

About the test

TOEFL iBT

What the TOEFL is and who takes it

TOEFL iBT is the English test most often accepted by universities in the United States, and it is taken all over the world. It does not test what you know *about* English. It tests whether you can **use** it: read a page from a textbook, follow a lecture 讲座, answer an email, and speak back.

- It is made by **ETS**, an American organisation, and it is taken **on a computer** at a test centre or at home.
- Almost every Chinese student applying to a university in the United States or Canada may use it. Many universities in the UK, Australia and Europe accept it as well — but always check the page for **your** course, because the number they ask for is written there and nowhere else.
- Four skills are tested in one sitting: **Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking**, in that order.

△ **The test changed in January 2026, and most advice on the internet is older than that.** If a book, a video or a shared question file talks about a 0 to 120 score, or about an “Integrated Writing” task where you read a passage and hear a lecture, it is describing the **old** test. The sections below describe the test you will actually sit.

The shape of the test from January 2026

The test is now **adaptive** 自适应: it looks at how you are doing and gives you items at a level that matches you. Two students sitting on the same day do not see the same questions.

Section	About	Items	What is in it
Reading	30 minutes	about 50	Complete the Words, Read in Daily Life, Read an Academic Passage
Listening	29 minutes	about 47	Listen and Choose a Response, Listen to a Conversation, Listen to an Announcement, Listen to an Academic Talk
Writing	23 minutes	about 12	Build a Sentence, Write an Email, Write for an Academic Discussion
Speaking	8 minutes	about 11	Listen and Repeat, Take an Interview

- ETS asks you to allow about **two hours** in total. The exact time and the exact number of items **vary**, because the test adapts as you go.
- Two things follow from “adaptive”, and both change how you should practise. First, **you cannot work out your score from a number of right answers** — the same 30 correct answers mean different things depending on how hard the items were. Second, **the test gets harder when you do well**. Meeting difficult items is a good sign, not a bad one.
- Notice how much of the test is now **everyday English** 日常英语: a notice, an email, an announcement, a short conversation. The old test was almost entirely academic. Practise both.

The 1 to 6 score scale

- You get **four section scores** and one **overall score**. Each runs from **1 to 6** in **half-point** steps: 4, 4.5, 5, 5.5, 6.
- The overall score is the **average of the four sections**, rounded to the nearest half point. So 5.5, 5, 5.5 and 5 average 5.25, which is reported as **5.5**.
- The scale is lined up with the **CEFR** 欧洲语言共同参考框架, the ladder used across Europe:

Score	CEFR level	Roughly what it means
1 – 1.5	A1	beginner
2 – 2.5	A2	elementary
3 – 3.5	B1	intermediate
4 – 4.5	B2	upper intermediate — the usual floor for undergraduate study
5 – 5.5	C1	advanced — what selective universities and most Master’s courses want
6	C2	near-native

- △ Universities usually set a minimum **overall** score **and** a floor on each section. An overall 5 with a 3.5 in Speaking is not the same application as a flat 5 — the weakest section decides the result. **Work on the lowest number, not the average.**

Old scores and new scores together

- Until **January 2028**, every score report shows **three** things: your **CEFR level**, your **1 to 6 scores**, and a **comparable 0 to 120 overall score**.

- That third number exists because universities write their requirement years in advance. A course page that still says “100 on the TOEFL iBT” can be compared against it.
- So when you read an offer, check **which scale it is written on** before you decide whether you have met it. The safest move is to look at the university’s own page in the month you apply.

How to use these notes

- The four sections that follow are one per skill, in the test’s own order. Each explains what the tasks ask for, what the marker is actually looking at, and the mistakes that cost Chinese candidates marks most often.
- A number in these notes is a **format fact**, and format facts change. Every one here was checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026. Before you book, check the two pages below yourself — it takes five minutes and it is the cheapest insurance you will ever buy.

Exam tips

- **Do not buy a practice book printed before 2026.** It is not a slightly old book; it is a book about a different test.
- **Decide early which scale your universities use**, then write the target number on the first page of your notebook. A target you can see is a target you work towards.
- **Practise everyday English deliberately.** Chinese candidates usually arrive strong on academic reading and weak on emails, notices and short conversations, because that is what school rewarded. The new test rewards both.
- **Type, do not write.** The whole test is on a computer, including the two writing tasks. If you type slowly in English, that alone costs you marks in a 23-minute section — practise on a keyboard from today.
- Sources, checked on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT score scale update, TOEFL iBT content and structure.