

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 SPEAKING

1. WHAT ARE YOUR IELTS SPEAKING PROBLEMS?

If I knew what I was saying wrong, I wouldn't say it!

Some IELTS candidates believe that the speaking test is the one area that they are unable to review without the help of a teacher, but this is far from being true. Why? Because it is simply not the case that only a native speaker can spot a mistake.

Think about it. One very popular technique used by many English teachers is to record their class talking about something, and then have the students listen to their sentences again to find their own mistakes. The teacher may push the big red button, but it's the students who provide most of the correction.

There is no reason why you can't use the same technique when you are studying alone. Record yourself as you talk about the topics in a practice test. Although you will miss a certain number of errors, there will be plenty of others that you do spot. If you notice yourself making the same engrained mistakes again and again, take a note of them and work on getting rid of them.

As you listen you may find that you used some words and expressions in a way that now seems a little odd to you. If so, take note of these and check them in your dictionary. If you discover that your usage was often incorrect, your accuracy with vocabulary may be an area that needs work.

Listen for times when you fall silent in the middle of sentences? Try to think back to the reasons in each case. Was it because you were reaching for a word? Was it because of uncertainty about sentence structure? Were you just trying to think what to say next? Your answers to these questions should give you hints about the problem areas you should be focusing on.

SELF-STUDY

Work with a practice test. Take one section at a time, speaking freely and without notes, and record yourself while you do it. Don't worry about keeping to a time limit. Once you have finished, play back the audio and try to spot the utterances that you are producing well and those that don't sound quite right.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The IELTS speaking test is something that you can and should practice for, even when you are studying alone. The posts here, in the IELTS speaking category, present ideas on the steps you can take in order to do so

2. HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

The IELTS speaking test always follows a three-stage pattern. You should try to familiarize yourself with this pattern and approximately how long each stage will take. Although the structure of the test is not difficult, there is still some potential for confusion at some points if you don't know what you are expected to do (such as when the examiner suddenly hands you a pencil and a piece of paper).

THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST

Part 1: Introduction & Interview (4-5 minutes)

Introduce yourself and confirm your identity

Answer questions on familiar topics.

Part 2: Individual Talk (3-4 minutes)

Read a task card

Write notes to prepare for a talk (1 min.)

Give a talk about a topic (1-2 mins.)

Answer additional 1 or 2 questions on the topic

Part 3: Two-way Discussion (4-5 minutes)

Discuss more questions related to the topic in Part 2

Total test time: 11-14 minutes

Part 1 of the test will begin with the examiner introducing him- or herself and then asking you to confirm your identity. In order to relax you, there will be a number of straightforward questions about familiar topics, such as your job, where you live, or your interests.

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In Part 2 of the test, you will be given a card with a topic that you should talk about and some of the different points to include. You will be handed a pencil and a piece of paper and allowed one minute to prepare notes for this talk. Next, you will be asked to speak for up to about two minutes. During this part of the test, the examiner will not interrupt at all. After you have finished, the examiner will ask one or two brief follow-up questions.

Next is Part 3 of the test. The examiner will ask you a number of questions about the same topic as that mentioned in Part 2. However, these questions will be more complex and abstract than anything that has appeared up to this point.

The examiner will not assess your ideas themselves, but rather will assign marks based on your fluency and coherence, the vocabulary you use, the accuracy and grammatical complexity of your sentences and the clarity of your pronunciation.

SELF-STUDY

The structure of the IELTS speaking test is shown in the chart on this page. Use this to help you identify the different parts of the speaking module of an IELTS practice test.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The IELTS speaking test has a simple three-part structure. Make sure that you are completely familiar with this structure so that there is no possibility of confusion in the actual test.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

3. HOW SHOULD YOU ANSWER ODD QUESTIONS IN PART 1 OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

The questions in Part 1 of the IELTS speaking test are, for the most part, rather predictable. They are usually the kind of thing you might be asked if you got into a conversation with the person sitting next to you on an airplane: What's your job? Where are you from? What do you like to do in your free time?

Every now and then, however, there may be a question that will surprise you. Luckily, these are unlikely to be grammatically difficult, but the contents may be a little... well, odd. How would you respond, for example, if the examiner suddenly asked you, "What is your favourite colour and why?"

Sometimes such questions are asked on purpose to see how you cope with the unfamiliar. What you must not do is panic or fall into silence for a long time. You may need time to think. If so, make it clear to the examiner that this is what you are doing by saying, "Let me see" or something similar. If you simply stop talking he or she may assume that there is a language problem.

With questions of this type, you should not worry about trying to use impressive vocabulary or grammar. Instead, give a short, positive answer, smile, and then wait for the next question.

Q: What animal would you like to be?

