Most IELTS marks are lost to a small number of habits, not to a gap in English. The × line is what candidates do; the ✓ line is what scores. Work through the ones for your weakest skill first – universities set a floor on each skill, so the lowest number is the one that decides.

× ✓

Across the whole test

✗ Preparing the skill you enjoy and leaving the weakest one alone.

✓ **Prepare the lowest skill first, because a 5.5 in Writing fails a 6.0-in-each requirement.**

Universities set a floor on each skill as well as on the overall band, so the weakest number is the one that decides the offer.

IELTS scoring in detail

✗ Booking the paper test by habit.

✓ **Book the computer test unless you have a reason not to.**

Results come in three to five days instead of thirteen, and only a computer test qualifies for One Skill Retake.

IELTS One Skill Retake

✗ Re-sitting the whole test because one skill was short.

✓ **Sit One Skill Retake within 60 days of a computer test.**

You may retake any one skill, once, and receive a new Test Report Form carrying that score and the original three.

IELTS One Skill Retake

✗ Memorising model answers and reciting them.

✓ **Prepare topics and sentence patterns, not scripts.**

Examiners are trained to discount memorised language, so a recited answer scores lower than the same idea in your own words.

IELTS Lexical resource

✗ Treating a long word as a better word.

✓ **Use a common word precisely; check the words that go with it.**

Lexical resource rewards collocation and precision. A rare word in the wrong collocation is marked as an error, not as range.

IELTS Lexical resource

✗ Practising Listening with the recording paused or replayed.

✓ **Play it once, straight through, then mark it.**

The real test plays each recording once. Practising any other way trains a skill the test does not measure.

IELTS Listening format

✗ Leaving an answer blank because you are unsure.

✓ **Guess every blank before time runs out.**

There is no penalty for a wrong answer in Listening or Reading, so a blank is a mark you have chosen to give away.

IELTS Listening format

✗ Assuming IELTS for UKVI is a harder test and preparing differently.

✓ **Prepare identically; book the UKVI session if a UK university or visa route asks for it.**

The questions, format, difficulty and scoring are the same. Only the session and the Test Report Form differ.

UKVI IELTS for UKVI

2 · Listening

✗ Reading the questions while the recording is already playing.

✓ **Use the preparation time to predict the word class of every gap.**

Knowing you are waiting for a time, a plural noun or an adjective is most of the work, and that time is free.

IELTS Listening format

✗ Listening for the words that are printed in the question.

✓ **Listen for a paraphrase of them.**

The recording almost never uses the question's own words, so a candidate listening for them hears nothing.

class

✗ Writing the singular when the recording said a plural.

✓ **Listen for the final -s, and copy the grammar of the gap.**

Plurals are marked strictly, and Mandarin has no final consonant there, so the -s is easy to miss.

class

✗ Writing a three-word answer where the instruction says two.

✓ **Underline the word limit before the recording starts.**

An over-length answer is marked wrong even when it is true, and this rule costs more marks than mishearing does.

IELTS Listening format

✗ Stopping to work out a missed answer.

✓ **Leave it blank, keep up, and return in the checking time.**

The recording does not wait, so one lost question usually costs the next one too.

class

✗ Choosing the option you hear mentioned first.

✓ **Wait for the correction – actually, in fact, although, on second thoughts.**

Parts 3 and 4 name two options and reject one; the rejected one is usually said first.

class

3 · Reading

✗ Answering NOT GIVEN as FALSE because the passage does not say it.

✓ **Use FALSE only when a sentence contradicts the statement, and NOT GIVEN when the text is silent.**

This single confusion is the biggest mark-loser on Academic Reading, and it is a rule rather than a judgement.

$\neq$ class

✗ Deciding TRUE because the statement is true in the real world.

✓ **Judge only what the passage states.**

Identifying information tests the text, not your knowledge, and an obviously true statement the passage never makes is NOT GIVEN.

class

✗ Planning to copy answers onto the answer sheet at the end.

✓ **Write on the answer sheet as you go.**

Academic Reading gives no extra transfer time at all, unlike Listening on paper.

IELTS Reading format

✗ Spending thirty minutes on the first passage.

✓ **Stop at 20 and 40 minutes, whatever is unfinished.**

The passages get harder and each carries the same number of marks, so an early passage that overruns eats a later one.

20 class

✗ Matching a heading to a paragraph because they share a word.

✓ **Match the paragraph's function – what it is doing, not what it mentions.**

The shared word is usually the trap; two headings will be near-synonyms and those are the pair being tested.

class

✗ Replacing a word from the passage with a synonym of your own.

✓ **Copy the word exactly as the passage spells it.**

Most completion tasks require words taken from the text, and a substituted synonym scores zero.

IELTS Reading format

✗ Reading the whole passage carefully before looking at the questions.

