

Grammar for IELTS: 7 Key English Grammar Rules You Should Know

Good grammar is essential for taking the IELTS exam.

Grammar is not tested directly in this exam, so you might be surprised to hear this.

But it is true: Proper English grammar is *very* important for [getting a high IELTS score!](#)

Even though there is no part of the IELTS that focuses *only* on grammar, you will need to study grammar to get on the path to exam success.

Grammar helps you make progress in all the four skills, reading, [writing](#), listening and [speaking](#).

You'll be able to feel your progress in speaking and writing mainly, because this is where you will actively use grammar structures to express your ideas.

However, knowing grammar will also help you understand language, both in reading and in listening, because you'll become more familiar with grammar structures and will understand what others want to say right away.

The best way to improve your grammar is to study each rule one by one, read some examples, make your own examples and then practice each rule by doing exercises.

We selected some important grammar rules for you to learn so that you feel more confident in the IELTS exam. Each rule is followed by examples and a short exercise. Once you've done the exercises, you can check with the answer key at the end of the post.

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7 English Grammar Rules You Need to Get a Higher IELTS Score

1. The Simple Aspect

We use the **simple aspect** to talk about general, permanent or repeated actions.

Here, the present simple is used to refer to a general, habitual action:

I often **read** business magazines online.

In the above example, it is implied that you read these magazines online all the time. This is something you do regularly.

We use the **continuous aspect** to focus on progressive actions that usually happen around the moment of speaking.

Here, the present continuous is used to refer to an action that is happening at the moment of speaking:

I ***am reading*** an interesting book.

The same rule applies to all the verb tenses, past, present and future. If you want to focus on the continuity of the action, use the continuous aspect. If you are more interested in the result of the action, then use the simple aspect.

Why is this useful for IELTS?

In **IELTS Speaking Part 1** you have to answer questions about yourself. You will need to make sure you use the **right verb tense** and the **right aspect**—simple or continuous—depending on what you want to say. If you want to talk about general things that you do regularly, then you need the present simple. If, however, you want to refer to actions that are temporary and happen around the moment of speaking, then you need the present continuous.

You may also need this grammar rule in **Writing Part 1** when describing trends shown in graphs or charts. You are probably going to use the past simple quite a lot because in this part you report on situations that happened in the past.

Examples:

Between January and March, the profit ***rose*** by 10%.

They ***produced*** twice the amount of cars in June.

Hungary ***accounted for*** 10% of the students involved in the competition.

Let's practice this rule by putting the verbs in the right tense and aspect:

1. I ___(exercise) every other day, but I ___(not like) going to sports competitions.
2. The graphs ___(show) how the total number of students ___(change) in the past 5 years.
3. I ___(do) an internship this spring, so I ___(not want) to take another job just yet.
4. Alan ___(watch) a movie when I ___(arrive).

2. The Simple Past and Present Perfect Verb Tenses

When using the past tense, we see these past actions as having no connection with the present. They belong to the past, so we use the **past tense** to express them.

I *ate* my breakfast with Tony and then we *saw* a movie.

The action above happened in the past. There is no connection with the present, so we use the **simple past**.

If, however, the action happened in the past but it has some kind of impact on the present, or if it continues into the present, we need to use the **present perfect**.

I *haven't eaten* breakfast yet, I'm starving.

The above is present perfect because it is a past action but it has an obvious impact on the present, the speaker is now hungry.

I *have been waiting* here since 10 a.m.

The above is present perfect because the action started in the past but is continuing into the present, when the speaker is *still* waiting.

Why is this useful for IELTS?

In the IELTS speaking test you may have to talk about different events from the past, either about yourself or about other matters. Decide if the actions are still relevant in the present, if they still have an impact or not.

You have more time to make this decision when you are writing than when speaking, but if you practice this rule you'll be able to think faster.

Have a look at the following sentences and decide whether to use the **past** or the **present perfect**:

5. I ___(start) studying for the IELTS exam two months ago but I still ___(not decide) whether to move to Australia.

6. According to the bar chart, more women than men ___(take) the course last year.

7. Entertainment ___(change) a lot since people ___(start) using the Internet every day.

3. The Passive Voice

The **passive voice** can be used whenever you want to sound more formal and impersonal.

You form the passive voice by using the verb "**to be**" in the tense you want, plus the **past participle** (the third form of the verb; for example, for the verb "**write**" you would use "**written**").