A: What animal...? Let me see. I think I would like to be a house cat. They get well fed and seem to have a very comfortable life.

Don't panic with a question like this and don't ramble on in the hope that eventually you'll find something great to say about it. Sometimes there just isn't very far that you can go with a particular question. In such cases, your best bet is to try to get through it and on to more familiar topics as quickly as possible.

SELF-STUDY

Unpredictable questions are, by their very nature, difficult to prepare for. However, you should try to remember a few short, natural expressions for giving yourself thinking time (e.g. well..., let me see...) and practice using them.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you are asked an odd question, give a short, positive answer and then wait for the next question.

4. WHAT COMMON IELTS SPEAKING PROBLEMS SHOULD YOU AVOID?

In general, in the IELTS speaking test, examiners will be impressed if you answer questions coherently, without too much hesitation and with an intonation and accent that is easy to catch. Try to avoid all of the following common IELTS speaking problems.

TRYING TO HIDE MISTAKES BY MUMBLING OR SPEAKING QUICKLY

If you make mistakes when you speak, the examiner will catch them. Speaking quickly or mumbling will not help with this. All that will happen is that as well as losing points for the original problem, you will lose additional points for not speaking clearly.

MISTAKING SPEED FOR FLUENCY

Being fluent does not mean being able to cram as many words into each second as possible. After all, even native English speakers vary greatly in the average number of words they speak per minute. Fluency is not about speaking quickly but about speaking steadily.

GIVING ONE-WORD ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

It is true that yes, no and maybe might be grammatically perfect answers to some questions, but this won't prevent you getting a low mark if this is all you ever say. The point of a speaking test is to speak. If you don't do this, there will be nothing for the examiner to assess. You should try to expand most answers to at least a sentence or two.

TRYING TO MAKE ANSWERS MUCH LONGER THAN THEY NEED BE

Although, as we have just said, it is good to expand on answers, this should be done within reasonable limits. Think of the points that you want to make in answer to the examiner's question. Once you have made these points, stop talking. Continuing with yet more sentences when you have nothing in particular to say is simply making noise, not communicating. You will lose marks for rambling and lack of coherence.

STRAYING FROM A NATURAL REGISTER

When answering questions, try to say things in a way that is natural to both the topic and the situation. Continued use of overly formal language is not a good idea because it will sound unnatural. Nobody says, "I possess a canine companion" instead of, "I

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have a dog.” On the other hand, being too casual can be even more dangerous. Using every slang expression that you know in the test, greeting the examiner as “dude” – or worst of all – using bad language, will not make you sound cool. It will just make you sound disrespectful.

USING BIG WORDS RANDOMLY

When you are unsure about the meaning of a word, you are better to avoid it and explain the same idea in simpler words that you are certain are correct.

MAKING CONSTANT NERVOUS MOVEMENTS

The examiner will understand if you feel a little ill at ease and will take this into account. If you think nervousness may affect your movements, try sitting slightly forward in your chair with your hands clasped in front of you. Avoid nervous habits such as playing with your hair, rocking in your seat, biting your lip, and so on. These can be distracting for the examiner and may lead to lower marks.

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5. HOW SHOULD YOU APPROACH THE FIRST FEW MINUTES OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

The first few minutes of the IELTS speaking test set the tone for what is to follow. Get off to a good start and you will give yourself confidence going forward. Make a terrible mess of it, and you will be running uphill from then onwards.

Luckily, the IELTS speaking test is structured in a way that is helpful. In the first of the three parts of the test, the examiner will ask you a few questions about subjects that are fairly predictable, such as your family, your job, or your interests. You should have practiced talking about all of these topics many times before the test (either to a willing friend or to yourself, if necessary), so there is no reason for you to have to struggle with content at this stage.

However, there is another aspect to the test. As in any type of face-to-face interaction with another person, the language you use is only half of the story. Your body language, facial expressions and overall manner may not be assessed directly, but they may still affect the score you are given. Examiners are ordinary people, after all, not robots.

Aim for approximately the level of politeness you might show a stranger who stopped you in the street to ask for directions. You might smile and try to be confident and polite, but you wouldn't start telling rude jokes or giving hugs. Try not to be too serious, but being overly familiar is, if anything, even worse.

Similarly, you should avoid extremes when it comes to eye contact. Don't spend the entire test with your eyes fixed firmly on the ground in front of your feet. On the other hand, looking directly into someone's eyes for any length of time will make that person feel intensely uncomfortable. Avoid giving the examiner a unbroken stare, but instead look at his or her face fairly regularly, but while keeping your gaze soft and not too focused.

One final point is that you should not be surprised if, despite all of your efforts to be polite yet approachable, the examiner responds somewhat abruptly. Don't take it personally. They have a job to do. Sometimes their focus on this can lead them to inadvertently come across as being rather unfriendly.

