

IELTS and TOEFL English Exams

Because universities want to make sure you have the English language skills necessary to study at their school, almost all institutes of higher learning require you to take a test of English. And TOEFL and IELTS are the two biggest standardized tests of the English language. One of the most frequent questions I hear is which test is easier or which test is better. The answer depends on what kinds of tests you excel at, as well as where you plan to apply.

Admissions

The IELTS test is administrated by the British Councils, the University of Cambridge, and IELTS Australia. That is to say, it is associated with the British government and traditionally was used by British universities, as well as New Zealand and Australian universities to determine the language capability of foreign students. TOEFL is administered by ETS, a US-based non-profit and is used widely by American and Canadian universities. However, these days, in order to make it easy on international students, universities all over the world take both TOEFL and IELTS. While you should check with the specific university you want to apply to, in general any school in the US, the UK, Australia or New Zealand will take either test score. So that's one worry off your mind. Pick the test you think will be easier for you to complete. To do that, you probably need to know the structure of each exam.

Structure of the TOEFL

Official TOEFL is almost universally given in the iBT (Internet Based Testing) format. It consists of four sections:

Reading

The TOEFL Reading section asks you to read 4-6 passages of university level and to answer multiple-choice questions about them (multiple-choice means you choose the answer from provided options). Questions test you on comprehension of the text, main ideas, important details, vocabulary, inferring, rhetorical devices and style.

Listening

The Listening Section presents long 2-3 conversations and 4-6 lectures. The situations are always related to university life i.e. a conversation between a student and a librarian about finding research materials or a lecture from a history class. The questions are multiple choice and ask you about important details, inferences, tone, and vocabulary. The conversations and lectures are very natural and include informal English, interruptions, filler noises like "uh" or "Uhm."

Speaking

The Speaking section is recorded. You will speak into a microphone and a grader will listen to your answers at a later date and grade you. Two questions will be on familiar topics and ask you to give your opinion and/or describe something familiar to you, like your town or your favorite teacher.

Two questions will ask you to summarize information from a text and a conversation--and may ask your opinion as well. Two questions will ask you to summarize information from a short conversation. Again, the topics of the conversations are always university-related.

Writing

Finally, there are two short essays on the TOEFL. One will ask you to write your opinion on a broad topic, such as whether it is better to live in the country or the city. One will ask you to summarize information from a text and a lecture--often the two will disagree with each other and you will need to either compare and contrast, or synthesize conflicting information.

IELTS Structure

The IELTS contains the same 4 sections, Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing, but the format is very different.

Reading

The reading section of the IELTS gives you 3 texts, which may be from academic textbooks or from a newspaper or magazine--but all at the level of a university student. One will always be an opinion piece--i.e. a text arguing for one point of view. The variety of questions on the IELTS is quite broad, and not every text will have every question type. One question type asks you to match headings to paragraphs in the text. You may be asked to complete a summary of the passage using words from the text. Or you may have to fill in a table or chart or picture with words from the text. There may be multiple-choice questions that ask you about key details. One of the hardest question types presents statements and asks you whether these statements are true, false or not included in the text. You may also be asked to match words and ideas. Finally, some questions are short-answer but the answers will be taken directly from the text itself.

Some questions come before the text and may not require careful reading to answer. Others come after the text and may expect you to have read the text thoroughly.

Listening

The IELTS has four listening sections. The first is a "transactional conversation" in which someone may be applying for something (a driver's license, a library card) or asking for information (say calling for more details about an advertisement or a hotel). The second section is an informational lecture of some kind, possibly a dean explaining the rules of the university. Third is a conversation in an academic context and the final section will be an academic lecture. For all sections you may be asked to fill out a summary, fill in a table, answer multiple-choice questions, label a diagram or picture, or classify information into different categories. You will be expected to fill out answers as you listen.

Writing

There are two writing tasks on the academic IELTS. The first asks you to summarize a table or chart

in about 300 words. You will have to identify important information, compare and contrast different figures or maybe describe a process. The second task asks you to present your opinion on a statement about a fairly open topic such as: "Women should look after children and not work" or "Too many people are moving to cities and rural areas are suffering."

Speaking

Finally, the speaking section will be held on a different day from the rest of the test and in the presence of a trained interviewer. The questions are the same for all examinees but some parts may be more in the form of a conversation than a monologue. The first part of the test will be a brief introductory conversation followed by some short questions about familiar topics. The interviewer may ask your name, your job, what kinds of sports you like, what your daily routine is, and so on. In the second part, you will be given a card with a topic and a few specific questions to address. You will have to speak for two minutes on this topic, which may be about your daily routine, the last time you went to the movies, your favorite part of the world or a similar familiar topic. In the last section, the interviewer will ask you to discuss a more abstract side of the topic in part 2--why do people prefer daily routines? Why do people like the movies? How does travel affect local life?