Examples:

Almost 50% more courses **were chosen** in the second semester as compared to the first one. (the passive voice is used here, with the past tense of the verb “**to be**” and the past participle of the verb “**choose**”).

More research needs **to be done** before choosing a certain supplier. (“**do**” is used in the passive voice in the infinitive, with the verb “**be**” used in the infinitive and the past participle of the verb “**do**”).

Why is this useful for IELTS?

You can use the passive voice in both writing tasks in the IELTS exam, particularly in reports where a more formal tone is needed.

Now try using the verbs in parentheses in the right passive voice form. These are examples you could use in your own formal reports!

8. As can ___(see) from the figures, the number of first year students decreased dramatically in the last five years.

9. As ___(show) in the diagram, there was a marked increase in the number of students driving their own cars to school.

10. More language courses ___(choose) by students in the second semester.

4. Modal Verbs

You can use **modal verbs** when you want to express different nuances like degrees of certainty.

- **Could, might** and **may** are modal verbs and can be used to refer to possible but uncertain actions in the future, with **might** being slightly less certain than **may**.

Examples:

We **could** be late if we stop for drinks now.

I **may** want to spend my holiday in Europe, but everything depends on my partner.

We **might** want to move to a different class if the problem persists.

- **Could have, might have** and **may have** are used to express *possible* actions in the present or past—you are suggesting that these actions are or were possible, or that they are or were completed.

Examples:

They **could have left** hours ago.

It's almost midnight in Spain, the plane **might have landed** by now.
I **may have** mentioned your name to my colleague.

- **Can** is used to make general possible statements about the present, while **could** is used as the past of **can** with this meaning.

Examples:

My boss **can** be very demanding at times.

Students **can** be difficult to motivate in evening classes.

My boss **could** be very demanding when I first got hired.

Students **could** be difficult to motivate when I was an inexperienced teacher.

- **Can't (cannot)** is used to express impossibility.

Example:

These conclusions **can't** be right.

- **Must** is used when we are sure something is true and **must have** is used with the same meaning for the past.

Examples:

There **must** be a better explanation for why they haven't arrived yet.

They **must have changed** their marketing strategy to afford such good prices.

Why is this useful for IELTS?

In the IELTS exam, you may find modal verbs in reading and in listening and if you get their meaning right you stand a better chance of getting that part of the test right.

In speaking you may want to use them in Part 3 when extending the discussion from yourself to other aspects the examiner might ask you about. Modal verbs can be used to express probability when making generalizations and talking more abstractly.

Now try practicing them by filling in the gaps with the right modal verbs studied above:

11. This ___(not be) your phone, I know you had a different ringtone.

12. It ___(be) Donna at the door, she called to say she is sick.

13. They ___(change) their plans, but they haven't said anything to me.

5. The Definite Article

The **definite article (the)**, as the name suggests, is used for talking about people or things that are known to the speaker, already mentioned earlier, described in some detail or unique.

Examples:

Can you turn **the** TV on? (The speaker knows which TV they are talking about.)

We are not going by car. **The** car is not big enough for all of us. (The car has already been mentioned, so we know what car the speaker is referring to.)

The gift they brought was a bit inappropriate. (We know what gift the speaker is talking about.)

I can't open the door, as I don't have **the** key. (The key is unique.)

- **The** can also be used with superlatives, ordinal numbers, countries that have plurals in them or that include the words "republic" or "kingdom."

Examples:

This is **the** best movie I've seen in a while. (superlative)

This is **the** second time I've met him today. (ordinal number)

The Czech Republic is one of my favorite country in Europe. (country that includes the word "republic")

Why is this useful for IELTS?

In the IELTS Writing exam, leave a few minutes at the end to proofread for grammar mistakes. If you're still having doubts whether you are using **the** correctly, try practicing in writing first and then in speaking, as you have more thinking time to decide if you should use **the** or not. It's easy to erase it in case you decide that the person or thing is in fact undefined, new or not specified.

To practice making this decision, use **the** or nothing in the following gaps:

14. I don't like ___ romantic comedies, I prefer ___ thrillers, but I like ___ one you suggested last week.

15. Moving to ___ United States was a big decision, but not ___ best they took.

16. ___ employees don't like it when their bonuses are being cut.

6. Comparing Adjectives

You should use **adjectives** as often as you can to describe people or things because they prove you have a wide range of vocabulary in speaking and writing.

