

# ETpedia™

Exams

500 ideas  
for preparing  
students for  
EFL exams

Louis Rogers and John Hughes

with Vanessa Reis Esteves

Series editor: John Hughes

[www.myetpedia.com](http://www.myetpedia.com)

Pavilion **et**

# ETpedia

## Exams

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# Introduction

# 10 reasons for using this resource

## 1. Everything in one place

English language teachers who prepare students for exams and tests can find supplementary resources, teaching ideas, activities and tips in a multitude of places. The shelves of the staffroom may be full of published resource books and they may have access to folders of materials created by colleagues. Internet search engines provide links to thousands of websites offering instant lesson plans and ideas. The sheer amount of available material can be overwhelming, and finding a tip can be time-consuming. The aim of this book is to bring a collection of resources together in one place for faster reference.

## 2. From teaching English to exam preparation

One of the biggest challenges for teachers of exam classes is how to balance exam preparation with the need to keep improving a student's general level of English. The 50 units in this resource try to balance those two demands with a range of activities that offer language practice for everyday life with the requirements of the exam.

## 3. Units of 10

Each unit contains 10 points. These can take the form of tips, ideas, examples of question types or checklists of general guidelines. Why 10? Because we believe that a list of 10 provides enough information to both inspire and encourage you to develop your skills further.

## 4. New teachers

If you are just starting out in English language teaching, you might not have received much previous training in what ELT exams tend to be like. You may be wondering in what ways exam preparation courses differ from general English ones. This resource gives you an extensive introduction to every aspect of exam teaching, which will get you up to speed before entering the classroom.

## 5. Experienced teachers

If you have been teaching exams for a while, this resource may both remind you of the techniques needed for exam preparation and also give you some fresh ideas for your lesson.

## 6. Studying for an ELT qualification

Perhaps you are planning to take the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), or studying for another teaching qualification, such as a CELTA or Cert TESOL. On these kinds of courses, you will need to be able to demonstrate knowledge of key exams and the basic principles of how exams are written. For teachers taking higher-level qualifications, such as the DELTA, Diploma in TESOL or an MA with a component in exams and testing, this book will be an invaluable reference.

## 7. Writing your own exams and tests

Maybe you are a teacher who has to write tests and exams from time to time, or you are a published writer who needs to include exam practice or tests in your materials. If so, this resource offers a useful set of checklists that you can turn to when you're in need of a few extra ideas – or looking for a quick alternative way to design a test or write a type of question.

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## 8. Teacher trainers

If you are a teacher trainer, senior teacher or director of studies who delivers staff training on a range of topics, then use the lists of ideas that this resource offers as the basis for training sessions related to teaching exam classes.

## 9. Additional materials and advice

At the end of this book, you will find an Appendix with additional photocopiable materials. These can be used as they are, or adapted and developed to suit your own context. Throughout the book you will also find quotes from experienced teachers, sharing their views, ideas and experiences on preparing students for exams.

## 10. More time

If you are familiar with the other ETpedia resource books, you'll know that the books aim to save you time. The one thing that all teachers (and full-time materials writers) say they lack is time. We hope that by sharing this collection of ideas, based on our many years of experience of writing for our own classes and, later, as published authors, we can save you time when it comes to producing your own materials.

*“ETpedia saves hours of planning time and opens opportunities for variation, adaptation and even creating my own materials inspired by the ideas it offers.”*

**Ayat Al-Tawel, English teacher, Egypt**

# 10 ways to use this resource

This resource has been written for teachers who are preparing students for exams. It could be for internal exams used by the school you work in, or it could be for an exam set by an external exam board such Cambridge First or the IELTS exam. It can be read and used in different ways according to your needs, interests and level of experience.

## 1. Cover to cover

If you are new to teaching and preparing students for a specific exam, then you might be using this resource as an introductory text to the subject. If so, it's worth reading the book from cover to cover in order to get a thorough overview and grounding in how to approach teaching an exam course for the first time.

## 2. Read a section

The contents page will direct you to different sections containing groups of units. If your exam doesn't involve a speaking exam, then you can ignore the section on speaking for now. On the other hand, if you have to prepare students for a writing exam, then that section will support you with a wealth of background knowledge and classroom activities.

## 3. Go to the unit

If you have been teaching exam courses for a while and you are teaching the same lesson again, go straight to the relevant unit for some ideas to help you find new ways of doing things.

## 4. Planning your exam lessons

There are differences in emphasis between teaching general English and preparing students for an exam. This affects the way you plan a lesson and the type of approach you take. By dipping into the relevant section or unit, you'll find plenty of straightforward advice on how to adjust your lesson planning accordingly.

## 5. Get inside the examiner's mind

When teaching new exams, it's always useful to understand why an exam is structured the way it is or what the examiner is testing. Because this book has been written by people who have also written exam materials, it helps you to get the 'inside story' on analysing question types.

## 6. Supplement your coursebook

Teachers sometimes find that they need to offer their students more practice than is found in their coursebook, or that the coursebook material needs to be adapted to suit their students' exam needs. You will find plenty of ideas in this book to help you supplement and enhance your existing resources.

## 7. Quick reference

With so many exams available now, it's hard to keep up with all the requirements. In the appendix you'll find one-page summaries of the main exam suites. Unit 50 gives you tips on other resources you can refer to.



## 8. Writing your own exams and tests

Most teachers also have to prepare their own exams and tests from time to time. You'll find plenty of units in the book with outlines of the typical text types you could include on different exams and suggestions for the different types of questions you could use. Units 47 and 48 also give advice on how to write your own exams and tests.

## 9. Sharing ideas

When you work with other teachers, you often find that a colleague needs help with a class or a lesson. Or perhaps they can't find a suitable activity to help their students improve their skills in a particular area. Use ETpedia with your colleagues and point them to the right unit.

## 10. Write your own ten

ELT materials writing is constantly evolving, particularly in the area of online materials. As you explore the subject more deeply, and expand your own skills, you are bound to come up with your own ideas and find aspects of materials writing for which you would like to make your own list of ten tips. Add your ideas to page 230 and share them with colleagues who are also writing their own materials. You could even share them with the whole world by visiting [www.myetpedia.com](http://www.myetpedia.com), where we regularly post lists of '10 ways' from people who use the ETpedia books. Visit the website for information on sharing your ideas.

*"My teachers and I have successfully contributed in the past to the myetpedia.com blog and it's a great platform and springboard to share your ideas with like-minded teachers from around the world."*

**Glenn Standish, Director of Studies, IH Toruń**

# 10 facts about the authors

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## Louis Rogers...

- ▶ has prepared students for a wide range of exams including BEC, Cambridge First, Advanced and Proficiency, IELTS and TOEFL.
- ▶ has authored and co-authored numerous exam books including IELTS Intensive (DELTA), *Proficiency Masterclass* (OUP) and *Foundation IELTS Masterclass* (OUP).
- ▶ has written high-stakes English exams for university entry, and online tests and test CD-ROMs for major general English courses.
- ▶ was the 2014 joint winner of an ELTon award in 'Innovations in Learner Resources'.

## John Hughes...

- ▶ has prepared students for English exams including Cambridge First, Advanced, BULATS and BEC. He has also been an examiner for the Cambridge and Trinity exam boards.
- ▶ wrote the exam preparation books *Spotlight on First* and *Success with BEC Vantage* (National Geographic Learning).
- ▶ originated and wrote the very first ETpedia title for Pavilion Publishing. He is now the series editor for the ETpedia resource series and regularly writes blogposts for [www.myetpedia.com](http://www.myetpedia.com).

