

How to bump up your IELTS Speaking test up to 7.0 or higher

How is the test laid out?

The speaking test consists of three sections. Together they take between 11 and 15 minutes. There will be you and an examiner and the whole test is recorded for quality control purposes and possible disputes about the level awarded. The marking criteria are applied consistently from centre to centre and all examiners have to pass regular tests to ensure marking is fair.

Section 1

The first section lasts for about 4 minutes and features interview-type questions about yourself and your family. You will know the answers to these questions and they shouldn't give you any difficulty.

However, be aware of the length of answer. The examiner wants you to demonstrate lots of different grammar structures and a wide range of vocabulary, and this will be easier to do if you give answers of around 50 words. For example, the following question could be answered in many ways: "Tell me about the house or apartment you live in?"

Answer: (1) "In a house." or, (2) "Well, at the moment I'm living in a house with my sister and two friends from university. It's crowded, but I like everyone and we have fun together. We eat meals together and we like the same movies. Because of that we get on really well and there aren't many arguments."

Obviously, answer 2 is better as it is more developed and is quite sophisticated with regard to grammar and cause and effect links. Also, at just over 50 words, it's about the right length too.

One thing to remember is that after the initial introductions, there will be a few 'settling' questions which are not assessed and are designed only to allow you to get used to the examiner's voice, accent, pitch etc. You will get a clear signal that the test has really begun with a phrase like: "I'd like to talk about ..." or "let's move on to talk about..." So, don't use up all your best phrases on the first couple of questions!

It is also worth pointing out that the examiner is not assessing your opinions, morals, decisions, etc. In fact, the examiner can only assess **how** you say something and is not really interested in **what** you say.



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Section 2

This section takes about 3½ minutes and is designed to show how you can describe a topic at some length. You will be given a card with a topic and some questions using ‘wh...’ words to prompt you, some paper and a pen or pencil.

You should make notes on the paper provided which remind you what you were going to say in answer to each wh... word. The examiner will tell you that you should talk for between one and two minutes, that you can take notes, and that you have one minute to prepare.

Make good use of that minute, write only short notes containing key words to help you remember what to say for each section. This is then your plan. The examiner will tell you that you now have two minutes to talk about the topic on the card and that he/she will let you know when to stop.

Here is a typical topic card:

Describe a memorable holiday you have taken.

You should say:

- **where it was**
- **who you went with**
- **what you did there**

Also say why it was memorable for you.

You will need to say about 250 words to get to band 7.0 or more. This is about the length of an essay, so the planning is important to help you remember. It is a good idea to base the response on true events or your own plans for the future, as these are much easier to talk about than a story, for example. Ideally you should be rounding off when the examiner indicates that time is up.

It's important to keep on topic and not to repeat yourself. To get higher grades you will need to demonstrate a wide range of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Try not to repeat a word if you know another that means the same thing. For example: If talking about ‘soldiers’ say ‘troops’, ‘ground forces’, ‘infantry’, or ‘armed personnel’.

The next couple of questions are directly related to the topic you have just talked about. For example the above topic about a specific holiday may be followed with: “Do you plan to visit that place again?” and then by: “Where do you plan to go for your next holiday?”

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Don't expect the examiner to 'engage' with you during your answer to section 2. They are told not to interact with the candidate, they should not even smile or nod, so they are not being rude, just following rules.

Section 3

The final section lasts for about 5 minutes. This is a two way conversation. However, unlike section 1, you may not ever have thought about these questions. They would usually be challenging questions for native speakers too. If you have performed well so far in the test, this is where the examiner will finally decide if your English is good enough for a higher band score.

The first question will naturally follow on from the section two topic. If following the above topic, the first set of questions would be related to travel and holidays in some way. A common question will ask you to compare and contrast a current situation with how it was in the past. Another common question asks you to think about how a current situation might develop in the future.

If you don't understand a question in this section, you can ask for clarification if you demonstrate enough understanding of the question. Do not say, "Can you repeat that please?" as the examiner will ask EXACTLY the same question with no changes. However if you say, "Do you mean holidays in my country or worldwide?" the examiner will let you know what they expect. A request from you to fully explain the meaning or context of a question will not be answered. For example, "What does that mean?" will not be explained.

Here is an example set of section 3 questions on travel and holidays:

1. Do you think it's important for people to take holidays?
2. How long do you think is the ideal length for a holiday?
3. Do you think holiday habits have changed over the last 50 years? (How?)
4. What factors might limit the places we travel to in order to take holidays in the future?

These kinds of questions can be challenging. Although most people who are taking an IELTS test will have experience of talking holidays, perhaps you have never given the subject of how holidays have changed over 50 years or how they might change again in future and, more importantly for your answer, why or how?

Because of this level of complexity, you are not expected to give a faultless answer. It is acceptable to use words and phrases like "um", "erm", or "Oh! I would have thought...", etc. You may even begin a sentence and realise that you are going in the wrong direction with it and stop before beginning a new, more appropriate sentence. Do not worry - this is a natural part of English and a

