

IELTS General Training for Canadian Express Entry: What Candidates Need to Know

Overview

If you are planning to apply for Canadian Permanent Residency under one of the Express Entry programs, you will need to submit scores demonstrating your proficiency in either or both English and French, Canada's official languages. The IELTS (International English Language Testing System), which is run by the British Council and IDP, is the only exam accepted for English proficiency.

There are two versions of the test: General Training and Academic Training. For immigration purposes, the Canadian Government accepts the General Training module only. The Academic Training Module is for students applying to study at Canadian universities.

The full exam lasts approximately 3 hours in total and contains four sections, always administered in the same order:

1. Listening
2. Reading
3. Writing
4. Speaking

The Listening and Speaking portions of the Academic and General Training exams are identical.

There are two main differences, involving Reading and Writing:

- In Reading, there are fewer passages, and these are more straightforward/less academic.
- In Writing, Task 1, Task 1 is a formal or informal letter rather than a graph summary; in Task 2 questions are generally more straightforward and may ask you to only discuss one side of an argument or situation.

The test is given in both paper and electronic formats. Some testing centers offer one option only, while others offer both. There is also a new [at-home testing option](#), available in 2022, for candidates who do not have access to a testing center. From an Express Entry standpoint, there is no advantage to taking a particular format. If you have a choice, you should simply register for the version you feel most comfortable with.

As the exam is given internationally, you are free to use either UK or US spellings. You should, however, be consistent, e.g., if you write *colour*, you should write *neighbour*, not *neighbor*.

Scoring

Each of the four sections is scored in .5-band increments ranging from 0 (lowest) to 9 (highest). The overall test is scored the same way, as the average of the four sections.

Listening and Reading are given a score based on the number correct out of 40.

Writing [Task 1](#) and [Task 2](#) and [Speaking](#) are assessed in four categories. Each category is scored as a whole number, and the four are then averaged and rounded up or down to the nearest .5.

To be eligible for Express Entry, candidates must achieve an overall score of Band 6.0 (for 16 points out of 67), with no sub-score below 6.0 in any of the four tests.

To obtain maximum language proficiency points (24) for English, candidates must score at least Band 7.0, with no sub-score in any of the tests below 7.0. This is the general equivalent of a C1 level (lower advanced) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages.

You can register for the exam at www.ielts.org. From the main site, you can find specific information for the country in which you are located.

Scores are valid for two years.

For more information, see [the official Canadian Immigration website](#).

Exam Content

1) Listening – 40 questions, approximately 40 minutes (30 for the questions, 10 to transfer them to your answer sheet)

- Divided into four sections.
- combination of short answer/gap-fill and multiple choice.
- May include charts or diagrams to fill in. Note that these can sometimes be tricky and confusing.
- You must follow the directions exactly, e.g., if you are instructed to write no more than two words, a three-word answer will be marked incorrect.
- Answers to gap-fill questions should be written in capital letters to avoid any confusion.

2) Reading – 40 questions, 60 minutes

- Three passages: instructional and informational rather than theoretical; focus on practical, everyday topics.
- Question types include identifying paragraph headings (main idea, summarizing); short answer/gap-fill; and multiple-choice, including True/False/Not Given.
- As is true for the Listening Test, you must follow the directions exactly in terms of the number of words that can be used in an answer choice.

3) Writing – 2 questions, 60 Minutes

- **Task 1** (one-third of the Writing score): informal, semi-formal, or formal letter (recommended 20 mins).
- Task 1 tests your ability to request and provide information, use appropriate greetings and casual/polite forms as required by the situation.
- **Task 2** (two-thirds of the Writing score): opinion or analysis of a more abstract topic, e.g., the role of technology in schools (recommended 40 minutes).
- You may be asked to discuss advantages and/or disadvantages; causes and effects; describe a problem and provide a solution; or explain the extent to which you agree with a statement.
- Common topics include technology, the environment, education, travel and transport, health, city life, and sports.
- Task 2 tests your ability to use standard, moderately formal written English (grammar, punctuation, syntax, vocabulary) to convey your thoughts in a logical, organized, and coherent manner.

Speaking – 11-15 minutes; three parts

This part of the exam is conducted as a separate, conversation with an examiner, usually in the afternoon after a lunch break. It is designed to test your ability to communicate with a native speaker and to discuss a variety of topics in a spontaneous manner.