In any case, the examiner is marking you, you are not marking the examiner, so continue trying to be open yet respectful in your behaviour no matter what happens.

SELF-STUDY

Practice talking to yourself about some of the introductory topics likely to come up in the first part of the test. As you do this, try looking at yourself in the mirror or videoing

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your performance. Check that your body language and facial expressions are appropriate.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Use the first part of the test as a chance to make a good impression and get things off to a successful start.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

6. WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE IELTS SPEAKING QUESTION?

It's Part 1 of the IELTS speaking test. You have just given an interesting and grammatically accurate answer about baby doctors in your country. Unfortunately, the question was about your baby daughter...

If you are not sure about something you are asked in the test, it is far better to ask for clarification than to give an answer to an entirely different question. Remember, checking your understanding now and again is a perfectly natural part of an ordinary conversation, not a sign of weakness on your part. After all, native speakers don't always understand each other.

Functional language, such as asking for repetition or clarification is something that you can and should practice before you go into the test. It is not necessary to remember a vast amount of English for this. For each function, have a couple of expressions that you can use accurately and without effort.

Be aware, though, that the examiner will not be able to give you additional help in Part 2 of the test, even if you ask politely. There is no problem asking for clarification in Parts 1 and 3, however. Indeed, you may occasionally want to ask for clarification in Part 3 of the test even if you have understood, since it can be a useful way to give yourself a few seconds thinking time.

There are, however, several dangers to avoid. The first is overusing requests for clarification. Asking once or twice during a conversation is fine and well within the normal range. Asking for clarification five or six times suggests a serious comprehension problem.

Similarly, the language you use when asking for help should be as natural as possible. "I'm sorry, do you mean X?" is fine. On the other hand,

"So what you are in fact asking me is X, unless I am very much mistaken," is natural only in nineteenth-century novels.

SELF STUDY

Make a list of natural functional expressions that you can use during the test for such things as saying you don't understand, asking for clarification, asking for repetition, and so on. Practice saying these from memory until you can use them without effort.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you don't understand something in the test. Don't do this too often, though, and ensure that the language you use is natural.

7. WHAT KIND OF DELIVERY SHOULD YOU AIM FOR IN THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

When is a pause not a pause? When it's a hesitation.

As has already been mentioned in a previous post, speaking fluently means speaking steadily and smoothly rather than at top speed. But "steadily" does not mean that you cannot pause. You will, after all, need to breathe from time to time!

Pausing is not at all unnatural in a conversation. If you listen to native speakers, you will find that they do it all the time. The trick is to know when and where to pause. Look at the following two examples. Can you see the difference?

"I think all citizens... whether poor or wealthy... deserve to have a comfortable place to live... and enough food to eat."

"I think all... citizens whether poor or... wealthy deserve to have a... comfortable place to live and enough... food to eat."

The top example is much more natural than the bottom one. Why? Because the pauses come after a complete phrase. A politician choosing his words carefully might pause in the places shown. This kind of pausing gives the impression that the speaker is thinking.

In the bottom example, the pauses come in the middle of phrases. This kind of pausing strongly suggests that the speaker has simply forgotten the next word or has become confused about the grammar of the sentence.

You can use natural pauses to your own advantage. If you are talking about a difficult topic, the listener will be fairly forgiving of short pauses as long as they occur at expected points in the sentence. Pausing randomly, on the other hand, is much more difficult to listen to and may result in lost marks.

If, as you are speaking, you realize that you really don't know a word and have no choice but to make a lengthy pause, try to do this as naturally as possible by using a phrase like, "How can I put it?" This way the listener understands what is happening and is not left confused by your sudden silence.

Expressions like this are helpful in implying that the reason you have stopped is not the result of any language weakness, but simply because you have so many words in your vast vocabulary that you must pause briefly to select from among them.

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SELF-STUDY

Make a list of two or three expressions that you can use when you need to give yourself more thinking time. Practice them until you can use them without effort (but be sure not to overuse them in a real conversation).

THE BOTTOM LINE

Brief pauses while speaking need not be a problem as long as you do it naturally.

8. WHAT KIND OF FUNCTIONAL EXPRESSIONS SHOULD YOU USE IN THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

Functional expressions are, as their name suggests, useful things to be able to use. There are also a very great many of them. Although this can potentially be a problem when it comes to understanding other people, it is a great advantage to you as a speaker because it gives you a lot of choice when it comes to choosing which expressions to concentrate on.

Some functional language is long and full of many small words – a terrible combination when it comes to trying to remember it and use it quickly. Luckily, with so many expressions available, you can avoid these and try to use shorter, simpler alternatives.