You may need to **compare** them using **comparatives** or **superlatives**, depending on what you are trying to say. There are a few rules you need to keep in mind:

- Most one syllable adjectives take **-er** and **-est** at the end to form the comparative and the superlative.

Examples:

My plan is **safer** than yours.

This is the **safest** plan of them all.

- Two-syllable adjectives can form the comparative and superlative either by adding **-er** and **-est** or by using **more** and **the most**. In most cases, both forms can be used.

Examples:

This is a **simpler** version of what I've just said.

I've never lifted a **heavier** bag.

This is **the narrowest** path I've ever walked on.

His was **the most complete** answer I got.

- Adjectives of three or more syllables use **more** and **the most** to form the comparative and the superlative.

Examples:

I've never heard a **more beautiful** song.

This is the **most interesting** story I've ever read.

Pay special attention to irregular adjectives that don't follow the rules above:

good ⇒ better ⇒ the best

bad ⇒ worse ⇒ the worst

far ⇒ farther ⇒ the farthest

little ⇒ less ⇒ least

In the IELTS exam you may want to use adjectives to prove your wide range of vocabulary, but pay attention to **spelling** while taking the writing test.

- **Adjectives ending in consonant + y:** The **y** changes to an **i** when adding **-er** or **-est**.

Examples:

Shiny ⇒ shinier ⇒ shiniest

Icy ⇒ icier ⇒ iciest

- Adjectives ending in *e*: The *e* is dropped when adding *-er* or *-est*.

Examples:

Polite ⇒ politer ⇒ politest

Gentle ⇒ gentler ⇒ gentlest

- Adjectives ending in a consonant with a single vowel preceding it, double the consonant when adding *-er* or *-est*.

Examples:

Big ⇒ bigger ⇒ biggest

Red ⇒ redder ⇒ reddest

Sad ⇒ sadder ⇒ saddest

Have a look at the following sentences and fill in the gaps with the correct comparative or superlative form:

17. This is the ___(fast) route to our destination.

18. The salad your mom makes is ___(delicious) than this one.

19. His report is ___(comprehensive) than I expected it to be.

7. Watch Out for Frequent Spelling Mistakes

Here's a list of frequent spelling mistakes students make. Make sure you understand the rule behind each mistake so that in the IELTS Writing exam you don't make these mistakes!

- Double *l* in adverbs. Normally, you can add *-ly* to many adjectives and turn them into adverbs. For example, interesting becomes the adverb *interestingly*. However, if the adjective ends in *l* already, then its adverb will have a double *l*:

Examples:

Beautiful ⇒ beautifully

- Adding *-ing* and *-ed* to verbs. If the verb ends in an *-e*, then the *-e* is dropped before you add *-ing* or *-ed*:

Examples:

Live ⇒ **living** ⇒ **lived**

Fake ⇒ **faking** ⇒ **faked**

- If the verb ends in a *consonant + vowel + consonant* pattern of letters, then we double the final consonant when adding **-ing** or **-ed**:

Examples:

Plan ⇒ **planning** ⇒ **planned**

Stop ⇒ **stopping** ⇒ **stopped**

- If the verb ends in **-ie**, we change it to **-ying** when adding **-ing**:

Examples:

Lie ⇒ **lying**

Die ⇒ **dying**

Now have a look at the following sentences and correct the spelling mistakes if you find any. Some sentences are correct.

20. I have never studyied Geography and I regret it.

21. They've been planing to visit, but never got the chance to do it.

22. The clock stopped working hours ago.

23. I've been listenning to this lecture for one hour and I still don't get the point of it.

24. The little girl is tying her shoelaces.

25. He was fixing his bike when I got there.

These are just a few basic grammar rules you need to know to get a higher IELTS score. Remember that just doing IELTS tests is usually not enough. You need to improve your general level of English to notice progress.

The best part about learning grammar is that you feel more confident in all the four skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Prepositions Following Verbs and Adjectives

Some verbs and adjectives are followed by a certain preposition. Sometimes verbs and adjectives can be followed by different prepositions, giving the phrase different meanings. To find which prepositions follow the verb or an adjective, look up the verb or adjective in an online dictionary, such as Merriam Webster, or use a corpus, such as The Corpus of Contemporary American English. Memorizing these phrases instead of just the preposition alone is the most helpful.