Unlike Writing Task 2, this is a test of informal/conversational English. You should be able to respond naturally, not sound as if you are giving a series of prepared speeches. It's perfectly acceptable to take natural pauses or say "um" or "you know," or to pause for a second or two to think.

You should, however, make sure to develop your answers. Avoid giving one-word or very short responses, even to simple yes/no questions. It is fine to keep going until the examiner cuts you off; you will only be penalized for talking too little, not too much.

In Part I, you will be asked some basic questions about where you live, study/work, your interests, hobbies, etc. This section is scripted: the examiner will be reading from a list of questions provided and will not have any choice about what to ask you.

In Part II (“the speech”), you will be given a cue card with a topic and some specific questions to consider (e.g., “Describe a book you read recently, what it’s about, what sort of person would enjoy it”), and will be asked to talk about it for around two minutes.

In Part III, the examiner will ask you some follow-up questions about Part II topic, designed to elicit more advanced language from you. They may, for example, ask you to discuss advantages/disadvantages, or to consider when and under what circumstances a particular assertion is true. At this point, the examiner is allowed to formulate their own questions.

Preparation for Native English Speakers

Even if you are a native speaker, you need to take the IELTS seriously and spend some time getting comfortable with the format and the different types of question so that you do not make careless mistakes and end up with a score that does not reflect your abilities. While the level of English used in the General Training module is nowhere near as high as the level of the language on a test for adult native speakers such as the GMAT, parts of the exam can be tricky for reasons entirely unrelated to your knowledge of English, and you should be prepared.

The Listening and Reading Tests, for example, may involve rather complex-looking tables; require answers in a variety of formats; and contain multiple-choice questions with as many as seven or eight possible responses. In the Reading Test, True/False/Not Given questions can be sometimes be tricky. Even if you can understand English effortlessly, you must still pay close attention.

During the Listening Test, even momentary lapses in concentration can cause you to miss key information. If you have not sat in a classroom for a long time and are in the habit of only half-listening to media such as podcasts, the type of active listening required can take practice, and you may need to spend some time getting comfortable with it.

You can find sample listening sections on the [official IELTS website](#) as well as on [YouTube](#) (you should use official, Cambridge-produced tests only). Two sample [Reading Tests](#) can be found on the IELTS website as well.

If you are registered for the electronic version and have never taken a computer-based standardized test before, you should practice with online material so that you do not encounter any tech-related surprises during the exam.

While native English speakers generally do quite well in the Speaking Test (mean score 7.4) for obvious reasons, Writing is a different story.

Not only do scores in this portion of the exam generally range from .5 to 1.5 bands below scores in the other three areas, but [the mean General Training Writing](#) score for native English speakers is only 6.5.

The most important thing to understand about the IELTS Writing is that it is a test of your ability to use English as a vehicle to present your ideas in a coherent manner—not just show off your ability to use high-level language. High-band essays do use sophisticated vocabulary and constructions, but they do so in an understated way.

While most university-educated native speakers can earn high scores in Grammar and Vocabulary with little effort, failure to address the exact question asked, develop your answer thoroughly, or organize it in an extremely clear manner can result in low scores in Task Analysis and Coherence and Cohesion. In reality, top-scoring essays are not only virtually indistinguishable from writing by educated native speakers, but they also present clearly structured arguments that are often impressively nuanced relative to the time and word constraints.

So even if you are a native speaker planning to immigrate to Canada from another anglophone country, you should spend some time familiarizing yourself with the marking criteria and reading some sample high-scoring essays. It is also a good idea to write a few full-length practice responses to get a sense of the timing and make sure you know how long it takes you to produce 150 and 250 words (for Tasks 1 and 2 respectively).

Preparation for Non-Native Speakers

If, like most IELTS candidates, you do not speak English as your first language, the amount of time you need to spend preparing for the exam will vary dramatically based on your current level.

If you are serious about maximizing your language points, it is imperative that you allow yourself sufficient time to prepare, and that you seriously consider whether you need test prep focused techniques and strategies that will allow you to apply your existing skills to the exam in the most effective way possible, or whether you need to spend time working on your English long-term in order to have a realistic chance of scoring Band 7.0 in all four sections.

While studying for the IELTS may certainly help you improve your English, preparing for an exam should not be confused with actually learning a language. If you do not actually have an advanced knowledge of English, it does not matter how many practice tests you take or how many essays you write—knowing the test well is not a substitute for knowing English well!