Which is Better for Me?

So now you have some understanding of what each test involves, but you might be wondering which is better for you. Maybe in reading about the structure, you thought, "Wow, TOEFL sounds so easy," or, "Oh, the IELTS sounds like it's kind of fun!" That might be a good sign that one test will be easier for you than the other. More concretely, there are a couple of key differences between the tests.

British versus American English

While both the UK and the US accept both tests, and while British English and American English are not as different as some think, the fact of the matter is the IELTS tends to use British English and the TOEFL uses exclusively American English. On the IELTS, this difference will have a larger effect because spelling counts, and that is one area where Britain and the US do not always see eye-to-eye. Obviously if you have problems with the British accent (and the test may include a wide variety of accents, including Australian, New Zealand, Irish and Scottish). On the other hand, American accents may throw you off. Certain terms are also different and you don't want to waste time in your speaking test asking what a flat or a lorry is. So whether you are used to British or American English is certainly a factor. If you are more comfortable with US English, the TOEFL is a good bet but if you are used to British English and accents, you'll do better on the IELTS.

Multiple Choice versus Copying Down

For the reading and listening sections, TOEFL gives you multiple-choice questions, whereas IELTS generally expects you to copy down words from the text or the conversation word-for-word. Multiple-choice questions will tend to be require slightly better abstract thinking, but the IELTS favors people who have good memories and think more concretely. The good thing about multiple-

choice is that it is easy to pick out wrong answers, whereas the good thing about copying down is that the answer is sitting there in the text. You just have to find it and repeat it. So, concrete thinkers will tend to do better on the IELTS and abstract thinkers will tend to excel on the TOEFL.

Predictable or Different Every Time

Of course, the TOEFL is also more predictable than the IELTS. The IELTS throws lots of different question types at you, and the instructions are often slightly different every time. That makes it harder to prepare for. The TOEFL, on the other hand, is pretty much the same test every time--pick A, B, C, D, or E. On the other hand, the IELTS certainly keeps you on your toes and that can keep you more alert.

Speaking to a Person or a Computer?

Another large difference is in how the speaking section is carried out. For some people, it's very relaxing to just record your answers into a computer because it feels like no one is listening. You just try your best and forget about it until you get your grades. Because the IELTS test is done in an interview format with a native speaker present, you might get nervous or feel you are being judged. And they take notes: Oh God, did he write down something good or something bad? On the other hand, you might feel more relaxed in a conversation, with a person there to explain if you don't understand a question, or simply having a face to look at, instead of a computer screen. Getting feedback from a native speaker can be helpful too, in order to correct mistakes and improve during the test. So it depends on what you are more comfortable with. If you like talking to people, the IELTS is a better bet. If you just want to be alone and not feel judged, the TOEFL will be more comfortable for you.

Holistic versus Criteria

Finally, the speaking and writing sections of the TOEFL are graded holistically. The grader gives you a score based on the overall quality of the essay, including vocabulary, logic, style, and grammar. The IELTS by contrast is marked by individual criteria and you are scored individually for grammar, word choice, fluency, logic, cohesion, and a dozen other criteria. In other words, if you write well but have a lot of small grammar mistakes, your TOEFL score might be quite good because graders will ignore small mistakes if the overall essay is logical and detailed. The IELTS will not overlook bad grammar. On the other hand, if your grammar and vocabulary are strong but you have trouble expressing your opinion or organizing an essay, you could end up with a low TOEFL score but the IELTS will give you good marks for language use. So while it may sound like the IELTS is much tougher since it grades you on everything, in fact you can get quite a good score if you are strong in a number of areas. The TOEFL emphasizes the ability to put together a logical and detailed argument (or summary) and looks at clarity, word choice, and style above all. If you don't feel comfortable writing essays but you think you have excellent grammar and vocabulary and overall are a decent writer, the IELTS will probably be easier for you.

You go to the websites of [IELTS](http://www.ielts.org) (www.ielts.org) and [TOEFL](http://www.toefl.org) (www.toefl.org) and get some more detail on each test, and also try out some practice problems on your own.

IELTS (full sample paper):

http://www.ielts.org/test_takers_information/test_sample.aspx

TOEFL (full sample paper):

http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/sample_questions/

Cambridge FCE - level B2 (sample questions)

<http://www.flo-joe.co.uk/fce/students/tests/tsindex.htm>

Cambridge Advanced - level C1 (sample questions):

<http://www.flo-joe.co.uk/cae/students/tests/pt1index.htm>

Cambridge Proficiency - level C2 (sample questions):

<http://www.flo-joe.co.uk/cpe/students/tests/index.htm>