## Vanessa Reis Esteves...

- ▶ is a well-known specialist and presenter in the field of ELT for Young Learners and teenagers, and has prepared young learners for the Cambridge Young Learners exams.
- ▶ is the author of *ETpedia Young Learners*, and has co-authored coursebooks for young learners and teenagers in Portugal.
- ▶ is currently working on her PhD in 21st Century Skills and Learning.

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# Preparing to teach exam classes

Teaching English involves helping students to learn language (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening). Teaching English on a course where students take a final exam has the added dimension of needing to ensure that students are familiar with the format of the exam and that they have the skills needed to achieve the best possible grade or score.

Making the transition from being a teacher of language to being someone who also builds students up for the big day – rather like a sports coach – can be challenging if you're doing it for the first time. Even experienced teachers must always be well prepared because exam courses by their nature can be stressful, and students are investing time, effort and often money in something that could affect their long-term future.

This first section introduces the key issues of exams, including firstly the varied reasons why students take exams, and secondly the main differences between normal everyday teaching and exam preparation courses. The section also provides an instant overview of some of the mainstream exams that students often take and a reference guide to key terminology you need to become familiar with. There is also a set of questions that you will need to ask students at the beginning of an exam course and a comparison of exam preparation for paper-based and computer-based testing.

# 10 reasons why your students need to pass the exam

When you start preparing students for an exam, it's always important to find out why they are taking it. Their motivation for taking it could be 'intrinsic' (that is, coming from a personal desire for achievement) or 'extrinsic' (coming from external demands such as university entry). Here are 10 common reasons why students take exams.

## 1. A state requirement

For students in the state school system, all students might be required to study English as part of the school curriculum and to take an exam at the end. This is typical for teenage students and, if studying the English language is obligatory, you will often be preparing classes of mixed ability and of mixed levels of motivation. However, the main goal will be the same for all – to pass the exam in order to proceed further through the education system.

## 2. Challenge and enjoyment

Some students take exams because they enjoy them. They like the challenge of setting themselves a personal goal. Having an exam to aim for can be especially useful if a student has been attending English classes for some time but is starting to lose interest and needs an extra boost of motivation. The looming date can be just what a student needs to invigorate their learning.

## 3. A general professional qualification

Students in work, or those looking for a job or a new career move often need a qualification in English. This might be a work-related qualification such as the Cambridge English Business English Certificate, although many employers are mainly interested in a qualification that indicates the job applicant's general level of English. In such cases, a certain score from an IELTS exam will also help the student with their job search.

## 4. A specific professional qualification

Some students might need to pass a specific English exam (or a specific exam in English) in order to get a job or stay in their job. One example of this would be the 'English Proficiency Test for Pilots', which a pilot must pass in order to meet the ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organization) language proficiency requirements. The test focuses on speaking and listening skills within the context of piloting situations. For this kind of test, the teacher will need to research the contents of the exam and decide if they are able to prepare the students for it, since this type of exam will require an understanding of specialised concepts and terms.

## 5. Entry to university and further education

Any student who intends to study English at university after leaving school will need an exam qualification. If a student plans to study overseas at a university in a country where English is the first language or the official language of education, they will need to pass an exam at a certain level. Most universities will look for a score of between 5.5 and 7 on an IELTS exam or a TOEFL score of between 80 and 100. Most universities state their English language entry requirements on their websites. Sometimes a university's requirements will vary depending on the subject a student is applying for.

## 6. Visa requirements

A student who needs a visa to enter an English-speaking country with the intention of living and working there may need to demonstrate a level of English. Take the case of a student applying for a general visa to enter the UK as an example: if the student has no family connections, they will need a recognised exam qualification equal to a C1 level of English (based on the CEFR levels). If they are the spouse of a UK citizen, the minimum level would be A1. Similar schemes will apply to many other countries where English is the first language. Students in this situation are usually highly motivated to work hard; however, they will sometimes need to take the exam before you feel they are ready to achieve the necessary score (see Unit 8 on managing students' expectations).

## 7. To gain credits at university

In a number of countries, students are increasingly taking general English or academic English modules as part of their degree. The degree itself might be in the student's own language, but they may be expected to take and pass English language modules as part of their course. This is especially common in the case of degrees that have an international focus. Sometimes, external English courses count towards these credits. For example, an exam passed by way of a private language school may gain a student exemption from the English modules at their university.

## 8. To graduate from university

In some countries, students study their degree through the medium of English. There is nearly always a minimum level of English required to gain entry onto this type of course. Students may also need to gain a minimum score in IELTS or another exam in order to graduate from their course.

## 9. Proof of ability

Many students can reach a high level of English through self-study or by attending courses without ever actually taking an exam. While this type of informal learning can enable them to do their job perfectly well in English, it still means that they do not have any official evidence of their language skills. Gaining a certificate in an international exam allows students to formally demonstrate their ability to others.

## 10. Other stakeholders

Sometimes the requirement to pass an exam doesn't come from the student, but from another stakeholder such as the class teacher or a student's parents. Class teachers might introduce the idea of taking an exam for various reasons; maybe they feel that the course needs a more clearly defined aim, and that the students will benefit from that. Parents might want their children to take an exam as it provides formal evidence of progress.

# 10 ways that exam preparation lessons are different from teaching general English

Many English teachers who enter the classroom are well prepared with resources and activities for teaching general English. When you teach an exam class, you are still teaching English, of course, but the focus can be quite different and it's important to be aware of the differences and to respond accordingly. Whether you see these differences as positive or negative will be up to you as a teacher.

## 1. A single aim

Sometimes on a general English course it can feel like there are many different reasons for students being in the classroom. You might have some students who need English to help them with their work, some who need it to support their academic studies, and some students who just attend for pleasure. In an exam class, the students have more or less the same aim – to pass the exam. That makes the overall goal of your course much clearer than it sometimes might be.

## 2. Motivation

Theoretically, if all the students are aiming to pass an exam, their levels of self-motivation should be very high and they will work hard. This is generally true except, sometimes, in the case of students who have been told that they must take an exam (for example, by a parent) but who don't personally see any good reason to do so.

## 3. Level

Placing your students at the correct level on exam courses becomes more important than it might on a general course. In general English lessons, teachers can adjust their teaching to the level of the students. On exam courses, you have a responsibility to teach to the level of the exam rather than to the level of the students. Note that the placement test that decides if a student is ready to prepare for the exam in the time given must be reliable.

## 4. Age and interests of the students

Some exams are written with a particular age group in mind; for example, some exams are unsuitable for younger learners. If the paper that tests writing skills requires students to write a formal piece of correspondence applying for a job, younger students, who are unlikely to have any real-world experience of this, should be advised to join a different class and prepare for an alternative exam.

## 5. Exam skills

The biggest difference between teaching an exam class and teaching general English is, without a doubt, the need to teach students about the exam and how to approach each question. This kind of work often feels as though it has less to do with teaching the English language itself and more about equipping the students with the strategies and awareness they'll need to navigate the exam.

## 6. Syllabus design and materials

If you know the skills and aspects of language that an exam will test, the syllabus almost writes itself in a way that a general English course doesn't. You know what task types have to be included, and what aspects of English will need to be taught. Copies of past

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papers are a good indicator of what needs to be included on the syllabus and past papers will also provide useful preparation material. In addition, many publishers produce exam preparation coursebooks for the main exams (for example, IELTS), and these can form an integral part of your course design and lesson material.

