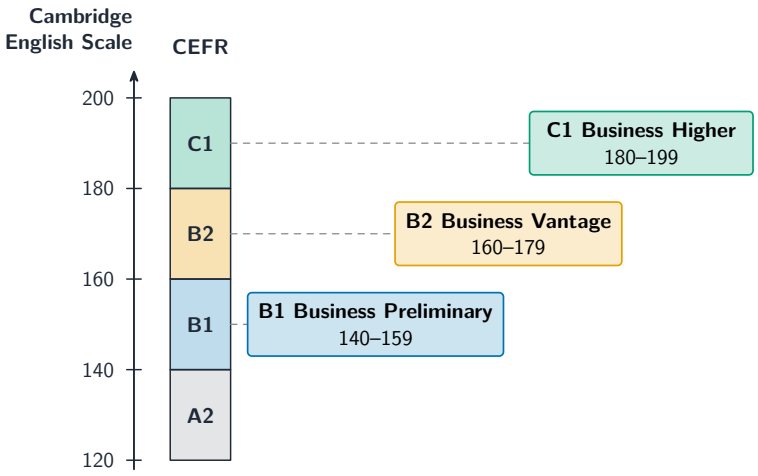
The exam: levels, results and a study plan

BEC Business English

What this topic covers

BEC, the Cambridge **Business English Certificates** , tests the English people use at work: emails, reports, meetings, phone calls and presentations. This topic explains the three levels, what is in each paper, how your result is worked out, and how to plan your preparation.



Three levels, three separate exams: choose one

- **B1 Business Preliminary**: about 2 hours 20 minutes in total.
- **B2 Business Vantage**: about 2 hours 40 minutes.
- **C1 Business Higher**: about 3 hours.
- Each level matches one level of the **CEFR** , the European scale of language levels from A1 to C2.
- Higher is not a harder copy of Vantage. The texts are longer, the tasks ask for more, and the writing is longer. Each level is a separate exam.
- Memory hook: **P**reliminary, **V**antage, **H**igher = **B1, B2, C1**, one step at a time.

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The four papers at each level

Every level tests **Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking**, and each skill is **25%** of the result.

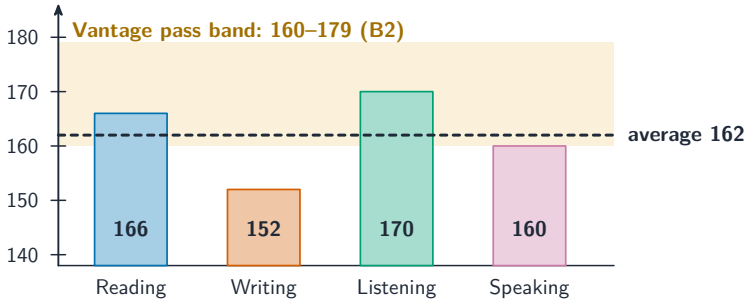
	Preliminary (B1)	Vantage (B2)	Higher (C1)
Reading	Reading and Writing in one paper: **1 h 30 min**, 7 reading parts (45 questions) + 2 writing tasks	**1 h**, 5 parts, 45 questions	**1 h**, 6 parts, 52 questions
Writing	(in the same paper)	**45 min**, 2 tasks	**1 h 10 min**, 2 tasks
Listening	about **40 min**, 4 parts, 30 questions	about **40 min**, 3 parts, 30 questions	about **40 min**, 3 parts, 30 questions
Speaking	**12 min**, 3 parts	**14 min**, 3 parts	**16 min**, 3 parts

- At **Preliminary**, Reading and Writing share one paper. You decide how to split the 90 minutes.
- At **Vantage** and **Higher**, Reading and Writing are two papers, each with its own time.
- **Speaking** is always taken **in pairs** with two examiners (a group of three when the numbers are odd).
- You need no business knowledge. Nobody asks you to calculate a profit. You need the **English** of working life.

How your result is worked out

Every candidate gets a **Statement of Results** . It shows a score on the **Cambridge English Scale** for each of the four skills, an **overall score** , a **grade** and a CEFR level.

The overall score is the **average** of the four skill scores. The grade and the CEFR level both come from the overall score, not from any single paper.



Zhang's four scores average 162: a Vantage pass, but only just

- Zhang: (166 + 152 + 170 + 160) ÷ 4 = 648 ÷ 4 = **162**. That is inside 160–179, so it is a **pass at B2**.
- A strong paper can make up for a weak one. But every paper is worth the **same 25%**, and five extra points in your **weakest** paper are usually easier to win than five more in your best.
- △ Never leave a paper or a writing task blank. 170 + 170 + 170 + 120 = 630, and 630 ÷ 4 = **157.5**: three strong papers and one disaster give **no Vantage pass**.