Better yet is the fact that short expressions are often more natural than longer ones. For example, if an examiner asked you a question that was difficult and required some thought, you could scratch your head and say, “That question is difficult and requires some thought.” This would be grammatical and appropriate to the situation.

Unfortunately, it would also sound like a talking book.

The only people who ever regularly use expressions like this in conversations are politicians during interviews or university professors at conferences. Back in the real world, someone who is asked a tricky question is much likely to say something like, “Well...” or “Let me see...” This is a case where the expressions that are easier to use and remember are also more appropriate than the harder, more formal ones.

Note, however, that while it can often be better to stick to shorter expressions, this does not mean simply saying “er” or “um” a lot. Doing this may be taken to mean that you can’t continue because of language difficulties, and you may lose points for hesitation.

Using short expressions is not the same as using very casual expressions. Being too casual can often sound rude. For example, if you don’t hear something clearly, you are much more likely to make a good impression with a polite, “Sorry, I didn’t catch that” than with a more direct, “You what?”

SELF-STUDY

Make a short list of functions that you are likely to have to perform in the IELTS test, such as greeting, asking for clarification, saying you don’t understand, generalizing, giving yourself thinking time, and saying goodbye even. Choose two or three expressions for each function and practice using them until you can do so naturally and without effort.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

THE BOTTOM LINE

When it comes to functional language, shorter expressions are easier to remember and use and also tend to be more natural than longer expressions. It is better to avoid short expressions which are overly-casual, however.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

9. WHEN MIGHT HONESTY NOT BE THE BEST POLICY IN THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

At first glance, an IELTS speaking test might seem a lot like a job interview. After all, you are trying in both to make the best possible impression on someone you have never met before by answering his or her many detailed questions.

However, there are some very important differences. For one thing, your personality will not be directly assessed, although it may have an indirect influence. Similarly, you will not be tested on your intelligence or your depth of knowledge about the issues. Being able to explain fluently that you don't know much about something will result in better points than being, say, an internationally-recognized expert on fashion design, but answering a question about the clothing industry with, "I... I... big hat."

Finally, the IELTS test is not an assessment of your honesty or your beliefs. This is a fact that you should use to your full advantage. If you are asked in the first part of the test whether you have a pet, it might be wiser say that you do even if you don't. Why? Because saying you do almost certainly guarantees a number of very predictable follow-up questions, such as, "What kind of pet is it?" or, "What is its name?" If you say you don't have a pet, the topic will change to something unpredictable that might not be as easy to answer.

In Part 2, it is even more important not to take the question too literally. Imagine, for example, a topic card that says something like, "Describe the best present you have ever received."

Do not spend the first thirty seconds of your precious note-taking time trying to decide whether to talk about your bike or your roller skates.

It doesn't matter whether the present you describe is actually your favourite. It doesn't matter whether you even like the present. Indeed, it doesn't matter whether such a present actually exists in the first place.

The same thing applies in Part 3 of the test too. Imagine you are asked whether you think globalization is a good thing or a bad thing. The question going through your head should not be "What do I think about globalization?" but, "Which is easier to explain in English: globalization is good or globalization is bad?" Choose whichever answer is likely to give you the most points and then argue that case.

Whether you actually believe it or not is irrelevant.

Remember, the examiner almost certainly doesn't care about the true facts one way or the other. He or she will be completely focused on how well you explain your ideas, not what those ideas actually are.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

THE BOTTOM LINE

Give answers that you can explain easily, not that are necessarily true.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

10. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN AN IELTS SPEAKING ANSWER OTHER THAN FLUENCY AND ACCURACY?

Imagine an exchange in the IELTS speaking test that goes something like this:

Examiner: So, can you tell me something about your family?

Test-taker: Well, there are five of us. We grew up in a little town in the country side about fifty miles south of the capital. There wasn't much industry there, so most people either have to work as farmers or move away. That's why I moved to this city, in fact. I've been here for a couple of years now and I really enjoy it. I miss the hills and streams, though.

It's an answer that is natural, easy to follow – and that may lose the test-taker points. Wait! What? Lose points? Why?

The problem is irrelevance. The question was about the test-taker's family, but the answer said almost nothing about this topic. It is not even clear if the five people mentioned are all brothers and sisters or if this number includes the speaker's parents. The words "grew up" makes it sound like the former, but common sense suggests the latter.

Sometimes test takers become so focused on speaking fluently and not making mistakes that they stop paying attention to the relevance of what they are saying. This is rather like spending so much time making sure that you drive safely, you forget entirely about your destination.

If you are unsure about where to go with a question, it can make sense to take a few brief moments to think about it before you start. One way to gain such thinking time is to repeat a little of the question before beginning your answer. For example, in the exchange above, the test-taker could have begun by saying something like, "About my family? Well..."