## 7. Planning lessons and time-management

When you plan a lesson or a course, it's important to balance students' English needs with their exam preparation needs. Imagine you are teaching on an intensive IELTS preparation course that lasts two weeks, leading up to the exam itself; in this situation, the course will mostly involve orientating students to the exam and giving them lots of exam practice because it is not possible to improve the level of their English significantly in two weeks. On the other hand, if you are teaching a year-long course (perhaps 120 hours of classroom time with additional time for homework), you can realistically try to raise the level of the students' English and then gradually introduce more exam practice as the course progresses.

## 8. Reflecting the exam task types in your lessons

Two of the most common questions from students preparing for an exam are: 'Is this in the exam?' and 'How will this help me pass the exam?' So, when you're planning your lessons, it's always worth thinking of what your answers would be to those questions.

Problems are likely to occur if, for example, you get students to do a fun roleplay activity and they then discover that roleplay isn't actually one of the tasks in the exam. Similarly, if you ask students to write a story for homework but storywriting is not a task type in the writing exam, they might question your methods. You might, of course, have very good reasons for setting up a roleplay or for getting students to write a story in an exam class: perhaps it's to practise some new grammar or vocabulary in context. But as a general guideline, it's usually wise to set activity types that reflect the format of the exam and if you stray from the format of the exam, explain clearly your reasons for doing so.

## 9. Focus on accuracy over fluency

In general, exams are marked according to whether the questions are answered accurately; this is especially true on papers testing reading and listening skills or exams with a focus on correct grammar and use of vocabulary. On writing and speaking papers, however, other criteria could be graded according to use of structure in writing or communicative competence in speaking. However, even for these papers, marks will be gained or deducted for accuracy. Whether you agree or disagree with the idea that exams reward accuracy over fluency, the fact is that most of them do. As a result, teachers in exam classes will tend to praise accurate production over fluency more often than they might on a general English course.

## 10. Maintaining the momentum

This final point relates back to the issue of motivation (see point 2 above). Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by many teachers of exam classes is keeping students interested while continually reflecting the format of the exam. Over time, even the most motivated students can find exam preparation relentless, with the exam task types seeming inauthentic and lacking in fun. As a teacher, you might feel like a sports coach trying to prepare an athlete for a major championship: you want your students to reach their peak in time for the big day, but you don't want them to be ready too early and lose momentum.

# 10 exams that you might have to prepare students for

There are many different exams that you might have to prepare students for. Some of these are lower-stakes tests, such as ones that measure progress in a course or assessments that take place at the end of term. High-stakes tests include national English exams, university entrance exams and other formal, summative tests. Since each country will have a slightly different set-up, this section will focus on exams that are taken throughout the world. On pages 189 to 229 of the Appendix you will also find a more detailed summary of each of these exams.

## 1. IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

IELTS is a proficiency test of English that scores all candidates on a scale of 1 to 9 with increments of 0.5 in between. There are two versions of the IELTS test: IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. Far more candidates take the academic version than the general one. IELTS Academic is taken for many different reasons, but one of the most common is to gain entrance to a university. Unlike many other exams, the grade a student receives on an IELTS exams is only valid for a certain amount of time.

There are four sections to the test: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The reading test (60 minutes) consists of three texts totalling around 2,200 words, with 40 comprehension questions. The listening test (30 minutes) tests candidates' comprehension of a dialogue and a monologue, both representing everyday situations, and a third one set in an academic situation. Each section has 10 questions. The speaking test lasts 12 to 15 minutes and consists of three parts. Part 1 contains general personal questions, part 2 is a two-minute monologue and part 3 is made up of further questions about the topic from part 2. The writing section (60 minutes) requires candidates to respond to an essay question relating to a visual stimulus such as a graph, a map or a diagram. IELTS General Training is the same as IELTS Academic with regard to speaking and listening. The IELTS General reading test uses slightly different genres, though, and the writing test requires students to write a letter rather than respond to a visual stimulus.

## 2. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)

The TOEFL test is similar to the IELTS test in that one of the most common reasons to take it is to gain entrance to a university. Nowadays, TOEFL is mostly taken online. Like IELTS, the test includes four sections: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The reading section lasts 60 to 80 minutes and requires students to answer 36 to 56 questions on three or four academic texts. The listening test lasts 60 to 90 minutes with 34 to 51 questions. Candidates answer comprehension questions on recorded lectures, classroom discussions and academic-related conversations. The speaking section lasts 20 minutes and requires candidates to (1) complete six tasks involving expressing an opinion on a familiar topic and (2) to speak based on reading and listening tasks. This usually involves summarising or comparing opinions from the texts in response to a prompt. In the writing section students have to write essay-style responses based on reading and listening tasks.

## 3. Cambridge general English exams

Cambridge Assessment offers a wide range of exams, and is one of the key stakeholders in IELTS. For general English, they offer a suite of exams that test students at different levels. These are:



- A2** - Key
- B1** - Preliminary
- B2** - First
- C1** - Advanced
- C2** - Proficiency

The two lower levels have three papers; (1) reading and writing, (2) speaking and (3) listening. The three higher levels have four papers: (1) reading and English in use, (2) writing, (3) speaking and (4) listening.

#### 4. **BEC**

Also run by Cambridge Assessment are the business English exams known as BEC (Business English Certificate). These are only offered at the levels of Preliminary (B1), Vantage (B2) and Higher (C1). The Preliminary exam consists of three papers: (1) reading and writing, (2) listening and (3) speaking. The two higher levels have four papers, with separate sections for reading and writing. The tests follow a similar format to the general English exams but all of the contexts reflect work-related situations.

#### 5. **Cambridge Young Learners**

Another important set of exams offered by Cambridge are the Young Learner exams. These are offered from pre-A1 to A2 levels, and are known as Starters (pre-A1), Movers (A1) and Flyers (A2). All three levels consist of three papers: (1) listening, (2) reading and writing, and (3) speaking. The lowest level lasts 45 minutes and the highest level lasts just over an hour. The format is different from many other exams due to the lower level. The listening test involves lots of visuals that students have to colour in, match or select. The reading test also involves pictures with matching and description tasks. Many of the texts are story-based and the tasks frequently involve gap completion. The speaking test also revolves around visual stimuli, with candidates continuing stories and describing differences. (See also Units 13 and 48 for more information on teaching and writing exams for young learners.)

#### 6. **BULATS (Business Language Testing Service)**

BULATS is another test offered by Cambridge English. This test assesses people's ability to communicate in a work context. The test is done online and has three main sections: (1) reading and listening, (2) speaking, and (3) writing. Students do not have to take all three sections; they can be assessed on only one. Typically, this test is used to shortlist people for interviews and to identify training needs within a company. The reading and listening test is adaptive so there is not a fixed number of questions; there are seven sections, each of about 250 words and candidates get 60 minutes to complete it. The speaking test consists of five sections and lasts 15 minutes. There are general questions first, followed by sentences to read aloud, then two presentations and responses to fixed questions. The contexts are all business-related. In the writing section, candidates write an email and a short report.

#### 7. **PTE Academic (Pearson Test of English)**

PTE Academic is a test offered by Pearson. It is used in much the same way as TOEFL and IELTS to gain entrance to universities and colleges around the world. PTE Academic assesses listening, reading, speaking and writing, all on-screen. To complete a PTE

Academic test, candidates need to attend a secure Pearson test centre. Candidates use a computer and a headset to listen to, read and respond to questions. The test lasts three hours and there are three main parts: (1) speaking and writing, (2) listening and (3) reading. There are 20 different question formats, ranging from multiple choice through to essay writing and interpreting information. Like other exams aiming for university entrance, candidates hear excerpts from lectures, view graphs and charts, read academic texts and write essays.