To start, you should take a full-length, timed practice test using official IELTS practice materials.

Try to replicate testing conditions as closely as possible: find a quiet space where you can concentrate, and do not take breaks or look things up on your phone.

Your goal should be to obtain an accurate picture of your likely score so that you know where to focus your energy and do not waste time and money sitting for the real exam when you are unlikely to meet Canadian benchmark requirements. It is far more time and cost effective to spend some money obtaining an accurate assessment of your skills and to base your study plan on those results than it is to take the test repeatedly and just hope for the best.

Take a sample official [Listening Test](#).

Take a sample official [Reading Test](#).

You can use this [Band Score Calculator](#) to estimate your scores.

For essay scoring, there are tutors and former examiners who run essay-scoring services. [TED-IELTS](#) is a trustworthy and reasonably priced option (£10/essay).

For Speaking, Ray at [IELTS Focus](#) runs a Speaking preparation service. A 40-minute session (\$37 USD) gets you a full-length mock exam, plus detailed feedback. You can also opt for a basic service such as that provided by [IELTS Assistance](#) in the UK. You can download Speaking questions, record your answers, and send them in to be marked (£10).

Based on your diagnostic scores, you can formulate a study plan.

When choosing the type of preparation you want to pursue, you will need to consider:

- How much time you have before the exam (most candidates require 3-6 months of intensive study to move up just half a band in all four levels, and the higher your starting point, the longer it generally takes to improve).
- Where you are starting from relative to CLB requirements.
- How much time you can devote to studying.
- How willing you are to listen to feedback and make changes in the way you write and speak.
- How much you can afford.

If you speak, write, and understand English at a very high level and primarily need to get comfortable with the exam in general, you may be able to self-study. Otherwise, this option is not recommended.

If your scores are at or above the CLB requirements in some areas and below them in others, private tutoring that will allow you to focus on your weaker areas is probably the best option. While self-study may be possible in Listening and Reading, it is difficult to improve in Speaking and (particularly) Writing without expert feedback.

Keep in mind that scores in Writing are generally lower than in the other three sections; it is not uncommon for test-takers to score in the 8.0-9.0 range in Listening, Reading, and Speaking, but in only the 6.0-6.5 range in Writing. In the worst-case scenario, candidates may sit for the full test a dozen times or more (paying \$2500+ USD) and repeatedly failing to earn Band 7.0 in Writing. This is obviously a situation that should be avoided at all costs. For this reason, it is crucial that you obtain an accurate assessment of your Task 1 letter and Task 2 essay as early in the study process as possible. If you need to obtain full points for English-language proficiency in order to qualify for Express Entry, you should not register for the real test until you are consistently scoring at Band 7 level, as confirmed by an experienced IELTS tutor and preferably former examiner.

You may find it helpful to find a study partner, particularly for Speaking, although you should be careful about working without any supervision. While talking to someone in English on a regular basis may help you improve your level of comfort and fluency, those gains may be diminished somewhat if you reinforce each other's mistakes and teach each other new ones. While you may feel more confident going into the exam, that may not actually translate into a higher score.

Whatever option you choose, you should make sure to make to only use Official Cambridge Material for [practice tests](#). Mock exams produced by outside companies may contain inaccuracies in terms of content, tone, and level. In addition, tests produced in non-anglophone countries often contain significant errors in grammar, punctuation, and usage. Any test-preparation company that uses such exams is not reliable.

Please be warned: The IELTS preparation landscape is chaotic and overwhelming, with tutors everywhere claiming that they can help you score Band 7.0, regardless of whether they are qualified or not. Anyone can call themselves a tutor and start marketing their services, so you need to be very careful when deciding whom to prepare with.

While native English-speaking teachers are not always best—they may have difficulty explaining concepts they understand instinctively, and they may assume you know things you have never been taught—there are also many non-native teachers who have serious problems with their own English, and who may teach you incorrectly as well as reinforce your existing errors. Particularly if you come from South Asia, you should be aware that certain very common words (e.g., *doubt* and *revert*) have different meanings in UK/US English than they do in the Indian subcontinent, and that the usages you are familiar with may not be considered correct. As a result, if you can afford to work with an experienced native speaker from the UK, Canada, Australia, etc. who knows the IELTS well, you should do so.