Of course, as with any of the techniques we discuss on these pages, you should be careful not to overdo it. Don't repeat too much of the original question – three or four words is usually enough – and don't repeat words after every question. There is no point "wasting" a technique like this by using it in situations when you don't have to:

"My name? Well now, let me see...?"

11. WHEN SHOULD YOU STOP SPEAKING?

Examiner: So do you have a pet?

Test-taker: No.

Examiner: Oh, really? Do you like animals?

Test-taker: Yes.

Examiner: I see. What kind of animals do you like?

Test-taker: Rabbits.

If for some reason you really want an examiner to dislike you, answering in the same way as the candidate above is a good idea. Responding to every question with a single word is not the same as having a proper conversation. Try to avoid this by expanding your answers out a little. Even replies to simple questions can get a short sentence or two.

Examiner: So do you have a pet?

Test-taker: No, I don't, unfortunately, although, I do like animals.

Examiner: Oh, really, why is that?

It should be clear how much better and more natural this answer is. However, let's look at the other extreme.

Examiner: So do you have a pet?

Test-taker: No, I don't, unfortunately, although, I do like animals. I wanted a pet when I was young, but my mother said I couldn't have one. My best friend Nisa had a cat – black and white and really friendly. It died, though, and she was really sad about it. She gets sad sometimes, like about her boyfriend. He got a new job so he had to move to a different city. He works for this big company, you see. They make...

This time the answer has turned into a rambling, out-of-control string of sentences. There is no central theme and no real point being made. The speaker has given no thought to what she wants to say. As a result, she is using a great many words to say nothing at all.

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Pausing slightly before you begin your answer will give you a few critical moments to think about the point you want to make. We have already talked about how repeating some of the words in a question can make pauses seem more natural.

The other important thing to remember is that once you have made your point, whatever it is, you should stop talking. If your answer has been fairly long, you may even find it helpful to signal to the examiner that you have now finished by adding a short concluding sentence, such as, "So that's my pet."

Even if it is now quiet, don't feel that you must jump in again to fill up the silence. Speaking without a point isn't so very different from simply making noise.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Avoid the extremes of giving either single-word answers or long, rambling ones.

12. HOW SHOULD YOU DEAL WITH EMBARRASSING TOPICS IN PART 1 OF THE IELTS TEST?

If, as you were walking along one day, you noticed a huge hole directly in front of you, it would be foolish indeed to ignore this fact and keep on going in a straight line.

The first section of the IELTS speaking test is highly predictable. The questions will be about familiar subjects, which means you are very likely to be asked about such things as your family, your job, your home, your interests, your habits, and so on.

If there is a personal topic that is difficult for you – say, for example, that you have recently been made redundant – you should spend some time thinking about how you will deal with any inconvenient or embarrassing questions that may arise. Ignoring the issue and just hoping for the best is just like walking with both eyes open straight into that hole we mentioned.

When you are asked about an uncomfortable topic, you have several options. You can say directly, “I would rather not talk about that.” This is grammatical, and native speakers might actually take this approach in real-life conversations, but it is still not advisable. The problem is that it is difficult to say this without causing awkwardness. Such an answer can easily come across as abrupt or make it sound as though you think the examiner was rude to ask the question.

Another possibility is to answer the question, but not be entirely accurate with your facts. For example, you could describe your old job as though you still had it. There is nothing wrong with doing this. You are being tested on your English and this is what the examiner cares about, not whether your life is exactly as you describe it.

Finally, you might tell the truth about the situation. This is rather a risky move, however, because you may make the examiner feel very uncomfortable. It is, after all, not entirely normal to go around telling strangers all about your personal problems. If you do go down this road, you should at least think about how you phrase things to make the conversation go as smoothly and positively as possible. In other words, describe your situation as in sentence B, not sentence A.

1. I've just lost my job. [Sob.] It's terrible! I don't know what I'm going to do!
2. I'm between jobs at the moment, but I'm hoping to get work soon as an engineer.

SELF-STUDY

If a topic makes you uncomfortable, the test should not be the first time you ever hear yourself talking about it. Have conversations in which you take the role of both exami-

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iner and candidate. Ask yourself all of the most difficult questions about the topic that you can think of and practice answering them. Record your conversations and evaluate your performance afterwards.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Before the test, practice how you will answer awkward personal questions.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

13. HOW SHOULD YOU ORGANIZE YOUR ANSWERS IN PART 1 OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

What are your interests?

What are your views on the role of government intervention in the workings of free markets?

Which of these questions would you rather answer under pressure? The IELTS exam gets progressively harder as it goes on, which means that by the time you get toward the end, some of the questions will be extremely tough. They have to be, to allow the examiners to separate English learners at the top end of the ability range. This means that you should try to get as many points as you can from the easier questions in the earlier parts of the test.