## 8. Trinity GESE (Graded examinations in spoken English) and ISE (Integrated Skills in English)

Trinity's two main exams are the GESE and ISE. The GESE (Graded Examination in Spoken English) is a one-to-one interview involving different types of speaking task and some formal listening tasks at higher levels. The ISE (Integrated Skills in English) assessment tests all four skills in two papers: (1) reading and writing and (2) listening and speaking. In the reading and writing paper there are four parts. There are two reading tasks, one reading into writing task and one writing task. The speaking and listening section consists of two listening tasks, one spoken topic task where candidates are given a prompt card to speak about and one conversation task.

## 9. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)

TOEIC is offered by the same organisation as the TOEFL exam (ETS, which stands for Educational Testing Service). The TOEIC listening and reading test is used by candidates to prove their ability in English for the workplace. The test lasts two and a half hours and students have to answer 200 questions in total, as well as completing biographical information. In the speaking and writing test, students have 20 minutes to read a text aloud, describe a picture, respond to questions, propose a solution and express an opinion. In the writing test, students have an hour to (1) write sentences responding to pictures, (2) respond to a written request and (3) write an essay.

## 10. Password

Password is another test that focuses on skills and is commonly used as an entrance exam to universities. Like other exams in this area, it is a proficiency exam testing from A2 to C1 and it takes three hours. The test is run in two parts. Part 1 tests reading and writing. The reading section has five parts and takes one hour and fifteen minutes. The writing part requires students to choose between two essay topics. Part 2 tests listening and speaking. The listening section contains five parts and lasts one hour. The speaking section also contains five parts.

# 10 exam terms used in exam literature

Over the years, examination papers and literature have developed their own terms and jargon. When you first meet some of these, it can feel quite daunting; for example, questions are sometimes called 'items' and a space to write an answer is called a 'lozenge'. Here are 10 terms it's worth becoming familiar with (and being able to explain to students on some occasions). The first seven terms relate to exam tasks that involve writing down your answers. The last three terms are specific to speaking tests.

## 1. Item

An item is a statement containing a gap, or simply a writing line where students have to write a letter, a number, a single word, a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph. It's more commonly referred to by teachers as a 'question', even though it often doesn't comprise an actual question.

## 2. Key

The key is the correct answer to an item or a list of correct answers to a set of questions.

## 3. Rubric

The rubric is a statement giving instructions on what the candidate must do; for example, 'Complete the sentences with the correct form of the verb given in brackets'.

## 4. Options

In a multiple-choice question, the options are the various possible answers, in the form of words or phrases that a candidate must choose from.

## 5. Cloze

A cloze test is a whole text (for example, a paragraph) from which words have been removed. The candidate has to complete the text by filling in the gaps with suitable words.

## 6. Multiple choice and multiple matching

Multiple choice is a task that requires the candidate to choose one answer from several (usually three or four) options. Multiple matching presents the candidate with a list of numbered items and a list of lettered responses. The candidate has to link each numbered item to its corresponding (i.e. matching) response.

## 7. Lozenge

A lozenge is a space on an answer sheet that the candidate has to fill in with their answer to a multiple-choice question. In computer-based exams, a lozenge consists of a dot in a circle that the candidate has to click on to select the correct answer.

## 8. Assessor and/or interlocutor

In a speaking exam, the assessor is the person who grades the candidate's performance. The interlocutor is the person who interviews the candidate. In many exams the assessor and the interlocutor are the same person.

## 9. Long turn

A long turn is any part of a speaking exam in which the candidate has to speak on their own for a period of time. For example, the candidate might be asked to talk about a picture (see Unit 40) or to give a short presentation (see Unit 42)

## 10. Collaborative task

A collaborative task is part of an exam in which two candidates are put together to discuss something (i.e. they 'collaborate'). They are then assessed on their communicative speaking skills.

*"Sometimes teaching students the terms to refer to the different parts of the exam can help. For example, the term 'multiple matching' helps students to understand the task in a practical way. But always follow-up by asking students, 'How are you going to approach this part of the exam?' to make sure they really understand!"*

**Judith Richardson, IELTS teacher, UK**

# 10 questions to ask students at the beginning of an exam course

As with any kind of English course, you'll want to know as much as possible about your students from the outset. Some of the points outlined below might seem obvious; however, on exams courses it's often easy to overlook the individual student and their needs because everything tends to be so focused on the final exam. Asking certain questions is also a way to highlight to students what a big commitment they are taking on (also see Unit 8 on managing student expectations). You can either ask students these sets of questions individually or you could use them on the first day of the course: students work in pairs, ask each other the questions, and then report back to the rest of the class what they have discovered. You could also make copies of page 158 of the Appendix with these questions. Students can write down their answers and hand the page to you if that's more appropriate.

## 1. Personal information

Start with the obvious. Personal information questions are often asked in the speaking section of exams, and the way a candidate responds will give an instant indication of how prepared (or otherwise) they are. Note that asking for a student's age only applies in the case of younger learners, teenagers and young adults because this might affect which exam they take; for example, the Cambridge First exam has a schools version and a general version.

*What's your name?*

*Where are you from?*

*How old are you?*

## 2. Areas of work or study

Find out about the student's area of work or study, as this may affect which exam they take. For example, a person who works in business might be choosing a general exam such as Cambridge First, when in fact Cambridge English: BEC Vantage could be more appropriate.

*What's your job?*

*Are you a student? What do you study?*

## 3. Free time and interests

Even though your students are taking an exam, it's still important to find out about their interests and, where possible, to try to link these to the exam content. They are highly likely to be asked about their free time in the exam speaking task.

*What do you do in your free time?*

*Do you play any sports?*

*What's your favourite hobby?*

*What do you like doing with friends at the weekend?*

## 4. English-learning background

Students' answers to these questions are significant because you will find out if they have a formal learning background in English. If they have, they might be familiar with many of the exam-type tasks. If a student comes to the course with a high level of English but they have learnt it with no formal teaching (for example, maybe they lived and worked in an English speaking country), their level might be right but they will need help with handling certain types of exam question.

*How long have you been learning English?*

*Where have you studied English?*

*What courses have you taken?*

## 5. Exams and qualifications

As well as asking a student about any previous English exams they have taken, try to find out about their experience of exams in general. Past experience of preparing for and taking any kind of exam will come in useful for the course.

*Have you ever taken any English exams before?*

*Do you have any qualifications in English?*

*What other exams have you taken?*

## 6. Reasons for taking the exam

Students have all sorts of reasons for taking exams; maybe they need it for their job or for school. In some cases, students just want to find a new motivation for learning English.

*Why are you taking this course/this exam?*

*What do you need this exam qualification for?*

## 7. Self-study time

This is an important topic. Some students might not have realistic expectations about what it takes to pass an exam or what they can achieve in the time they have outside the lesson. (See also Unit 8 on managing expectations.)

*How many hours of homework can you do per week?*

*What other commitments might affect your self-study time?*

## 8. Knowledge of the exam

Ask students what they already know about the exam. This will enable you to check that any information they do have is correct. If they say they don't know much about it, you can provide them with the information they need and make sure they realise what they are committing themselves to.

