

CONCISE REVIEW OF A COMMERCIALY DEVELOPED OR WIDELY USED TEST

Test Reviewed: International English Language Testing System (IELTS) – Writing subtest

Language(s) Assessed by this Test: English

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Intended Purpose and Audience:

The purpose of the IELTS is to test the candidates' ability of handling English in an academic setting and in a non-academic environment in an English speaking country.

There are two versions to the Writing subtest, the Academic Writing Module and the General Training Writing Module. The Academic Writing Module is geared towards candidates who are interested in enrolling in an undergraduate and graduate academic program where English is the primary language of instruction. The General Training Writing Module is for those who are completing secondary education, undertaking work experience, training, or meeting immigration requirements where English is the main language of communication.

Ordering Information:

Those who are interested in taking the IELTS should go to www.ielts.org. Candidates can download the registration form as well as obtain other information about the test at the link recently provided.

Description of the Test:

The Writing subtest is taken on the same day as the Listening and Reading subtests. In the Academic Writing Module, there are two Writing tasks. The first task requires candidates to explain a graph, table, chart, or diagram in their own words. They may be asked to describe an object, event, how something works, or the stages of a specific process, or they may be asked to explain a piece of data provided. Candidates are required to write at least 150 words and have 20 minutes to complete that task. The second task consists of an essay in which candidates write about their thoughts towards a point of view, argument, or problem given. Candidates are given 40 minutes to write at least 250 words in response to the prompt. The General Training Writing contains two Writing tasks as well. In the first task, candidates are asked to write a letter requesting information or explaining a situation in response to the presentation of a particular situation. Candidates are given 20 minutes to write at least 150 words. In the second task, similar to the second task of the Academic Writing Module, candidates are to write an essay in response to a point of view, argument, or problem. Candidates are given 40 minutes to write at least 250 words.

The Writing subtest is a criterion-referenced test scored using a subjective and holistic scoring system. The Academic Module and the General Training Module are scored using a Band Scale from one to nine, one being the lowest and nine being the highest. Highly trained examiners score the two modules using detailed performance descriptors. Once the scores for the Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking subtests are calculated, the examiner takes the mean of the four individual subtests to obtain the Overall Band Score. The average score should then be rounded to the nearest half or whole bands if needed in order to get the final Overall Band Score.

Evaluation of the Test:

The IELTS Writing sub-test is a criterion-referenced test. Trained and certified examiners use a set of specific descriptors to mark each writing task individually. The Writing sub-test is first marked locally and then rater reliability is estimated by selecting a sample of returned scripts to have marked for the second time by a senior examiner of the IELTS team. Andrew Blackhurst found that the ratings from the sample of the IELTS Writing test data produced an average correlation of .91 (as cited in Uysal, 2014). As Hacer Hand Uysal pointed out, this is a high reliability measure for a high stake international test (2014).

In order to ensure comparability and equality, IELTS continuously pre-test the topics and contents of the sub-test. The Cambridge English Language Assessment Research and Validation group conducts routine analysis on each test version to ensure that the performances of test materials, candidates and examiners are in line with historical norms. In addition, IELTS promotes positive washback by making information about the test readily available to candidates, such as sample test questions, understanding the scoring system, FAQs, and much more.

Although IELTS is making extreme efforts to make the Writing sub-test as reliable, fair, and valid as possible, there seem to be some issues, in particular with the readability of the prompts, comparability of writing topics, and validity issues.