Grades and certificates

Level	Top result	Pass	One level below
Preliminary	Pass with Distinction, **160–170** (states B2)	Pass or Pass with Merit, **140–159** (B1)	**120–139**: certificate at A2
Vantage	Grade A, **180–190** (states C1)	Grade B or C, **160–179** (B2)	**140–159**: certificate at B1
Higher	Grade A, **200–210** (states C2)	Grade B or C, **180–199** (C1)	**160–179**: certificate at B2

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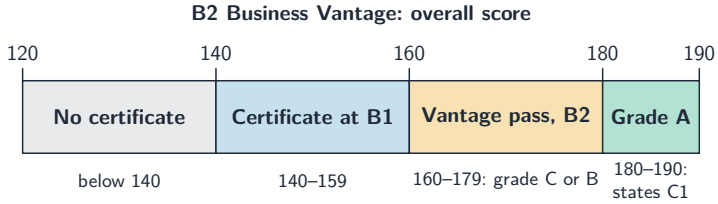


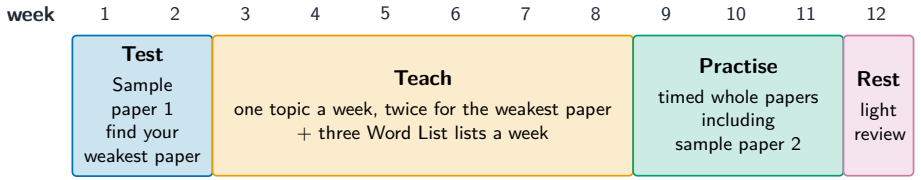
One exam, three possible certificates: Vantage as an example

- A **certificate** can show a level **above or below** the exam's own level.
- Below the "one level below" range, you get the Statement of Results but **no certificate**.
- Cambridge certificates **do not expire**. An employer or a university decides how recent a result must be.

BEC in China: where and when

- Since **2025**, BEC is offered **only in mainland China**. Cambridge stopped it in every other country.
- The **NEEA** (National Education Examinations Authority) runs it **once a year**, on its BEC website (bec.neea.edu.cn).
- In **2026**: **registration** from **11 to 17 March**; written papers on **16 May** (Preliminary and Higher) and **23 May** (Vantage); Speaking on the next day.
- The registration window is only **one week** long, and seats can run out. Check the NEEA site from January for the next year's dates.
- A failed attempt costs a whole year, so choose the level you can pass **now or after a few months of study**, not the level you hope to reach one day.

A 12-week study plan



Twelve weeks: test, teach, practise, rest

- **Weeks 1–2:** do official **sample paper** 1 for your level from the Library, with a timer. Mark it with the answer key and find your **weakest paper**.

- **Weeks 3–8:** one topic of this course per week, and **twice** for your weakest paper. Learn **three lists** of the BEC Word List each week.
- **Weeks 9–11:** timed practice of **whole papers**, including official **sample paper 2**.
- **Week 12:** light review, early nights, and nothing new.

Test day: the time rules

- **Reading** answers go onto a separate **answer sheet** **inside** the paper's time. There is no extra time to copy them, so copy your answers **after each part**.
- **Listening** gives you time at the end to copy answers: **5 minutes** at Preliminary, **10 minutes** at Vantage and Higher. Write on the question paper while you listen.
- At **Preliminary**, a sensible split of the 90 minutes is about **55 minutes** for the 45 reading questions and **35 minutes** for the two writing tasks. Nobody will tell you to move on.
- Bring a watch you can see easily. The clock in the room may be behind you.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **Choosing the level by ambition.** Many students choose Higher because it "looks better". A Vantage pass with grade A states C1 anyway; a failed Higher may give only B2.
- △ **Studying only Reading and grammar.** Each of the four skills is 25%. Speaking and Writing need practice with your voice and your pen, every week.
- △ **Copying Reading answers at the end.** At the end there is no time left. Copy after each part.

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Try it

Cover the answers first.

1. A Vantage candidate scores Reading 172, Writing 158, Listening 176, Speaking 166. What is the overall score, and what is the result?
2. A Preliminary candidate's overall score is 163. Which grade, and which CEFR level does the certificate state?
3. A Higher candidate's overall score is 175. Does she get a certificate? At which level?
4. Li Ming is strong in Reading and weak in Writing. He has six weeks. How should he split them?
5. Which two papers are one paper at Preliminary?
6. How long do you have to copy Listening answers at Vantage?

Answers. 1 (172 + 158 + 176 + 166) ÷ 4 = 672 ÷ 4 = **168**: a Vantage **pass at B2**. 2 **Pass with Distinction**; the certificate states **B2**. 3 **Yes**, a certificate at **B2** (160–179 is one level below Higher). 4 Writing first and most: for example **two weeks** on Writing, one week each on the other three papers, and one week of timed practice. 5 **Reading and Writing** (1 hour 30 minutes). 6 **10 minutes**.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. How is the overall score worked out? – It is the **average of the four skill scores**.
2. Which skill counts most? – **None.** Each skill is **25%** of the result.
3. Can a Vantage candidate get a C1 certificate? – **Yes**, with grade A (**180–190**).
4. How often does BEC run in China? – **Once a year**, organised by the NEEA.
5. Do BEC certificates expire? – **No.** An employer or university decides how recent a result must be.

Vocabulary card meanings

Business English Certificates: Cambridge exams that test the English used at work, at three levels. CEFR: The Common European Framework of Reference, a set of language levels from A1 to C2. Statement of Results: The document every candidate receives, with a score for each skill and the overall result. Cambridge English Scale: The score scale used by Cambridge exams, for example 160 to 179 for B2. overall score: The average of the four skill scores, which gives the grade. grade: The letter or name that shows how well a candidate passed, such as A, B or C. certificate: The official document that shows a candidate reached a language level. registration: Signing up for an exam before the closing date. sample paper: An official practice test that shows the real format of an exam. answer sheet: The paper where test takers mark or write their final answers.