

Listening

IELTS Academic

The four parts, and what changes between them

Listening is 40 questions in about 30 minutes, and the recording is **played once only**. The four parts get harder in a predictable way, so know which one you are in.

Part	Voices	Situation	What makes it hard
1	two, in conversation	everyday: booking, enrolling, enquiring	names and numbers spelled out
2	one speaker	everyday: a talk, a tour, an announcement	a lot of detail in one voice
3	two to four, in discussion	study: students and a tutor	speakers disagree and change their minds
4	one speaker	academic: a lecture	long stretches with no pause, and abstract vocabulary

- Parts 1 and 2 are the marks you cannot afford to drop. If you are aiming at band 6.5, you should be losing almost nothing before question 20.
- Part 3 is where a **distractor** 干扰项 does most damage, because one speaker says something, another corrects it, and the answer is the correction.
- Part 4 has no second speaker to signal a change of topic, so the **signposting** 路标词 in the language is all you get: *firstly, turning now to, the key point here*.

Reading the question before the audio

You are given time to read each section's questions before it plays. IELTS calls this the **preparation time** 审题时间, and it is part of the test, not a courtesy. That time is the single biggest source of easy marks, and most candidates waste it.

- **Predict the word class** 词性. *The tour leaves at _____* needs a time. *Bring a _____* needs a noun. *The museum is _____ on Mondays* needs an adjective. Knowing what kind of word you are waiting for is most of the work.
- **Underline the word limit** in the instruction. *NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER* means a three-word answer is wrong even if it is true. This rule is enforced exactly, and it costs more marks than mishearing does.
- **Underline the words that cannot change**. A name, a number or a date will be said as it is written. Everything else will be **paraphrased** 同义改写 — the

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

- Move your eye to the next question as soon as you have written an answer. The recording does not wait, and one lost question usually costs two.

Spelling, plurals and numbers

These are where the marks actually go, and every one of them is avoidable.

- The four parts get harder along one axis — the **register** 语域 moves from everyday to academic — and the vocabulary follows it.
- **Spelling must be correct.** A correct answer spelled wrong scores zero. British and American spellings are both accepted (*organise* / *organize*, *centre* / *center*).
- **Plurals are marked strictly.** If the recording says *two tickets*, then *ticket* is wrong. Listen for the final **-s**; Mandarin has no final consonant there, so it is easy to miss.
- **Copy the grammar of the gap.** If the sentence reads *the museum has three _____*, the answer must be plural whether you heard the **-s** or not.
- **Numbers:** *thirteen* and *thirty* are the classic pair — the stress moves to the second syllable in *thirteen*. Dates may be written 21 March or March 21; both are accepted.
- **Letters:** names are spelled out at normal speed. Practise the pairs Chinese candidates confuse — G and J, M and N, S and F, and the vowel letters E, I and A.
- Write the answer exactly as you hear it. Do not “improve” it into a full sentence.

Map, plan and diagram labelling

- Before it starts, find **north** and fix your orientation. The speaker will describe the route as somebody walking it.
- Learn the small set of position words and use them actively: *opposite*, *adjacent to*, *at the far end of*, *on your left as you come in*, *beyond*, *between ... and ...*, *a short way past*.
- The speaker moves in order, so the labels come in order too. If you lose one, skip to the next landmark rather than re-reading the map.
- On a diagram of a machine or a process, the description almost always runs in the direction the material moves.

Matching and multiple choice

- **The distractor is mentioned first.** Almost every multiple-choice item in Parts 3 and 4 names two of the three options in the recording. The one that is said first is usually the one being rejected: *I thought about doing the survey first, but actually the reading has to come first.*
- Listen for the **correction signals**: *actually, in fact, although, I'd say rather, on second thoughts, mind you.* What follows them is the answer.
- A **synonym** 同义词 in the recording is the normal case, not the exception.
- In a matching task, read all the options first and group the ones that mean nearly the same thing — those are the pair the item is testing.
- An option that repeats the question's own words is usually the wrong one, because the answer is always paraphrased.

Exam tips

- **Never stop to fix a missed answer.** You will lose the next one too. Leave it blank, keep up, and come back in the checking time.
- **Guess every blank.** There is no penalty for a wrong answer, so an empty space is a mark you have chosen to give away.
- On paper, use the **10 minutes** of transfer time to check spellings and plurals, not to re-think answers. On computer you have 2 minutes and the same advice.
- Practise with the recording played **once**, with no pause and no rewind. Practising any other way trains a skill the test does not measure.
- Sources, checked on 19 September 2026: Listening format, scoring in detail.