grammatical range and accuracy	25%
Pronunciation	25%

Band score boundaries

Although all IELTS test materials are pretested and standards fixed before being released as live tests, there are inevitably minor differences in the difficulty level across tests. To equate different test versions, the band score boundaries are set so that all test takers' results relate to the same scale of achievement. This means, for example, that the Band 6 boundary may be set at a slightly different raw score across individual test versions.

> **"IELTS gives us a reliable indication of entry level. Other tests are less satisfactory at providing this."**
>
> *Kings College, UK*

4 IELTS: an international test of English

International partners

IELTS is owned by a global partnership of education and language experts: British Council, IDP:IELTS Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment. These bodies are dedicated to academic excellence, cultural understanding, student recruitment, and creating success worldwide. The IELTS test combines the world-renowned assessment and research expertise of Cambridge English Language Assessment and the international delivery, evaluation and security expertise of the British Council and IDP:IELTS Australia.

International consultation

IELTS has been developed in close consultation with academics, professional bodies and immigration authorities around the world.

International content

The IELTS approach is recognised by academics and admissions professionals as being fair, reliable and valid to all candidates, whatever their nationality, cultural background, gender or specific needs. The test questions are developed by item writers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US.

International delivery and accessibility

IELTS tests are offered up to four times a month at over 1000 test venues in more than 140 countries. The cost of taking the test is set locally and payable in the local currency, making registration more convenient for candidates. Results are issued to candidates 13 calendar days after the test. IELTS test centres can send Test Report Forms directly to an organisation or institution (provided it has been nominated by the candidate), either by mail or as an electronic download.

International English

IELTS recognises both British and American English spelling, grammar and choice of words. It also incorporates a mix of native speaker accents from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US in the Listening component.

The number of people migrating and studying abroad has multiplied over the last 20 years. This has transformed life in educational institutions.

In English-speaking countries, more and more universities recruit staff internationally, and this is matched by an increasing student intake of non-native speakers of English. Simultaneously, in non-English speaking countries, more organisations are using English as a common language of communication, as well as employing rising numbers of staff from English-speaking countries. Consequently, more people are teaching, studying and working with others who speak different varieties of English.

"**With IELTS, the world is a smaller place. I sat the test before leaving Japan and received a band score of 8.5, satisfying visa requirements. Before starting new employment, I was required to undertake the IELTS test again. This time it was the academic version mandated by my employer.**"

(Pavel received a band score of 8.5 on his additional IELTS Academic test)

Employee, large accounting firm, Australia

5 Tips from teachers

The way IELTS results are reported makes it easy for teachers see which areas of a learner's language skills need to be developed, and helps them set learners clear goals and objectives. Teaching techniques for IELTS include presenting language elements such as grammar and vocabulary in a wider context.

The topics in IELTS are both interesting and contemporary, and are based in the real world. This means teachers can bring the outside world into their IELTS classes by using a range of authentic source materials adapted to test preparation.

Tips from Teachers

1 General

Make sure that your students:
- are familiar with the format and types of tasks in the different sections of the IELTS test
- know what is expected of them and how best to approach each section
- are aware of the time allowed for each section and include timed practice in class
- read the instructions carefully and follow them.

2 Listening

Make sure that your students:
- think about the context before they listen and identify the type of information they will need to listen for
- read the questions before they hear the text and use the time between each section to prepare for the following section.

3 Reading

Make sure that your students:
- use reading skills such as skimming and scanning – they will need to use these skills to answer all the questions in 1 hour
- know how best to approach each type of reading task
- answer the questions and transfer their answers to the answer sheet within the time allowed.

4 Writing

Make sure that your students:
- analyse the question carefully and plan their answer before starting to write
- keep in mind the reader and the purpose when writing
- structure their writing logically and clearly
- decide on a position and use examples and evidence to support points they make in task 2
- are familiar with the assessment criteria.

5 Speaking

Make sure that your students:
- feel confident and remind them to relax and enjoy the conversation with the examiner
- listen carefully to the questions
- use fillers and hesitation devices if they need 'thinking time' before answering
- realise it is their language level not their opinions which are being evaluated
- are familiar with the assessment criteria.