That said, if you are absolutely determined to work with someone who shares your linguistic background, you should look for a tutor who has actually taken the IELTS and has achieved high band scores in all the areas in which you need assistance. You cannot learn to write a Band 7.0 essay from a person who can only write a Band 6.5 level!

If you need help in all four areas but cannot afford high-quality private tutoring, Fiona Wattam's (IELTS Etc.) [Members Academy](#) and Bootcamps provide thorough preparation for the full exam at a reasonable rate. Run from the UK by a former examiner with a Master's in English as a Foreign Language and several decades of experience, the program systematically covers all the major topics as well as the skills you need to master to meet each of the band criteria, and provides the flexibility for you to work at your own pace. Students are also given access to a huge library of materials and community support, making it easier to stay motivated. **If you need to focus on Writing only**, there is a [separate program](#) that includes detailed video feedback on eight essays.

(Please note that The Critical Reader is not affiliated with any of the companies mentioned above.)

In addition, you should do at least one of the following on a daily basis:

- Listen to English-language podcasts or television shows/films.
- Read a newspaper or news site from an anglophone country (e.g., *The New York Times*, The BBC) and look up/write down every word you don't know.
- Have a conversation in English. Try to speak without translating.
- If you write in English, make sure you apply the rules of standard punctuation, spacing, and capitalization. The more accustomed you are to using them for real, the easier it will be to use them during the test.

Remember... you get what you pay for (informal idiom). Yes, there is an enormous amount of free material online, but it ranges from high-quality and reliable (and often produced by former examiners) to error-ridden and misleading, and different sites may offer contradictory advice. If you attempt to self-study online, you must not only be able to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy material—something that requires you to notice subtle elements of language such as spacing, punctuation, and spelling—but you must be able to organize it into an effective study program that will result in your actually making progress.

If you are unable to afford tutoring, legitimate sites run by native English speakers include the following:

[IELTS Liz](#)
[IELTS Simon](#)
[IELTS Etc.](#)
[Ted-IELTS](#)
[IELTS Advantage](#)

To prepare for Writing, you should study only the sample essays written by the people who run these sites. Unless you want to learn what NOT to do, you should not read the practice essays posted in the comments sections. Most of these are written at Band 5.0-6.5 level and contain numerous problems with grammar, vocabulary, and organization.

For Speaking, there are many sample clips of full-length mock Speaking exams on YouTube. I also recommend [Keith Speaking Academy](#).

On the other hand, the following sites should be avoided. Although they contain many sample essays, these responses contain are not vetted for accuracy and are not accompanied by reliable feedback. Their explanations may also contain the same types of grammar and vocabulary errors that cause many IELTS candidates to score below Band 7.0.

[IELTS Blog](#)

[IELTS Buddy](#)

[IELTS Mentor](#) (also goes by www.english-exam.com)

Finally, keep in mind that while you should work on vocabulary related to major topic categories (e.g., education, technology, health, environment, travel, sports), studying questions from very recent tests will not provide any provide any particular advantage. If a question has just been used for an exam, it is extremely unlikely to be used again in the immediate future. Instead, you should focus on learning vocabulary in the categories that you know the LEAST about. For examples, if you do not play a sport or follow any teams, you should spend time learning common sports terms so that you are prepared in the case that you are asked a question on this topic.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are no shortcuts for the IELTS. It is not an exam that allows you to memorize your way to success, and there are no simple tricks that will guarantee you a high band score. The test is structured to ensure that your score reflects your actual level rather than how much you crammed during the few days beforehand, and anyone who promises you an easy score increase cannot be trusted.

The bottom line is that if you have a solid level of English, achieving a Band 7.0+ score in all four components of the IELTS is entirely doable, but you need to be both realistic and strategic in deciding how to prepare.

To reiterate, this is not a matter of ploughing through practice test after practice test, but of being willing to do the serious work of learning from your mistakes. On the IELTS, accuracy counts far more than you might realize, and far more than it has in any situation you have previously experienced. Accepting this and planning your preparation accordingly will go a long way toward helping you achieve your goals.

Throughout the preparation process, keep in mind that improving your level of English is not just a question of passing a test but also of readying yourself to live in a new country. Although Canada is an incredibly multicultural society whose residents come from dozens of linguistic backgrounds, having a high level of English and knowing how to communicate well in different types of situations will allow you to get to know more people and give you access to more opportunities, including some that you perhaps have never even imagined.