TOEFL iBT

Most TOEFL 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. Start with the section holding your lowest number – universities set a floor on each section as well as on the overall score, so the weakest one decides the offer. × ✓

Preparing for the wrong test

✗ Working through a practice book printed before 2026.

✓ **If a book teaches Integrated Writing or a 0-to-120 score, it describes the previous test.**

The January 2026 format is adaptive, about two hours, scored 1 to 6, and the read-then-listen writing task is gone.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

✗ Practising only academic reading and listening.

✓ **Practise everyday English too – notices, emails, short conversations, announcements.**

Two of the three Reading tasks and two of the four Listening tasks are now everyday English, which school practice rarely covers.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

✗ Working out a target from a 0-to-120 number found online.

✓ **Read the requirement for your own course, and check which scale it is written on.**

Until January 2028 reports carry both scales, and departments differ from the university's general page.

ETS score scale update

✗ Treating a hard question as a sign the test is going badly.

✓ **Expect the questions to get harder when you are doing well, because the test is adaptive.**

The test adjusts to your level, so difficult items are evidence you are scoring, not evidence you are failing.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

2 · Reading

✗ Translating each sentence into Chinese while reading.

✓ **Read in English and look words up afterwards.**

Translating costs two to three times the reading speed, and the section gives about 30 minutes for about 50 items.

class

✗ Leaving an item blank when unsure.

✓ **Always answer, guessing from the word class if nothing else is left.**

There is no penalty for a wrong answer, so a blank scores exactly what a wrong guess scores.

class

✗ Hunting for a word from the question in the passage.

✓ **Expect the passage to say it in different words.**

Paraphrase is the normal case in this test. Matching on a keyword finds the distractor.

class

✗ Spending two minutes rescuing one hard item.

✓ **Answer, mark it, move on.**

Every item is worth the same, so two minutes on one costs you three easy ones later.

class

✗ Reading the passage carefully before looking at the question.

✓ **Read the question first, then read to find its answer.**

You are looking for one thing, and knowing what it is before you start is the difference between reading and searching.

class

✗ Guessing a word's meaning from the dictionary definition you remember.

✓ **Answer from the sentence it sits in.**

A vocabulary question asks what the word means in this passage, and the passage is where the evidence is.

class

3 · Listening

✗ Thinking about the detail you just missed.

✓ **Let it go, guess, and stay with the speaker.**

One missed item is one mark; thirty seconds of not listening is about five. Dwelling is the most expensive habit in this section.

class

✗ Choosing the option that repeats words from the prompt.

✓ **Expect the natural reply to use different words.**

Distractors are built from the words you just heard, precisely because those are the ones you remember.

class

✗ Trying to write down everything the lecturer says.

✓ **Write the outline: topic, then each point on its own line with a dash for its example.**

Your hand cannot keep up with speech, and while you write you stop listening. The questions are about the outline.

class

✗ Practising with replays.

✓ **Listen once, answer, and only then replay to see what you missed.**

Every recording in the test plays once, so what you caught on the third pass is not evidence of anything.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

✗ Relying on memory for a number, a date or a room name.

✓ **Write it down the moment you hear it.**

Those are exactly the details the practical listening tasks ask about, and they are gone from memory within a sentence.

class

✗ Only ever listening to the accent you find easiest.

✓ **Spend two or three minutes a day on an unfamiliar one.**

The test uses speakers from North America and elsewhere, and an accent you have never practised costs whole recordings.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

4 · Writing

✗ Answering the professor and ignoring both classmates.

✓ **Name a classmate and answer their point – agreeing and extending, or disagreeing and saying why.**

The task is to contribute to a discussion. A post that engages with nobody is an essay posted in a thread, and it caps task completion.

class

✗ Restating the professor's question before you start.

✓ **Open with your position.**

The reader already knows what was asked, and in a 23-minute section that sentence costs a quarter of your time.

class

✗ Opening with a memorised phrase.

✓ **Open with a position and a reason in one sentence.**

'With the development of society' appears in thousands of scripts, adds nothing, and a marker reads straight past it.

class

✗ Writing 'Dear Sir or Madam' to a named person, or signing off formally to a classmate.

✓ **Match the greeting to the reader the situation names.**

Register is wrong in every sentence at once, which makes it far more visible than a grammar slip.

class

✗ Answering one of the two things the situation asked for.

✓ **Check the prompt again before you finish: everything it asked, nothing it did not.**

Task completion asks whether the writing did its job. Half the job is half the marks, however good the sentences are.

class

✗ Using a soft 'maybe' to mean no.

✓ **Decline clearly, give a brief reason, then be warm.**

Indirect refusal is polite in Chinese and reads as evasive in English, so the email fails at its job.

class

✗ Writing as much as possible because there is no maximum.

✓ **Write fewer sentences and make each one carry weight.**

Padding is marked as padding. The section is about 23 minutes for three kinds of task, so length costs you the next one.

class

✗ Finishing with no time to read the answer back.

✓ **Leave sixty seconds and check articles, plurals and verb endings.**

Those three are most of what a Chinese candidate gets wrong AND can still fix in a minute.

class

5 · Speaking

✗ Pausing in silence while you plan the whole answer.

✓ **Start within a second, using a natural filler if you need one.**

The section is about eight minutes. Silence is the most expensive thing on that clock, and fillers sound like real speech.

ETS TOEFL iBT content and structure

✗ Reciting a prepared general answer.

✓ **Answer the question that was asked, then give one reason and one example.**

A recited answer is audible – the rhythm changes and it does not quite fit the question – and markers discount it.

class

✗ Stopping and restarting a sentence you stumbled over.

✓ **Repair it out loud and carry on: 'sorry, what I mean is...'**

That is what fluent speakers do, and it is marked as fluency. A restart costs more than the stumble did.

class

✗ Slowing down to pronounce every sound carefully in Listen and Repeat.

✓ **Say it back at a normal speed, and finish the sentence even if you miss a word.**

Slowing down breaks the rhythm, which is part of what is judged; a complete sentence beats half a perfect one.

class

✗ Practising by writing down what you would say.

✓ **Speak aloud, on a timer, into a microphone, and listen back.**

A typed answer gives no hesitation, no silence to fill and unlimited time, so it always flatters you.

class

✗ Listing three things without explaining any of them.

✓ **Give one reason and develop it.**

A developed reason is what fluency and coherence are judged on; an unexplained list is three fragments.

class