"Test takers receive an objective assessment of their English proficiency and have a clearer idea of where they need to make most improvements."

Lyndell King, teacher

6

Becoming an IELTS examiner

Becoming an IELTS examiner

The worldwide recognition of IELTS and the increasing numbers of IELTS test takers has in some countries led to growth in demand for IELTS examiners.

For teachers familiar with IELTS, becoming an IELTS examiner offers a possible opportunity for professional development.

The training and support provided to IELTS examiners can impact positively on teachers' classroom practice. IELTS examiners gain a good understanding of what language learning involves, the study skills needed by students following a university course in English and the conventions of Academic Writing in English.

Becoming an IELTS examiner

IELTS Examiners worldwide are supported by the IELTS Professional Support Network, a system of recruitment, training, standardisation and monitoring.
The Professional Support Network is jointly managed by British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia.

All IELTS examiner applicants must:
• be native speakers of English or a non-native speaker with an IELTS band score of 9 in the Speaking and Writing components
• hold relevant qualifications in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (or equivalent)
• have substantial relevant teaching experience post-qualification.

Next steps

If you are interested in becoming an IELTS examiner and you meet the requirements outlined above, please contact your local test centre.

Ensuring consistency across test centres:
• same operational procedures are adhered to by all test centres globally
• same examiner systems, standards and monitoring safeguard results.

"I love teaching for IELTS as I can make my classes more interactive."

Erika Tennant, IELTS course teacher, Australia

The examiner system

Recruitment
The assessment of the professional and interpersonal skills of examiner applicants occurs at three stages in the recruitment process: application form, interview, and training.

Induction
Shortlisted applicants are interviewed and, if successful, complete an induction process.

Training
Applicants who successfully complete induction proceed to training, which is carried out by an examiner trainer and lasts four days.

Certification
They then complete a certification set to demonstrate that they can apply the assessment criteria accurately and reliably and are certificated as examiners.

Year 1: Monitoring
Examiners are monitored at least once every two years. New examiners (and those who have not recently worked as IELTS examiners) are monitored three times in their first year. Monitoring is carried out by examiner trainers. All examiners receive written feedback on their rating and also on the delivery of the Speaking test. They may be required to take corrective action if any issues are raised about their performance.

Year 2: Standardisation and recertification
Standardisation sessions are held every two years and are led by an examiner trainer. Standardisation is completed at the centre and takes place as close as possible to the two-yearly recertification of the examiner. After the standardisation session, the examiners then complete a new certification set to demonstrate they can apply the assessment criteria accurately.

7 Continual research-based improvement

The success of IELTS rests on attention to four key test qualities – validity, reliability, impact and practicality. These four factors have been the subject of a great deal of research involving academics, administrators, teachers and other practitioners throughout the world for more than 40 years.

The IELTS partners lead an extensive programme of international research designed to ensure the quality and continual improvement of IELTS tests.

Advances in applied linguistics, language pedagogy, language assessment and technological capabilities constantly challenge test developers to review, refine and reshape their approaches to test design, development, delivery and evaluation. The steady evolution of IELTS clearly demonstrates how such factors shape the development of a large-scale, high-stakes language test.

The IELTS research programme ensures:
• the ongoing usefulness and contemporary relevance of the test for organisations that use IELTS results
• that IELTS contributes more broadly to the growing understanding of the nature of language proficiency and its place within linguistics and language education.

Internal research
Internal research activities are managed by Cambridge English Language Assessment's Research and Validation group and are co-ordinated within a framework for ongoing test development and validation.

Cambridge English Language Assessment makes a valuable contribution to the wider field of language assessment through a number of presentations and publications, in particular, *Studies in Language Testing (SiLT)*. SiLT is a series of academic volumes that addresses a diverse range of important issues and new developments in language testing and assessment that are of interest to test users, developers and researchers. For more information, go to www.cambridgeenglish.org/silt.