✓ **Read the questions, scan for where each is answered, then read that part closely.**

Sixty minutes does not allow a careful read plus forty answers, and the questions follow the passage in order for most task types.

class

4 · Writing

✗ Describing a Task 1 figure line by line, year by year.

✓ **Write an overview sentence, then group the detail into two paragraphs.**

Without an overview, Task achievement cannot pass band 5 however accurate the detail is.

IELTS Task achievement

✗ Explaining why the data changed, or saying which trend is good.

✓ **Report what the figure shows and nothing else.**

Task 1 has no opinion; an invented cause or a recommendation caps Task achievement at band 5.

Task 1 IELTS Task achievement

✗ Writing 'increased of 20%' or 'rose to 20%' when you mean by.

✓ **Rise BY the size of the change, TO the end point, FROM one value TO another.**

These three prepositions carry the meaning, and getting them wrong is read as an accuracy error, not a style one.

by / to / from class

✗ Calling a change from 20% to 24% 'a rise of 4%'.

✓ **Call it a rise of 4 percentage points.**

A rise of 4% of 20% would be 0.8 percentage points. The two are different quantities and examiners read this as inaccuracy.

class

✗ Opening with 'With the development of society' or 'It is undeniable that'.

✓ **Start with the topic itself.**

Memorised openers carry no information and are discounted, so they lower Lexical resource rather than raising it.

IELTS Lexical resource

✗ Agreeing in the introduction and concluding that both sides have merit.

✓ **Hold one position from the first sentence to the last.**

A position that wobbles cannot pass band 6 on Task response, however well the English is written.

IELTS Task response

✗ Answering one half of a two-part question.

✓ **Give each question its own paragraph.**

A partly answered question cannot pass band 5 on Task response.

IELTS Task response

✗ Starting every sentence with Firstly, Moreover, Furthermore, Last but not least.

✓ **Link with pronouns, repeated noun phrases and the order of ideas.**

Mechanical linkers are counted as over-use and lower Coherence and cohesion.

IELTS Coherence and cohesion

✗ Spending thirty minutes on Task 1 because it comes first.

✓ **Give Task 1 twenty minutes and Task 2 forty.**

Task 2 is worth twice as much, so time taken from it costs twice as much.

Task 2 IELTS Writing format

✗ Writing 180 words for Task 2 and hoping the quality carries it.

✓ **Reach at least 250 words, and count them if you are unsure.**

Under-length is penalised mechanically on Task response before quality is considered at all.

IELTS Writing format

✗ Writing ‘Although it is expensive, but it is useful’.

✓ **Use one connector: Although it is expensive, it is useful.**

Although…but and Because…so are direct translations of Chinese patterns and are counted as grammar errors.

although but class

✗ Writing ‘more and more informations’ or ‘many advices’.

✓ **Information, advice, equipment and research are uncountable and have no plural.**

Unmarked plurals and false plurals are the two most frequent errors in Chinese candidates’ scripts and both hit Grammatical range and accuracy.

class

5 · Speaking

✗ Answering a Part 1 question with one word.

✓ **Answer, then add one reason or example – two or three sentences.**

A one-word answer gives the examiner nothing to mark, and Part 1 is where the easy range is shown.

\+ class

✗ Running out of things to say after 45 seconds in Part 2.

✓ **Practise with a timer until two minutes is comfortable.**

The examiner does not stop you early, and a short long turn costs Fluency and coherence directly.

IELTS Speaking format

✗ Writing full sentences in the one-minute preparation.

✓ **Write six to eight nouns, one or two per prompt.**

Sentences cannot be read aloud naturally; single words trigger speech without sounding recited.

class

✗ Giving a one-sentence answer in Part 3.

✓ **State a view, give a reason, add an example, then consider the other side.**

Part 3 is where the higher bands are won, and developing an answer is the whole task.

Part 3 class

✗ Speaking fast to sound fluent.

✓ **Speak at your normal pace, with visible organisation.**

Fluency is measured by coherence and continuity, not speed, and a rush makes every pronunciation problem worse.

IELTS Fluency and coherence

✗ Dropping the final consonant, the -ed and the plural -s.

✓ **Finish the word: walked, needed, lived, tickets, desks.**

Mandarin has no final obstruent, so these disappear – and they are heard as a tense or number error as well as a pronunciation one, costing two criteria at once.

class

✗ Ignoring pronunciation because it feels unteachable.

✓ **Drill the enumerable set: final consonants, -ed and -s, /θ/ and /ð/, /l/ /n/ /r/, and word stress.**

Pronunciation is a quarter of the Speaking band and the errors come from a small, fixed list, so it is the cheapest quarter to improve.

IELTS Pronunciation

✗ Answering a question you did not understand.

✓ **Ask: sorry, do you mean...?**

Asking costs nothing and is not penalised; answering the wrong question costs Fluency and coherence.

class