*How much do you know about the exam?*

*Have you looked at any sample exam papers?*

## 9. Strengths and weaknesses

It's a good idea to ask the students to assess their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to the exam. While you can also establish their current level by giving them a placement test (or maybe even a past paper), asking the students themselves tells you how aware they are of their own abilities and whether their own perceptions are realistic.

*Which parts of the exam do you think will be the easiest/most difficult for you?*

*What areas of English will you need to improve the most for the exam?*

## 10. Availability for the exam

Check that the students will be available when the exam takes place. It's best to clarify this before they start the course!

*The exam takes place in ... [give date]. Will you be available at this time?*

# 10 similarities and differences between paper-based and computer-based exams

Increasingly, exam boards offer students the choice of taking an exam either on paper or on the computer. Your own school or institution might offer one or the other or both. It's worth establishing early on how students will take the exam and tailoring your exam preparation to that format. The following list provides points to consider, and highlights some key issues that might affect a candidate's performance.

## 1. Checking the equipment

In paper-based exams, sound levels of recordings for listening tasks will be controlled by the invigilator. In a computer-based exam, on the other hand, a candidate might need to check sound levels on their individual computer and ask for help if it isn't working properly. The same is also true if candidates have to use a microphone. They will need to first check their voice levels for recording.

## 2. Navigation

Some candidates comment that a paper-based exam makes it easier to jump to a different part of the exam and complete that, before going back to tackle a question they find more difficult. With computer-based testing, the candidate often does not have this freedom; they have to answer whatever appears on screen. Some exams, however, do allow you to move to later sections before completing earlier sections. If this is the case, students need to know how to navigate the relevant screen instructions and menus.

## 3. Pen or keyboard?

As increasing numbers of students do the majority of their writing with a keyboard, it can be quite a shock to suddenly have to write with a pen for an extended period time. Equally, some students aren't familiar with keyboards, so they will need practice. It's a good idea to take this sort of decision early so that students can get used to using the equipment they will be using in the exam.

## 4. Word count in writing exams

One nice feature of some computer-based writing tests is that the screen shows the candidate how many words they've written, enabling them to easily stay within the specified word count. For paper-based exams, students need to get familiar with word counts and how much they have to write on the page.

## 5. Speaking to a person or to a screen

Some speaking exams require students to attend a face-to-face interview. While this might be stressful, it seems like a natural way to test speaking – with someone listening and responding to what the candidate says. Computer-based speaking tests, on the other hand, sometimes require the student to respond to a variety of tasks by speaking into a microphone (while the computer records their voice). This means that candidates need to work on becoming familiar with the concept of speaking to a computer that does not provide any of the visual responses they might expect from a person.

## 6. Editing and correcting

Computer-based exams let you correct and edit answers in the same way any word-processing software does. Some candidates regard this as an advantage, as correcting and editing with pen and paper can become messy and confusing.

## 7. Results

Some students might ask you if there is any difference in the results they might get, depending on whether they take an exam on paper or on screen. The main examination boards would say there is no difference, based on their research into this aspect of examining. So you can reassure students that their result will be the same, whichever format they go with. (For more detailed research on this topic, see [https://www.ets.org/research/policy\\_research\\_reports/publications/chapter/2014/jsol](https://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/chapter/2014/jsol))

## 8. Receiving results

In general, a computer-based exam can provide you with your final results more quickly than a paper-based one.

## 9. Adaptive testing

The increased use of computer-based testing means that some tests will vary in length and format if they are designed to adapt to the candidate's answers. The candidate answers a question and the computer chooses the next question based on whether the answer was right or wrong. The test continues in this way until the program establishes the student's level. This can be useful for placement testing; it does, however, mean that every student takes a slightly different test. This can be disconcerting for students so they need to be made aware of it in advance.

## 10. On the day

On the day of the exam, there is not much difference in the exam format itself. Students are often required to bring ID along if it's a public exam, and they might need specific log-in details for a computer-based exam. For both paper-based and computer-based exams, candidates are normally allowed to make notes, so they should bring pens, pencils, erasers and any stationery allowed. Some (but by no means all) examinations also allow students to bring in a dictionary.





# Exam skills

This section looks at the range of skills your students will need to develop in order to take an exam. Even when a student has the right level of English to pass or get a high grade in the exam, their final mark can be adversely affected by a lack of awareness of what an exam consists of and how they should approach exam preparation.

Unlike later sections in this book, all the exam skills covered in this section tend to be universally true and the advice is useful for any part of an exam regardless of whether it's testing reading, writing, speaking, listening or explicitly assessing grammar and vocabulary.

The seven units focus on classroom practice and ways to raise your students' awareness of what taking an exam is like and how they should be realistic about what it requires. In particular, there are suggestions for developing students' exam study skills and ways to turn their weaknesses into opportunities for learning.

The section also looks at ways to handle the dilemma of needing to teach and improve students' English while also preparing them for the exam. For example, Unit 12 includes the type of activities we normally use for language teaching but it can also provide exam awareness. The final unit in this section offers additional advice to anyone preparing younger learners for exams.

# 10 tips for providing exam practice in the classroom

There are various ways in which an exam preparation class is different from a general English class (see Unit 2), and one important way is that you will have some lessons where you want to simulate exam conditions. Setting aside time for students to take past papers and experience the demands of the exam is particularly helpful when you are close to the date of the exam. The experience means that students can identify any unforeseen problems and deal with them in good time.

## 1. Using past papers

Most exam boards offer past papers; some publishers produce books of 'practice papers' – exam papers that have been written to emulate the actual exam. (Note that these papers are often written by people who also write real exam papers.) Many teachers give students these practice papers as homework, but it's also a good idea to use them to create exam conditions in your classroom.

## 2. Seating

Most exam boards will have specifications on the distance between the candidates in an exam. Although you probably won't be able to simulate this exactly in your classroom because you'd need a very large room, try to seat students separately and as far apart as possible so everyone gets a feel for what it will be like on the actual day. For speaking exam practice, set up the room with the examiner's chair and the student's chair as it is likely to be in the real exam.

## 3. Timings

When students take a past-paper exam, make sure you use the exact timings indicated on the exam paper. If you are only having students take one or two of the questions, calculate approximate timings by dividing the total time for the exam by the number of questions, or according to the weight of marks given for the question. Completing an exam question in the set time is one of the key things that any student should be given an opportunity to practise so that they use time appropriately in the exam itself.

## 4. Instructions

If the person running the exam is supposed to give or read out instructions with the paper, try to do this word for word when you do exam practice with the students.

## 5. Instructions and questions for speaking exam practice

When practising part 2 of the IELTS speaking test, don't just give the topic card to students; say the instructions as well. For example:

*OK, next I'm going to give you a card with a topic on it. I'd like you to talk about it for one to two minutes. Before you start talking, you have one minute to think about what you're going to say. You can make notes if you wish. Do you understand?*

If students aren't familiar with these instructions, they might be confused by them on the day of the test.

## 6. Answer sheets

Many major paper-based exams come with an answer sheet. Students have to make sure they transfer all their answers onto this sheet at the end. If students are not familiar with the layout, they might easily make a mistake and fill in the wrong boxes, so try to use real answer sheets with the students in class. (It also speeds up marking afterwards.)

## 7. Cheating

If a student leans over to look at a peer's answers, speaks to another student, or does anything that a real examiner would interpret as cheating, explain to the student that they could be disqualified for such actions in the real exam. In many cases, students are not intentionally cheating; when they are doing exam practice they are often looking around to check that they are following the correct exam protocols rather than trying to copy another student's work. However, it's better that they understand at the practice stage what does and doesn't warrant disqualification, rather than discovering it on the day of the exam.