Research relating to IELTS test development and validation activities is also published in *Research Notes (RN)*. For more information, go to www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-notes.

External research
The IELTS research programme, jointly funded by IDP: IELTS Australia and the British Council, ensures an ongoing relationship with the broader linguistics and language testing community and demonstrates the IELTS partners' commitment to continuous improvement of the test.

Since 1995, more than 100 external studies by over 130 researchers around the world have attracted funding under this scheme. Selected reports are published in print and online in *IELTS Research Reports* www.ielts.org/researchers.

Annual research grants
Every year, individuals and education institutions with relevant experience are invited to apply to undertake IELTS-related research projects. Details of available grants, awards and application guidelines can be found online at **www.ielts.org/researchers**

IELTS Research Reports include:

Title	Author/Organiser	Volume and date of publication
Using eye-tracking to research the cognitive processes of multinational readers during an IELTS reading test	Stephen Bax, Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA), University of Bedfordshire, UK	Online Research Reports Volume 2, 2015
Stakeholder perceptions of IELTS as a gateway to the professional workplace: The case of employers of overseas trained teachers	Jill C Murray, Judie L Cross and Ken Cruickshank	Online Publication Reports Volume 1, 2014
Construct validity in the IELTS Academic Reading test: A comparison of reading requirements in IELTS test items and in university study	Tim Moore, Janne Morton and Steve Price, Swinburne University	Volume 11, 2012
An impact study into the use of IELTS by professional associations and registration entities in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada	Glenys Merrifield, GBM & Associates, Australia	Volume 11, 2012
Investigating IELTS exit score gains in higher education	Kieran O'Loughlin, Sophie Arkoudis, The University of Melbourne, Australia	Volume 10, 2009
Investigating stakeholders' perceptions of IELTS as an entry requirement for higher education in the UK	David Hyatt, Greg Brooks, The University of Sheffield, UK	Volume 10, 2009
An impact study into the use of IELTS as an entry criterion for professional associations in Australia, New Zealand and the USA	Glenys Merrifield, GBM & Associates, Australia	Volume 8, 2008
Does the computer make a difference? The reaction of candidates to a computer-based versus traditional hand-written form for the IELTS Writing component: effects and impact	Cyril Weir, The University of Bedfordshire, UK; Barry O'Sullivan, The University of Reading, UK; Jin Yan, Jiao Tong University, China; Steven Bax, Canterbury University, Christchurch, UK	Volume 7, 2007
IELTS as a predictor of academic language performance, Part 1	David Ingram, Amanda Bayliss; Melbourne University Private, Australia	Volume 7, 2007
Exploring difficulty in Speaking tasks An intra-task perspective	Barry O'Sullivan, Roehampton University, UK; Cyril Weir, The University of Bedfordshire, UK; Tomoko Horai, Roehampton University, UK	Volume 6, 2006
Investigating the relationship between intensive English language study and band score gain on IELTS	Catherine Elder, The University of Auckland and Kieran O'Loughlin, The University of Melbourne, Australia	Volume 4, 2003