What can you do to answer a question in a way that will impress the examiner? We have already talked about the importance of avoiding irrelevance. Answering a question about your job with a funny story about your pet dog may lose you points, even if the examiner laughs.

But staying relevant is not enough. You must also try to be logical. If you structure your answer in a way that seems natural, you will be much easier to follow, and this can only increase the chances that you will score well.

For example, imagine you are asked to describe your family. Which of the following replies do you think is better?

There are my two sisters. We have Goldie too – our dog. One of them is an English teacher, by the way. One of my sisters, that is. Then there's Mum and my little brother. And of course, there's my dad too. So that's six of us.

Well, there are six of us. First of all, there are Mum and Dad. Then there are my two older sisters. Actually, one of them is an English teacher. And then there's my little brother too. Oh, and there's also our dog, Goldie. I mustn't forget her.

The first answer jumps all over the place in a way that is unpredictable and difficult to follow. If you answer a question in this way, you force the listener to do all of the hard work of arranging everything in a logical order. He or she is not likely to thank you for it.

The second version is much easier to understand. It is clear how many people there are, who they are, and what relationship they have to each other. This is the kind of answer you should be aiming for.

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SELF-STUDY

Have practice conversations with yourself in preparation for the test. Record these and listen to them later. As you do so, take note of the logic and coherence of your answers. Work on improving any problems that you find.

THE BOTTOM LINE

In your answers to questions, try not only to be relevant, but also logical and coherent.

14. HOW SHOULD YOU TAKE NOTES IN PART 2 OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

In the second part of the IELTS speaking test, you will be given a card with a topic on it and some points to cover. You will then be given a pencil and a piece of paper and allowed a minute to write some notes. Finally, you will be asked to speak for up to about two minutes on the topic. After you have finished, the examiner will ask you a few more questions on the same theme.

This section of the test has some advantages and some disadvantages for you as a test taker. One good point of is that the topic will always be about something personal to you, so you shouldn't require any specialist knowledge to discuss it.

In addition, because you are the person who decides what you are going to say, you have the freedom to answer in a way that demonstrates your strengths and shows off your talents.

On the other hand, the examiner will not speak during your talk. You will be on your own. This means that if you have any problems, the examiner will not be able to help you out. There is a real danger of either rambling far from the topic, or freezing up halfway through.

The only help available to you during your talk will be the notes you have made, so it is in your interests to make them as useful as possible. It is important to remember that you only have one minute to make these notes. There will be no time to write out a full script of what you are going to say. If you try, all you will end up with is a series of unreadable shapes on the page.

What matters is not how much you write but what you write, because five words you can read will be of much more use to you than fifty words that you can't. Think of the key points you want to make and write a keyword or phrase to remind you of each of them. Make sure these are written in the order that you want to mention them. If there is a difficult or impressive expression that you would like to use, write it out (plus any associated language that goes with it, such as the appropriate preposition or the correct form of the following verb) in the correct place on the paper.

Use your notes to help you structure your answer and keep to them as much as you can.

As well as the danger of rambling if you stray far from them, you want to be careful with your timing, and this will be harder to do if you add a lot of additional detail that wasn't in your original plan.

It is also a nice idea to signal when you have reached the end of your talk by return

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

ing back to the original question and saying something like, “So that’s my favourite movie.”

SELF-STUDY

Practice taking notes under timed conditions. Focus on making your notes clear and easy to use rather than extensive. Remember also to practice speaking from these notes for two minutes.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Make sure that you write notes that are legible and useful. Don’t try to write every word that you want to say.

15. HOW SHOULD YOU HANDLE PART 3 OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

Q. So Prime Minister, how do you plan to respond to the financial crisis?

A. Well, I... um...

Some questions are difficult for anyone to answer, and so it is no surprise that there are times when even native speakers have to pause and think about how they should phrase something.

Part 3 of the IELTS speaking test will contain the hardest questions, and it is quite likely that you will have to pause before you begin to speak. If this happens, try to avoid simply falling silent while you think since this offers no clue as to why you have stopped. The examiner may simply assume that you don't have the language skills to continue.

There are a number of expressions that could potentially be used to signal a pause, but some of the longer ones can sometimes seem overly-formal and rather unnatural, particularly if you use them several times. Often, it is better to avoid saying something like, "That's a good question. Let me think how to answer it." Instead a simple, "Let me see..." may sound better.

As we mentioned on an earlier page, repeating part of the original question can be another way to gain a little bit of extra thinking time.

Q: Do children today have an easier life compared to children in the past?

A: Hmm, an easier life...?