Some Common Verb + Preposition Combinations

About: worry, complain, read

- He *worries about* the future.
- She *complained about* the homework.
- I *read about* the flooding in the city.

At: arrive (a building or event), smile, look

- He *arrived at* the airport 2 hours early.
- The children *smiled at* her.
- She *looked at* him.

From: differ, suffer

- The results *differ from* my original idea.
- She *suffers from* dementia.

For: account, allow, search

- Be sure to *account for* any discrepancies.
- I returned the transcripts to the interviewees to *allow for* revisions to be made.
- They are *searching for* the missing dog.

In: occur, result, succeed

- The same problem *occurred in* three out of four cases.
- My recruitment strategies *resulted in* finding 10 participants.
- She will *succeed in* completing her degree.

Of: approve, consist, smell

- I *approve of* the idea.
- The recipe *consists of* three basic ingredients.
- The basement *smells of* mildew.

On: concentrate, depend, insist

- He is **concentrating on** his work.
- They **depend on** each other.
- I must **insist on** following this rule.

To: belong, contribute, lead, refer

- Bears **belong to** the family of mammals.
- I hope to **contribute to** the previous research.
- My results will **lead to** future research on the topic.
- Please **refer to** my previous explanation.

With: (dis)agree, argue, deal

- I **(dis)agree with** you.
- She **argued with** him.
- They will **deal with** the situation.

Although verb + preposition combinations appear similar to phrasal verbs, the verb and the particle (in this case, the preposition) in these combinations cannot be separated like phrasal verbs.

Some Common Adjective + Preposition Combinations

	About	At	By	From	For	In	Of	To	With
Accustomed								X	
Aware							X		
Beneficial								X	
Capable							X		
Characteristic							X		
Composed			X				X		
Different				X					
Disappointed						X			X
Employed		X	X						

Essential								X	
	About	At	By	From	For	In	Of	To	With
Familiar									X
Good		X			X				
Grateful					X			X	
Interested						X			
Happy	X				X				X
Opposed								X	
Proud							X		
Responsible					X				
Similar								X	
Sorry	X				X				

Ending a Sentence With a Preposition

At one time, schools taught students that a sentence should never end with a preposition. This rule is associated with Latin grammar, and while many aspects of Latin have made their way into English, there are times when following this particular grammar rule creates unclear or awkward sentence structures. Since the purpose of writing is to clearly communicate your ideas, it is acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition if the alternative would create confusion or is too overly formal.

Example: The car had not been paid for. (Ends with a preposition but is acceptable)

Unclear Revision: Paid for the car had not been. (Unclear sentence.)

Example: I would like to know where she comes from. (Ends with a preposition but is acceptable)

Overly Grammatical Revision: I would like to know from where she comes.
(Grammatical but overly formal. Nobody actually speaks like this.)

However, in academic writing, you may decide that it is worth revising your sentences to avoid ending with a preposition in order to maintain a more formal scholarly voice.

Example: My research will focus on the community the students lived in.

Revision: My research will focus on the community in which the students lived.

Example: I like the people I am working with.

Revision: I like the people with whom I am working.

Prepositional Phrases and Wordiness

Like with pronouns, too many prepositional phrases can create wordiness in a sentence:

Example: The author chose the mixed-method design to explain that the purpose *of* the study was to explore the leadership qualities *of* the principals *in* the schools as a means to gauge teacher satisfaction *in* the first year *of* teaching. This type of sentence could be shortened and condensed to minimize the prepositional phrases and bring clarity to the writer's intent:

Revision: The author chose the mixed-method design to explore the principals' leadership qualities and their impact *on* first-year teachers' satisfaction.

Unnecessary Prepositions

If the preposition is unnecessary, leave it out. This creates more clear and concise writing.

Example: Where are the plates *at*?

Revision: Where are the plates?

Example: She jumped *off of* the balance beam.

Revision: She jumped *off* the balance beam.

Table of Verb Tenses in English Grammar

Introduction

Verb tenses show us when an action takes place: in the present, past or future. Each of the three main tenses has a progressive, perfect and perfect progressive [aspect](#) which give us more information about the time, progression or completion of an action. This table of tenses in English grammar provides an overview of the 12 different verb tenses with examples in the positive, negative and interrogative or question form. You will also find tips on the usage of each tense and common signal words to help you recognise the tenses. For a detailed lesson including exercises, click on the name of the tense.