IELTS Speaking assessment criteria

Band	Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy	Pronunciation
9	• Speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar • Speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features • Develops topics fully and appropriately	• Uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics • Uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately	• Uses a full range of structures naturally and appropriately • Produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech	• Uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety • Sustains flexible use of features throughout • Is effortless to understand
8	• Speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content related and only rarely to search for language • Develops topics coherently and appropriately	• Uses a wide vocabulary resource readily and flexibly to convey precise meaning • Uses less common and idiomatic vocabulary skilfully, with occasional inaccuracies • Uses paraphrase effectively as required	• Uses a wide range of structures flexibly • Produces a majority of error-free sentences with only very occasional inappropriateness or basic/unsystematic errors	• Uses a wide range of pronunciation features • Sustains flexible use of features, with only occasional lapses • Is easy to understand throughout; L1 accent has minimal effect on intelligibility
7	• Speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence • May demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction • Uses a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility	• Uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics • Uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices • Uses paraphrase effectively	• Uses a range of complex structures with some flexibility • Frequently produces error-free sentences, though some grammatical mistakes persist	• Shows all the positive features of Band 6 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 8
6	• Is willing to speak at length, though may lose coherence at times due to occasional repetition, self-correction or hesitation • Uses a range of connectives and discourse markers but not always appropriately	• Has a wide enough vocabulary to discuss topics at length and make meaning clear in spite of inappropriateness • Generally paraphrases successfully	• Uses a mix of simple and complex structures, but with limited flexibility • May make frequent mistakes with complex structures, though these rarely cause comprehension problems	• Uses a range of pronunciation features with mixed control • Shows some effective use of features but this is not sustained • Can generally be understood throughout, though mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduces clarity at times
5	• Usually maintains flow of speech but uses repetition, self-correction and/or slow speech to keep going • May over-use certain connectives and discourse markers • Produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems	• Manages to talk about familiar and unfamiliar topics but uses vocabulary with limited flexibility • Attempts to use paraphrase but with mixed success	• Produces basic sentence forms with reasonable accuracy • Uses a limited range of more complex structures, but these usually contain errors and may cause some comprehension problems	• Shows all the positive features of Band 4 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 6
4	• Cannot respond without noticeable pauses and may speak slowly, with frequent repetition and self-correction • Links basic sentences but with repetitious use of simple connectives and some breakdowns in coherence	• Is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics and makes frequent errors in word choice • Rarely attempts paraphrase	• Produces basic sentence forms and some correct simple sentences but subordinate structures are rare • Errors are frequent and may lead to misunderstanding	• Uses a limited range of pronunciation features • Attempts to control features but lapses are frequent • Mispronunciations are frequent and cause some difficulty for the listener
3	• Speaks with long pauses • Has limited ability to link simple sentences • Gives only simple responses and is frequently unable to convey basic message	• Uses simple vocabulary to convey personal information • Has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics	• Attempts basic sentence forms but with limited success, or relies on apparently memorised utterances • Makes numerous errors except in memorised expressions	• Shows some of the features of Band 2 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 4
2	• Pauses lengthily before most words • Little communication possible	• Only produces isolated words or memorised utterances	• Cannot produce basic sentence forms	• Speech is often unintelligible
1	• No communication possible • No rateable language			
0	• Does not attend			

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IELTS Task 1 Writing assessment criteria