## 8. Hide the speaking questions

In most classes you will probably have a coursebook to follow. One of the problems with this is that the speaking test questions will be written down in front of the students. When it comes to a pairwork task in which one student is the examiner and the other is the candidate, the student answering the questions has time to read and think about their responses. In the actual test they will just hear the questions and have no thinking time. To better simulate the real test, copy some of the speaking questions onto sheets of paper. Give the questions to the person playing the role of the examiner for them to read aloud to their partner.

## 9. The right number of questions

Many exam preparation coursebooks provide fewer questions for each section than candidates will find in the actual exam. This is usually because of space restrictions in the book. Always check the format of the exam and compare the number of questions in each section. Draw students' attention to any differences. Students can be shocked to suddenly find their reading text is not 400 words with six questions but in fact 800 words with 12 questions. Similarly, for the speaking part of the test, many books do not include the full number of questions. For example, in IELTS, part 3, there are between six and nine questions, but many IELTS preparation coursebooks will only have three or four. If this is the case with your coursebook, you could write some additional questions before class.

## 10. Exam administration

On the day of the exam there will usually be a few simple administrative procedures that students have to follow, such as showing their ID and confirming their name. Although minor, this type of thing can unsettle students if they are not prepared for it. Before the exam, try to replicate the procedures so that students know what is going to happen.

# 10 tips for managing student expectations

Students often have a target in mind and a timeframe in which they hope to reach it. This might be linked to another objective, such as obtaining a place at university. Unfortunately, students often have unrealistic expectations regarding how quickly they will reach this target. You can use the following strategies to try to manage their expectations.

## 1. State lesson objectives

At the start of a lesson, display a slide or write to one side of the board what students can expect to achieve in each lesson. For example:

*By the end of this lesson you will be able to:*

- ▶ analyse an essay question
- ▶ brainstorm ideas for an essay
- ▶ organise and structure your response

It is important to do this so that students know the limitations of what can be achieved in a single lesson.

## 2. Differentiate your lesson objectives

In exam classes such as TOEFL and IELTS, it is quite common to be teaching mixed-ability groups. You may therefore need to set a variety of objectives and word these differently. For example:

- ▶ All of you will be able to give an opinion and support it with two reasons.
- ▶ Some of you will be able to justify the arguments.
- ▶ Some of you will be able to use complex sentence structures to do so.

## 3. Personalise success criteria

Once you have taught a class for a few lessons and marked their individual work, it is a good idea to set individual criteria for measuring success. At the start of a lesson you can ask students to write down one or two goals based on feedback you have previously given them. For example:

*My goal: To use a wider range of grammatical structures.*

Doing this can help students focus on an additional personal target while writing.

## 4. Explain the progression in band scores

There is no one-size-fits-all response to the question: How long will it take me to improve my IELTS/TOEFL score? A student may already have a score of 5 in IELTS and need a score of 5.5 to get onto their course. This might sound like a small increment, but it can take as long as six months to improve one's score by half a band. Make sure students are aware of how long it can take to improve their score.

## 5. Keep a diary

Often, students will expect to make rapid progress, when in reality they are not putting in enough hours or effort to match their expectations. Ask students to start a diary recording how often they practise and what it is they are practising. Review these regularly with students to discuss when they need to do more work and what they need to work on to improve.

## 6. Conduct a needs analysis

At the start of a course it can be good to discuss with your students what their expectations and needs are. You can create one specific to the exam you are teaching by creating a table such as this one:

	I can do this without problems	I can do this most of the time	I find this difficult but can do it with help	I can't do this
Generate ideas for an essay				
Speak confidently and fluently for two minutes on any exam topic				
Write an overview sentence of a graph				

This will help you to structure your course and to prioritise aims. Once you have analysed it and planned the course in more detail it will also help to show students what is possible in the number of hours available in the course.

## 7. Use previous students as an example

If you have students in your school who have previously studied for your exam, they can be a good resource. For example, if you have an FCE course and the school also runs a CAE course with a former FCE student in it, then they could help you. Ask one of the students to come to speak to your class about how they achieved the score they did, how much work they had to do and what priorities they set. They can then take questions from the class. Students often respond better to the experiences of other students than they do to advice from a teacher.

## 8. Highlight the importance of attendance

Students often have many other pressures on them or may not be fully committed to a class so that they end up missing some lessons. There are those who will still pass the exam despite this, but others do not fully realise the importance of attending classes. In some contexts there can be a direct correlation between attendance and scores. When you teach a class, record their absence rates and their final score. If you find a correlation, display this in the form of a graph at the start of a course. This can help to highlight the fact that their attendance is needed to achieve their aim.

## 9. Over-enthusiastic students

Some students will be incredibly enthusiastic and want to constantly give you work to mark and check. They may also try to get a lot of individual attention both inside and outside the class. While their commitment is laudable, it is important that they realise you have limited amounts of time. If all your students in all your classes took the same approach, you would not be able to cope. At the start of the course, think about how many hours you have outside classroom time for looking at students' work. Then work out how many essays, reading test answers, etc. you can look at in this time. Tell students how much work you are able to look at each week so that they are aware of the maximum amount of feedback you can provide.

## 10. Focus your feedback

If you try to comment on every issue you come across in a student's work, especially in writing and speaking, the amount of feedback can be overwhelming for them. Based on the criteria for the exam you are teaching, choose a maximum of three areas to focus your feedback on each time. These can be different for each student. Explain to the students that you have not corrected everything, but only the things they should prioritise. This can help to manage their expectations of your feedback and also allows them to focus their efforts on improving key areas. It's important that students realise they cannot improve everything at once.

*"In our context, it can happen that school-aged students who are taking other exams also want to take an additional English exam in the same year. However, we strongly advise against doing this as most students really don't have a realistic amount of time to juggle their exam preparations. Make sure the student is aware of the workload before he or she signs up for your exam-preparation course."*

**Glenn Standish, Director of Studies, IH Toruń**

# 10 questions about the exam that students should be able to answer before the exam

Part of a student's exam preparation is to memorise the key points about an exam before they walk into the exam room. Here is a checklist of 10 key questions to answer. You can also find a photocopiable version of these questions on page 159 of the Appendix which you could give to your students in class as a way to check that they know the key information.

## 1. Is the exam paper-based or computer-based?

Increasingly, exams are being taken on computers and this will affect the students. If they have been working in the classroom using pen and paper, they will need to be aware that they will suddenly have to switch to a keyboard (or vice versa). Ideally, in the last few weeks, you will provide exam preparation which reflects the actual format.

## 2. How long is the exam?

Students need to know not only the length of the whole exam but also how much time is allocated to separate papers. They will also need to know how long (approximately) they should spend on each part of the exam so they don't run out of time on any questions or spend too long on one part with fewer marks than another part that offers more marks.

## 3. How many papers are there?

Students need to know how the entire exam is divided up; for example: are there separate papers for reading, writing, speaking and listening or are some combined and taken at the same time?

## 4. How many parts are there in each paper?

Most exam papers are divided into parts; a listening paper is likely to have different parts for each recording that is played.

## 5. What is the format of each part?

Before taking an exam, students should be able to tell you how many parts there are on a paper and also what the format will be. If it's a reading paper, they ought to know which part is a longer text with multiple-choice questions and which part is a series of short texts with some kind of matching activity. In the case of a listening paper, students should know how many times they will hear a recording and plan accordingly.