In part 3 of the test, you will have a lot to think about. There will be advanced vocabulary and complicated sentence structure in the questions. There will also be challenging topics to deal with and probably tricky follow-up questions. With so much going on, it really isn't the place to begin experimenting with difficult vocabulary and grammar. Play it safe and work instead on making sure that the language you do use is used perfectly.

SELF-STUDY

Memorize and practice with a small stock of natural-sounding expressions that you can use if you need to have more thinking time. Also practice asking yourself questions and then trying to respond naturally by repeating a little of the question before you begin your answer.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't be afraid to pause before you begin answering a tough question, but make sure you do this in a natural way.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

16. HOW SHOULD YOU ORGANIZE YOUR ANSWERS IN PART 3 OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST?

What makes Part 3 of the IELTS speaking test so difficult? The challenging topics and more complex questions are both major reasons, of course. On top of this, however, is also the fact that you will have so little time to organize your answers.

On the other hand, you do have some things in your favour!

Although you will not be able to see the questions for Part 3 of the test beforehand, they are always related in some way to the topic of Part 2, so this means you should have some idea of the overall theme and the kind of vocabulary that is likely to be useful.

It is a good idea to practice the two latter stages of the test at the same time. Try to keep the conditions as close to those of the actual test as possible. If you are using practice tests, try to ensure that when you look at the printed topic for Part 2 of the test, your eyes don't accidentally glance over at the questions for Part 3. It is important to get plenty of practice of being able to answer tough questions without much preparation.

It may seem an impossible task to give a structured response to a difficult question that you have never seen before, but this is not really true.

Most often, what you will be asked for is your opinion, which means, in its most basic form, the information you have to give is, "I think X because Y."

There are different ways you can add to this basic structure to make it sound more sophisticated, but by the time you finish speaking, it should be clear to the examiner what your opinion is and why you feel that way about it. Your first job, then, on hearing a question should mentally fill in the X and Y in the sentence above. Once you have done that, you can think about whether you also want to mention the opposing point of view or give examples to illustrate your argument.

Some questions may be factual rather than opinion-based, such as, "Is advertising important in your culture?"

In such cases the basic structure you must build on is very similar, "The situation is X because Y."

You can add clarity and sophistication to your answer by using appropriate signposting language, such as that for showing order (first, second, also, and finally), contrast (on the other hand, however), additional reasons or examples (in addition, what's more), and so on.

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It is a good idea to begin with a short, punchy sentences rather than long, difficult-to-follow ones. It is also better to forget about trying to use difficult vocabulary or complex sentence structure in this part of the test and work instead at impressing the examiner with coherence and fluency.

SELF-STUDY

Since coherence is particularly important in this section, memorize and practice using the signposting language you will need to help you link your ideas smoothly.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A good way to organize your answers to this section of the test is to quickly think about the basic information you must give, and then build on your answer from there.

17. HOW SHOULD USE THE WORD “YOU”?

Q: Would you like to be an astronaut?

A: Be an astronaut? I'm not sure. I know you can get sick if you travel in space for too long. I believe your bones can get weak and your muscles can get a lot smaller in space. I think I'd rather stay on Earth.

Who is the “you” in a sentence like the one above? Is the examiner an astronaut? It's extremely unlikely, but this doesn't mean the sentence is wrong or at all unnatural.

Using “you” to mean “people in general” is common and perfectly acceptable in English. Listeners can virtually always tell from the context whether the speaker is making a statement about what they personally should do or whether he or she is generalizing. It simply doesn't cause confusion.

In some languages the word “you” is avoided because it can sound too abrupt, or there are particular forms that have to be used when addressing someone you respect – such as an IELTS examiner! This is not the case in English. The word “you” is acceptable whether you are talking to your boss, your wife, your children, your country's president, or your dog.

There is simply no reason to avoid using this word. If you try, you may well end up sounding rather unnatural.

e.g. In my country, one does not wear one's shoes indoors.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't be afraid to use the word “you” when generalizing. It is not rude and not confusing.

18. IS IT ACCEPTABLE TO USE PERSONAL EXAMPLES IN YOUR ANSWERS?

In much of the speaking section of the IELTS test, you will be asked about your life and opinions. As part of your reply, it is not at all strange to give personal examples.

In fact, it can be a positive advantage to do this. Mentioning an experience from your own life can be used to strengthen your argument when you are talking about an issue.

Giving details about something that you know about first hand can add interest and colour to your description of whatever you are talking about.

Some students try to avoid talking about their life, perhaps because they are worried that they may appear boastful. Such fears are unnecessary. It is quite possible to talk about something you have experienced without stopping every second sentence to say something nice about yourself.

Of course, you should only talk about your experiences if they are actually related to the topic. Don't be tempted to answer a question about international relations with a long, irrelevant discussion of all the amusing things that happened to you during your recent vacation in France, for example.