Band	Task achievement	Coherence and cohesion	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy
9	• Fully satisfies all the requirements of the task • Clearly presents a fully developed response	• Uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention • Skilfully manages paragraphing	• Uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'	• Uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'
8	• Covers all requirements of the task sufficiently • Presents, highlights and illustrates key features/bullet points clearly and appropriately	• Sequences information and ideas logically • Manages all aspects of cohesion well • Uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately	• Uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings • Skilfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation • Produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation	• Uses a wide range of structures • The majority of sentences are error-free • Makes only very occasional errors or inappropriateness
7	• Covers the requirements of the task • (Academic) presents a clear overview of main trends, differences or stages • (General training) presents a clear purpose, with the tone consistent and appropriate • Clearly presents and highlights features/bullet points but could be more fully extended	• Logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout • Uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under/over-use	• Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision • Uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation • May produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation	• Uses a variety of complex structures • Produces frequent error-free sentences • Has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors
6	• Addresses the requirements of the task • (Academic) presents an overview with information appropriately selected • (General training) presents a purpose that is generally clear; there may be inconsistencies in tone • Presents and adequately highlights key features/bullet points but details may be irrelevant, inappropriate or inaccurate	• Arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression • Uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical • May not always use referencing clearly or appropriately	• Uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task • Attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy • Makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication	• Uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms • Makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication
5	• Generally addresses the task; the format may be inappropriate in places • (Academic) recounts detail mechanically with no clear overview; there may be no data to support the description • (General training) may present a purpose for the letter that is unclear at times; the tone may be variable and sometimes inappropriate • Presents, but inadequately covers, key features/bullet points; there may be a tendency to focus on details	• Presents information with some organisation but there may be a lack of overall progression • Makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices • May be repetitive because of lack of referencing and substitution	• Uses a limited range of vocabulary, but this is minimally adequate for the task • May make noticeable errors in spelling and/or word formation that may cause some difficulty for the reader	• Uses only a limited range of structures • Attempts complex sentences but these tend to be less accurate than simple sentences • May make frequent grammatical errors and punctuation may be faulty; errors can cause some difficulty for the reader
4	• Attempts to address the task but does not cover all key features / bullet points; the format may be inappropriate • (General training) fails to clearly explain the purpose of the letter; the tone may be inappropriate • May confuse key features/bullet points with detail; parts may be unclear, irrelevant, repetitive or inaccurate	• Presents information and ideas but these are not arranged coherently and there is no clear progression in the response • Uses some basic cohesive devices but these may be inaccurate or repetitive	• Uses only basic vocabulary which may be used repetitively or which may be inappropriate for the task • Has limited control of word formation and/or spelling; errors may cause strain for the reader	• Uses only a very limited range of structures with only rare use of subordinate clauses • Some structures are accurate but errors predominate, and punctuation is often faulty
3	• Fails to address the task, which may have been completely misunderstood • Presents limited ideas which may be largely irrelevant/repetitive	• Does not organise ideas logically • May use a very limited range of cohesive devices, and those used may not indicate a logical relationship between ideas	• Uses only a very limited range of words and expressions with very limited control of word formation and/or spelling; errors may severely distort the message	• Attempts sentence forms but errors in grammar and punctuation predominate and distort the meaning
2	• Answer is barely related to the task	• Has very little control of organisational features	• Uses an extremely limited range of vocabulary; essentially no control of word formation and/or spelling	• Cannot use sentence forms except in memorised phrases
1	• Answer is completely unrelated to the task	• Fails to communicate any message	• Can only use a few isolated words	• Cannot use sentence forms at all
0	• Does not attend • Does not attempt the task in any way • Writes a totally memorised response			

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IELTS Task 2 Writing assessment criteria

Band	Task response	Coherence and cohesion	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy
9	• Fully addresses all parts of the task • Presents a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas	• Uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention • Skilfully manages paragraphing	• Uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'	• Uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'
8	• Sufficiently addresses all parts of the task • Presents a well-developed response to the question with relevant, extended and supported ideas	• Sequences information and ideas logically • Manages all aspects of cohesion well • Uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately	• Uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings • Skilfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation • Produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation	• Uses a wide range of structures • The majority of sentences are error-free • Makes only very occasional errors or inappropriateness
7	• Addresses all parts of the task • Presents a clear position throughout the response • Presents, extends and supports main ideas, but there may be a tendency to over generalise and/or supporting ideas may lack focus	• Logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout • Uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under/over-use • Presents a clear central topic within each paragraph	• Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision • Uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation • May produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation	• Uses a variety of complex structures • Produces frequent error-free sentences • Has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors
6	• Addresses all parts of the task although some parts may be more fully covered than others • Presents a relevant position although the conclusions may become unclear or repetitive • Presents relevant main ideas but some may be inadequately developed/unclear	• Arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression • Uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical • May not always use referencing clearly or appropriately • Uses paragraphing, but not always logically	• Uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task • Attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy • Makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication	• Uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms • Makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication
5	• Addresses the task only partially; the format may be inappropriate in places • Expresses a position but the development is not always clear and there may be no conclusions drawn • Presents some main ideas but these are limited and not sufficiently developed; there may be irrelevant detail	• Presents information with some organisation but there may be a lack of overall progression • Makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices • May be repetitive because of lack of referencing and substitution • May not write in paragraphs, or paragraphing may be inadequate	• Uses a limited range of vocabulary, but this is minimally adequate for the task • May make noticeable errors in spelling and/or word formation that may cause some difficulty for the reader	• Uses only a limited range of structures • Attempts complex sentences but these tend to be less accurate than simple sentences • May make frequent grammatical errors and punctuation may be faulty; errors can cause some difficulty for the reader
4	• Responds to the task only in a minimal way or the answer is tangential; the format may be inappropriate • Presents a position but this is unclear • Presents some main ideas but these are difficult to identify and may be repetitive, irrelevant or not well supported	• Presents information and ideas but these are not arranged coherently and there is no clear progression in the response • Uses some basic cohesive devices but these may be inaccurate or repetitive • May not write in paragraphs or their use may be confusing	• Uses only basic vocabulary which may be used repetitively or which may be inappropriate for the task • Has limited control of word formation and/or spelling; errors may cause strain for the reader	• Uses only a very limited range of structures with only rare use of subordinate clauses • Some structures are accurate but errors predominate, and punctuation is often faulty
3	• Does not adequately address any part of the task • Does not express a clear position • Presents few ideas, which are largely undeveloped or irrelevant	• Does not organise ideas logically • May use a very limited range of cohesive devices, and those used may not indicate a logical relationship between ideas	• Uses only a very limited range of words and expressions with very limited control of word formation and/or spelling • Errors may severely distort the message	• Attempts sentence forms but errors in grammar and punctuation predominate and distort the meaning
2	• Barely responds to the task • Does not express a position • May attempt to present one or two ideas but there is no development	• Has very little control of organisational features	• Uses an extremely limited range of vocabulary; essentially no control of word formation and/or spelling	• Cannot use sentence forms except in memorised phrases
1	• Answer is completely unrelated to the task	• Fails to communicate any message	• Can only use a few isolated words	• Cannot use sentence forms at all
0	• Does not attend • Does not attempt the task in any way • Writes a totally memorised response			