## 6. How many questions are there in each part?

In papers such as those assessing reading and listening, each part will have a number of questions; students should know how many there are in each.

## 7. How many marks are there for each question or part?

Knowing the maximum number of marks that can be awarded for each question allows students to plan how much time and effort is needed for each part or question in an exam. For some exams this is easy; if you have an exam based around grammar with 100 questions and one mark per question, it's fairly obvious. However, for a writing exam, where it's easy for a student to lose track of time and spend too much time on one question and not enough time on the next, they need to think about the maximum number of marks that can be awarded for each question and only spend a certain amount of time on each.

## 8. Where do I write the answers?

If students are taking the exam on a computer, it will probably be obvious where to click or type. But if they are taking a paper-based exam, they need to know if they should write on the question sheet or if they should be writing on a separate answer sheet. If they need to write on the question sheet and then transfer answers onto another sheet, make sure they are familiar with the format of the answer sheet. (There are cases in exams where students have thought they answered everything but in fact they hadn't transferred the answers onto the answer sheet, so scored no marks.)

## 9. When and where is each exam?

The date and time for each part of an exam will vary. Some parts of an exam, such as a reading paper, will be taken by everyone at the same time around the world. Also, make sure students are aware that although an exam might start at 9.30am, candidates will probably be required in the exam room 20 or 30 minutes before it starts. Other exams, such as a speaking exam, will take place over a few days with everyone having different time slots, so students need to double-check the time they should arrive.

## 10. What are the rules on the day of the exam?

Students need to be prepared for the day of the exam and make a list of what they need to bring and what they are allowed and not allowed to do. For example, do they need to bring their own pen and pencil? Will they have to leave their bags and coats outside the exam room? If the speaking exam is done in pairs, will they be able to do it with a friend or will it be with someone they don't know? Do they need to take some form of identity with them? All these questions will be answered in the literature from the exam centre. Make sure students have read it, understand it and know it.

*“Ask students to imagine they have been presented with a test they don't have enough information about. In groups, they brainstorm questions to ask the teacher. Introduce an element of competition by offering a small reward to the group which comes up with the most questions.”*

**Anthony Manning, author and teacher**



# 10 study skills to teach your exam students

It is a good idea to encourage good study habits in students outside class. Under pressure, students can easily be tempted by distractions or procrastinate on a task. Some can even spend more time creating a study plan than actually studying.

## 1. Limit distractions

Too often, students have to cope with endless distractions, for example, the internet, their phone or friends and family. Encourage students to keep a log of the things they do while studying. For students who are too distracted by their phone, you could encourage them to install an app such as Offtime. This allows them to (selectively) block texts and calls, and limits the use of the type of apps that send notifications. Using such an app can make students more focused.

## 2. Use flashcards

Flashcards are a great way for students to test themselves on the meaning of words. However, it's important that they try to move beyond using them to learn the definitions of words only. Tell students that each time they test themselves on a meaning, they should add another piece of information to the card. For example, they might add the pronunciation, example sentences, other forms of the word, collocations, translation, etc. This will make the cards more interactive and help to improve active knowledge as well as passive knowledge. For students who prefer to work on-screen, there are apps for producing study cards, for example, Quizlet, Cram and StudyBlue.

## 3. Do past papers, but with specific aims

Past papers are an effective way for students to familiarise themselves with the exam format. Most major exam boards have free past papers on their websites. There are also past-paper books available. One way of using past papers effectively is to focus students' attention on a particular skill. Each time you teach a new skill, such as a reading or listening skill, ask students to apply it to their test practice. Give students a specific time to aim for, or a specific number of questions to complete successfully. Students often struggle on the day with their time management, so encouraging good practice while studying can help their performance on the day.

## 4. Explain your answers to others

Once students have completed a past paper, they can work with a partner and explain their answers to each other. This process helps students to analyse why they have chosen particular answers. This can either be set as a regular activity after completing a past paper in class or it can also be done outside class, with students working in study groups.

## 5. Take regular breaks

Many students often set overly ambitious self-study timetables. For example, they might allocate four hours one evening to practising the writing paper of an exam. This can actually be counterproductive; their performance is likely to get worse as time progresses. Taking regular breaks can help students to refocus and enhance performance. This can be especially true if the student is trying to commit something, such as a set of vocabulary, to memory. Long-term retention of knowledge tends to improve with regular breaks. Ask students to show you their study timetables and then discuss or suggest points where they may want to take more breaks.

## 6. Practise different techniques

There are lots of different techniques students will learn in class, from each other or online. There is no particular best method for all students. For example, when it comes to reading papers, some students prefer to read the text and then the questions, whereas others prefer to read the questions and then the text. Neither one can claim to be more effective than the other for all students, so it is important that they regularly try both strategies to find out what works for them. Similarly, there are lots of different ways to brainstorm ideas for an essay. Students should try a variety of different methods (see Unit 15 for ideas) to see which ones are most effective for themselves.

## 7. Use time circles

Use the time circles on page 160 of the Appendix to help students be realistic about how they manage their time. Students shade each area to represent how long they currently spend on each activity. They then discuss with a partner which activities take up too much time and which do not receive enough time. They then shade the second circle showing how they plan to spend their time.

## 8. Increase writing speed

Students often find timed writing challenging because they do not generally spend much time actually writing with a pen. Any sustained writing is usually done on a computer now, but some exam formats still expect students to write by hand. Practising writing speedily by hand can help students in an exam. Ask students to spend 10 minutes every day writing quickly by hand. The topics can be simple, and anything the student chooses. Each time students write, they should try to increase the number of words they produce.

## 9. Chunking

Students often learn words individually, but it is generally more efficient to learn them in chunks, i.e. as collocations or fixed phrases that students can use in writing. There are plenty of resources available to help students learn the most common phrases and collocations found in academic texts. One such list is the Pearson Academic Collocation List, which is available for free at: <https://pearsonpte.com/organizations/researchers/academic-collocation-list/>. These collocations are not specific to any one academic discipline but are found in all disciplines.

## 10. Encourage reflection

When students have done a practice test, they often focus only on the score they achieved, without reflecting on how they got that score. Most students receive feedback from teachers, but this is often limited due to time constraints. For this reason, students need to practise reflecting on their own work. For example, ask them to record their own answers to the speaking section of the test. When they listen back, students should ask themselves questions such as: Did I make any grammatical errors? Did I use the time effectively? Did I organise my ideas clearly? Did I speak too quickly or slowly? Did I pause too often? A few days later students should record their answers again, trying to improve on any weaknesses they noticed.

# 10 mistakes that candidates often make that can be easily avoided

Candidates often lose marks by making simple mistakes that can easily be avoided. Many of these oversights are connected to understanding the task or rubric. Others are related to specific exams or sections of exams. Making students aware of these and practising completing them correctly can help to increase a student's score.

## 1. Number of words

Many gapfill tasks will contain an instruction in the rubric such as: 'Write NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS OR A NUMBER in each gap'. Students frequently drop marks because they do not pay attention to this and they write too many words. Even if two of the words they have written are the correct ones, they can drop marks if, for example, they have written four words in the gap. They need to select the two that are necessary to complete the answer.

## 2. Word formation

In gapfill tasks, the grammatical form of the missing word is usually specified. For example, the gap might require an adjective plus a noun, a singular noun or a noun plus a noun. If a student selects a verb from the text to complete a gap that requires a noun, then they have chosen the wrong answer. Students should always check the grammatical sense of the full sentence once the gap has been completed.