Remember too, that the information you give need not be completely (or even at all) true. If you are using a personal experience to illustrate a point, you should feel free to adjust the details as much as possible to suit your argument.

Remember, you are telling your story to an English examiner, not a journalist or a trial judge.

What matters is how well you express the information. It doesn't matter whether the facts you give are absolutely true or a complete work of fiction.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Don't be afraid of using relevant personal details (altered if necessary) to illustrate a point or add interest to an answer.

19. HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU WORRY ABOUT YOUR PRONUNCIATION?

I to New York next week will go.

Ahh ell ga chu Naa Yaak naks eek.

When it comes to successful communication, pronunciation can sometimes be more important than correct grammar. Why? Because native speakers can often work out what you mean from the words you say, even if the sentence structure is strange or you have used some of the wrong parts of speech.

There's not much listeners can do, though, if they can't understand the words themselves since this will leave them with nothing to work with but a series of random sounds.

Remember, however, that having an accent is not the same as having a pronunciation problem.

There is little point trying to sound exactly like an American, a Briton or an Australian since this is close to impossible unless you began developing your English accent in childhood.

In any case, there is also absolutely nothing wrong with people being able to tell where you are from, as long as they can also tell what you are saying. After all, everybody has an accent of some kind or other – even native speakers. If they didn't, nobody would be able to tell which country they came from!

Unfortunately, being able to judge the understandability of your accent may not be something that you are well qualified to do by yourself. If you strongly suspect that you have real problems, this is one area where you really will need the advice of a qualified and experienced teacher to give you accurate feedback and concrete pronunciation tips. If you do begin working on your pronunciation, though, don't expect instant results. It will take time before you notice any changes.

SELF STUDY

Find short passages or sentences of speech that you can use to practice shadowing. Record your voice while doing this. Try to copy the pronunciation and intonation of the original as closely as you can. When you have finished, compare the two. If you notice many areas of great difference, you may have a problem. If so, seek out some professional training.

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Speaking clearly is important. If you have serious problems in this area, get the help and advice of a professional teacher.

20. HOW CAN YOU USE WRITING TO IMPROVE YOUR IELTS SPEAKING?

There was a time when a portable voice recorder meant a reel-to-reel device about the size of a small suitcase. Nowadays, people can use equipment that can fit comfortably into a shirt pocket. It has never been easier to record yourself talking. So how can you use this fact to help you prepare for the speaking test? You can start writing.

The previous sentence may have left you feeling a little confused, but actually it makes perfect sense. A problem that many candidates for the IELTS test have is structuring their answers well. Most people find structuring written sentences easier because they are visible on the page throughout and so keeping track of the logical progression of an argument is easier.

For this reason, it can sometimes be useful to write your answers down (in a spoken style of English, of course) and then read them while you record your voice. When you play the recording back, listen to make sure that your delivery sounds natural.

Repeat the exercise again and again, and as you do so, work to reduce the amount that you write each time, beginning with full sentences, reducing this to phrases, then to key words, and then finally writing nothing at all.

Once you are happy with both the structuring of your answers and the quality of your delivery, you may find it useful to record yourself giving answers again, but this time using video equipment. This will allow you to check your visual presentation. Remember, your body language and the expressiveness of your face are also part of communication.

Try watching yourself speak without sound. Do you notice any problems? Do you look down too much? Does nervousness lead you to be too serious? Are you unnaturally still throughout your answers, or alternatively, do you throw your arms about wildly to emphasize the points you are trying to make?

Whatever your problems are, this is your chance to identify them and work to improve your performance.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Practice writing answers to improve your structuring, and record yourself giving those answers to check your delivery and body language.

IELTS SELF-PREP SPEAKING

21. IT MIGHT NOT BE A PROBLEM IF YOU DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT ANYTHING!

If you have a lot of thoughtful opinions, clever arguments and a wealth of personal experience to back it all up, that is, of course, absolutely wonderful. If you don't... Oh, well, never mind. You see, demonstrating the wisdom of your insights or the depth of your understanding of the issues is simply not the point of the IELTS test.

Take the example of a Japanese man who had lived in London for a number of years and who spoke English clearly and grammatically, if fairly slowly. He gave a very impressive performance in Part 1 of the test when the questions were all about his daily life. When it came to the more difficult topics in Part 2 and Part 3, however, he knew almost nothing about them and told the examiner as much.

The result? He got band 8.5.

You see, what the examiner is looking for is how fluently, grammatically and coherently you can express yourself in English. If your response to a question is to fluently, grammatically and coherently explain that you know don't know anything about the topic, that may be good enough.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The IELTS test is not about the quality of your ideas, but about how well you can express yourself in English.