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How IELTS maps to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR)

How should the CEFR be used by recognising institutions wishing to set language ability requirements?

In fulfilling its purpose as a common reference tool, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was not designed to provide the basis for precise equating, nor was it intended to be a prescriptive tool to impose standardised solutions. Rather it was designed as a common framework of reference, primarily intended as 'a tool for reflection, communications and empowerment', as described by John Trim, its coordinating author, (Saville, N (2005)). The IELTS partners recommend that all test result users should look at the IELTS bandscore descriptors and use the *IELTS Scores Guide DVD* to establish the appropriate level of language ability required for their particular institution or course.
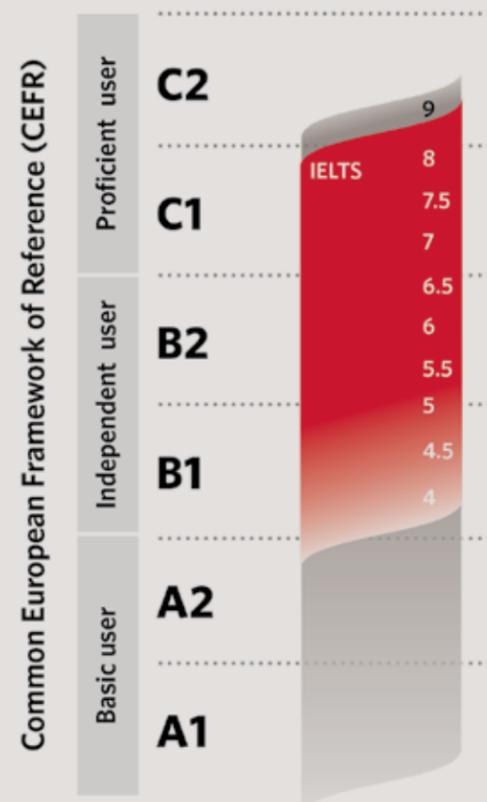
However, test users may also find the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages helpful. The Framework, a series of descriptions of abilities at different learning levels, which can be applied to any language, can provide a starting point for interpreting and comparing different language qualifications, and is increasingly used as a way of benchmarking language ability not only within Europe but worldwide.

To help test users understand the relationship between IELTS band scores and the six CEFR levels, Cambridge English Language Assessment has conducted a number of studies to map the IELTS scale to the CEFR, drawing on the interrelationship between IELTS and other Cambridge English Language Assessment qualifications and the known relationship of these latter qualifications to the CEFR.