Tense	positive/negative/question	Usage	Signal Words
Simple Present Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P: He speaks. • N: He does not speak. • Q: Does he speak? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ repeated/regular action in the present ▪ general validity ▪ actions happening one after the other ▪ confirmed future actions (time table, schedule) 	always, every ..., never, normally, often, seldom, sometimes, usually
Present Progressive Present Continuous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P: He is speaking. • N: He is not speaking. • Q: Is he speaking? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action currently taking place ▪ action limited to a particular timeframe ▪ already planned or agreed-upon future action 	at the moment, just, just now, Listen!, Look!, now, right now
Simple Past Preterite	P: He spoke. N: He did not speak. Q: Did he speak?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a single or repeated action in the past ▪ actions happening one after the other in the past ▪ a new action that interrupts an action that was already taking place 	yesterday, 2 minutes ago, in 1990, the other day, last Friday

<p>Past Progressive</p> <p>Preterite Continuous Past Continuous</p>	<p>P: He was speaking. N: He was not speaking. Q: Was he speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ emphasis on the process of an action taking place in the past ▪ multiple actions taking place at the same time ▪ an action that was taking place when interrupted by a new action 	<p>while, as long as</p>
<p>Present Perfect</p> <p>Perfect</p>	<p>P: He has spoken. N: He has not spoken. Q: Has he spoken?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the result is emphasised ▪ action that lasts to the present moment ▪ action that has just been completed ▪ completed action with influence on the present ▪ an action that has never/once/more than once taken place up to the time of speaking 	<p>already, ever, just, never, not yet, so far, till now, up to now</p>
<p>Present Perfect Progressive</p> <p>Perfect Continuous</p>	<p>P: He has been speaking. N: He has not been speaking. Q: Has he been speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the action is emphasised (not the result) ▪ action that has lasted until the present time ▪ completed action with influence on the present 	<p>all day, for 4 years, since 1993, how long?, the whole week</p>
<p>Past Perfect</p> <p>Pluperfect Past Anterior</p>	<p>P: He had spoken. N: He had not spoken. Q: Had he spoken?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action taking place before a certain time in the past ▪ sometimes interchangeable with past perfect progressive ▪ emphasises only the fact that something took place before a certain point in the past 	<p>already, just, never, not yet, once, until that day</p>

<p>Past Perfect Progressive</p> <p>Pluperfect Continuous Past Anterior Continuous</p>	<p>P: He had been speaking. N: He had not been speaking. Q: Had he been speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action before a certain point in the past ▪ sometimes interchangeable with past perfect simple ▪ emphasises the action or length of the action 	<p>for, since, the whole day, all day</p>
<p>Future (will)</p>	<p>P: He will speak. N: He will not speak. Q: Will he speak?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ events in the future that cannot be influenced ▪ spontaneous decision ▪ suppositions about the future 	<p>in a year, next ..., tomorrow, first conditional sentences (If you ask her, she will help you.), supposition: I think, probably, perhaps</p>
<p>Future (going to)</p>	<p>P: He is going to speak. N: He is not going to speak. Q: Is he going to speak?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ pre-existing intention regarding the future ▪ logical conclusion regarding the future 	<p>in one year, next week, tomorrow</p>
<p>Future Progressive</p> <p>Future Continuous</p>	<p>P: He will be speaking. N: He will not be speaking. Q: Will he be speaking?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action that will be taking place at a certain point in the future ▪ certain or obvious events 	<p>in one year, next week, tomorrow</p>
<p>Future Perfect</p>	<p>P: He will have spoken. N: He will not have spoken. Q: Will he have spoken?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ action that will have been completed by a future time 	<p>by Monday, in a week</p>

**Future Perfect
Progressive**

Future Perfect
Continuous

P: He will have been speaking.
N: He will not have been speaking.
Q: Will he have been speaking?

- action that will have been completed by a future time
- emphasises the length of the action

for ..., the last couple of hours, all day long

Answer Key

1. exercise, don't like
2. shows, changed
3. am doing, don't want
4. was watching, arrived
5. started, haven't decided
6. took
7. has changed, started
8. be seen
9. (is) sown
10. were chosen
11. can't be
12. can't be
13. might have changed
14. -, -, the
15. the, the
16. -
17. fastest
18. more delicious
19. more comprehensive
20. studied
21. planning
22. correct
23. listening
24. correct
25. correct