Figure 1: The mapping of the IELTS scale to the Common European Framework above is derived from the interrelationship between IELTS and the Cambridge English Language Assessment Main Suite qualifications and the mapping of these latter qualifications to the CEFR. Further information on this can be found at **www.cambridgeenglish.org/cefr**

General information

Making comparisons between scores on different tests is challenging because many of the current range of test products differ in their design, purpose, and format (Taylor, 2004a). Candidates' aptitude and preparation for a particular type of test may also vary and individual candidates or groups of candidates may perform better in certain tests than in others.

Specifying the relationship between a test product and the CEFR is challenging because, in order to function as a framework, the CEFR is deliberately underspecified (Davidson & Fulcher, 2007; Milanovic, 2009; Weir, 2005). Establishing the relationship is also not a one-off activity, but rather involves the accumulation of evidence over time (e.g. it needs to be shown that test quality and standards are maintained).

The relationship of IELTS with the CEFR is complex as IELTS is not a level-based test, but rather designed to span a much broader proficiency continuum. It also utilises a different 9-point band scoring system; thus, there will not be a one-to-one correspondence between IELTS scores and CEFR levels. It is important to bear in mind the differences in test purpose, test format, test populations, and measurement scales when seeking to make comparisons.

With the above in mind, Cambridge English Language Assessment has conducted a number of research projects since the late 1990s to explore how IELTS band scores align with the CEFR levels. A number of these were summarised in Taylor (2004b), while cautioning that, "As we grow in our understanding of the relationship between IELTS and the CEFR levels, so the frame of reference may need to be revised accordingly."

Note that the IELTS band scores referred to in Figure 1 above are the overall band scores, not the individual module band scores for listening, reading, writing and speaking. It is important to recognise that the purpose of this figure is to communicate the relationship between IELTS performances and the CEFR. They should not be interpreted as reflecting strong claims about exact equivalence between assessment products or the scores they generate, for the reasons given in Taylor (2004a).

The current alignment is based upon a growing body of internal and external research, some of which has also appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals, attesting to their quality (e.g. Hawkey & Barker, 2004). This research has been further combined with long established experience of test use within education and society, as well as feedback from a range of stakeholders regarding the uses of test results for particular purposes.

As further work, such as that being undertaken in the English Profile project, enriches our understanding of the CEFR levels, further refinements may be possible.

Further information

Q1. Some IELTS band scores are shown as borderline (e.g. it is not clear whether band 5 is B1 or B2). How should institutions and organisations interpret this?
As IELTS preceded the CEFR, IELTS band score thresholds have never aligned exactly with the CEFR transition points. Previously (Taylor 2004a), we provided advice as to the score on IELTS that a candidate who was at a given CEFR level might achieve. However, our research shows that a C1 minimum threshold would fall between the 6.5 and 7 thresholds on the IELTS scale. Therefore, whilst many 6.5 candidates would be at C1, a number will be marginally below. The present table makes this clearer. So if an institution requires a high degree of confidence that an applicant is at C1, they may wish to set a requirement of 7, rather than 6.5.

Q2. Does IELTS differentiate at C2 level?
Band scores of 8.5 and higher constitute C2 level performance. Band 8 is borderline.

Q3. If a student has an IELTS score of 6.5 should this be treated as a B2 equivalent score?
6.5 is borderline B2/C1. It is for institutions to decide alignment to a particular level of the CEFR is critical. Otherwise, our general advice remains that an overall IELTS band 7.0 will probably meet the language requirements of most university courses, though 6.5 may be adequate for courses which are less linguistically demanding. Institutions need to consider a range of factors in setting their requirements, including, for example the amount of pre-sessional or in-sessional language-learning support which will be available to prospective students, and whether a minimum standard should also be specified in a particular individual skill.

Q4. How does this compare to the mappings that other language testers have published?
We do not comment on the benchmarking exercises that other language testers have provided.

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Notes

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