## 3. Transferring answers

Some tests require students to transfer answers to another sheet. This can cause them to lose marks in a number of ways. First, they may not realise they need to do this and leave their answers on the question sheet. Second, they may not realise how long this task can take. As a result, they spend time checking their answers on the answer sheet and do not leave enough time to transfer the answers. Finally, they might transfer answers inaccurately, for example, they might have the correct answer on the question sheet, but because they have missed one answer on the question sheet, they might write this answer in the wrong gap on the answer sheet. For example, they might put the answer to number 5 in the gap for number 4.

## 4. Misunderstanding the task

Sometimes students misunderstand or misread the task they are given. For example, an essay question may want them to focus on cause and effect but the student writes an essay that looks at the topic from a problem/solution perspective. Students need to carefully read all parts of the question to make sure they cover everything and from the angle specified.

## 5. Not understanding the marking criteria

Many students tend to pay too much attention to grammatical accuracy in speaking and writing. While accuracy is important, it is only one of four or five categories on which the student will be graded. In speaking tests, some candidates will self-correct a lot and focus on producing accurate sentences. However, this tends to limit the range of sentences they use and thus end up limiting even their grammatical performance. It can also have a negative effect on other areas such as their fluency. Make sure students are aware of the exam criteria and that they focus on all elements rather than just one.

## 6. Over-interpretation of a visual

Many writing tasks contain a visual such as a graph that requires students to describe and compare data. They often do not require students to interpret the data. In fact, in some exams you can be marked down for doing this. If interpretation is allowed, then it usually requires students to do so with caution and to demonstrate this hesitancy using cautious language such as modal verbs. Students should largely be encouraged to confine themselves to describing and comparing.

## 7. Poor structure

Too often in writing exams, students read the questions and simply start writing. What then appears on the page is a stream of consciousness. This means students end up writing essays that have no clear line of argument and paragraphs that do not have a single focus. Sometimes students fail to include any paragraphs at all. Organisation in many written exams counts for around 20 to 25% of the mark. Spending a few minutes planning and brainstorming can help enormously to improve this area. See Units 13 and 15 for ideas on how to work on this.

## 8. Poor time management

This tends to be one of the biggest issues in reading and writing papers. There are tips for improving writing and reading speed in units 10 and 30. However, one of the most basic things that can help students to deal with this issue is simply disciplining themselves with their time use. If the reading test has three texts of equal importance and the test is an hour long, students need to set themselves a strict limit of 20 minutes per text. If they run over by just two or three minutes on the first two texts, then they have lost 25% of their time available on the last paper. Note also that they should learn to allocate time based on the relative weight of a section. For example, if the writing test is one hour long, has two sections and the first section is worth 30% of the marks, they should limit themselves to 15 to 20 minutes for that first section. Practising the test with strict timings in class can reinforce this.

## 9. Not looking forward in the listening test

The listening section can be challenging because students are expected to listen, read and write at the same time. At the start of most listening tests, students are given a couple of minutes to read the questions; it is important that they do this, and that they think about the order information comes in. Too often, students are listening for an answer and before they know it, the audio is actually four questions further ahead. In listening tests, remind students to constantly look at the questions coming up so that they know when to move on to the next question.

## 10. Short simplistic answers

This can be a problem in the writing section of an exam but is more often the case in speaking. Rather than seeing the interview as an opportunity to showcase their ability in the language, students often revert to short, one- or two-word, answers. This does not give the marker much to judge the student by. Students should frequently practise extending their answers. For example, many exams have a few short personal questions

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at the start, such as, 'What was your favourite subject at school?' or 'What do you like most about your home town?' Inappropriately short answers might be 'Maths' and 'The shopping mall'. In order to help students to practise extending these answers, put students in pairs and give them a set of questions to ask and answer. Students should time their partner's response. The person speaking should aim for two- or three-sentence answers that last about 20 seconds each. Here are some example questions:

*Where is your home town?*

*Do you like your home town?*

*What do you study?*

*Why did you choose that subject?*

*What did you enjoy doing as a child?*

*Is fashion important to you?*

*What kind of clothes do you like to wear?*

*What is your daily routine?*

*What do you do in the evenings?*

*"Firstly, I encourage my students to think about time management while taking exams. Students should glance through the exam paper thoroughly to see how much time they can devote to each question. Secondly, students should read the exam questions correctly, focusing on key words and phrases and try to build connections with the course content. Finally, students should start the exam confidently and focus their attention on what they know rather than what they do not know."*

**Magda Dygała, teacher and trainer, Poland**

# 10 classroom activities for checking exam knowledge and strategies

Most of the following activities are typical of the activities that teachers use in their general English classrooms. The difference is that these ones are all adapted to raise awareness of what the exam requires, or they check that students remember the key information about the exam.

## 1. Treasure hunt quiz

Write a set of questions (on the board or on a handout) about the exam that encourage students to look for the correct answers. Either they could look online at the exam information pages or you could provide them with an exam booklet from the exam board. Typically, questions would look like this:

- ▶ *How long does the reading exam last?*
- ▶ *How many questions are there in the listening exam?*
- ▶ *How many words can you write in your answers to part 2?*

## 2. Numbers quiz

A lot of information about examinations includes numbers relating to the number of parts or the number of questions, the length of different parts of the exam, the number of marks you can receive for each part or question, and so on. The following activity needs very little preparation but provides a quick warmer or filler in any exam lesson. Pick out some numbers from different parts of the exam and write them on the board. For example: 4 (= the number of parts) 75 (= the number of minutes for the reading exam), 25 (= the number of marks on the language paper), and so on. Students work in small teams of three or four and try to guess what each number refers to. The team with the most correct answers is the winner.

## 3. True/false comprehension questions

Take part of a text about the exam and turn it into a reading comprehension exercise. For example, if you were working from the text below, you could write the questions in a true/false format:

1. The reading exam has four different parts. T/F
2. Each part has equal marks. T/F
3. You should write all your final answers on the question page. T/F

The reading exam lasts 75 minutes and consists of four parts. There are a maximum of 15 marks per part and the final mark is out of 60 marks in total. At the end of the exam, candidates must write their answers onto a separate answer sheet.

## 4. Information gap

The following activity also requires a piece of text about the exam, which you turn into an information gap activity. It takes some time to prepare but it checks students' understanding of the exam in the form of speaking practice. Cut and paste the text and make two different copies by creating a Student A version and a Student B version, like this:

**Student A**

The reading exam lasts (1)\_\_\_\_\_ minutes and consists of four parts. There are a maximum of 15 marks per part and the final mark is out of (3)\_\_\_\_\_ marks in total. At the end of the exam, candidates must write their answers onto a separate answer sheet.

**Student B**

The reading exam lasts 75 minutes and consists of four parts. There are a maximum of (2)\_\_\_\_\_ marks per part and the final mark is out of 60 marks in total. At the end of the exam, candidates must write their answers onto (4)\_\_\_\_\_.

Students look at their text and prepare questions to ask in order to get the missing information and write it in. For example:

Student A: *How long does the reading exam last?*

Student B: *Seventy-five minutes.*

**5. Find the mistake**

Still using the idea of editing an exam-related text, add 10 mistakes into the text and tell students to find them. This is a good reading exercise and best given to students just before the exam to check that they are completely familiar with the exam format. So, the example exam text could be changed to read:

*The listening exam last 75 minutes and consists of four questions. There are a maximum of 50 marks per part and the final mark is out of 100 marks in total. At the end of the exam, candidates must write their answers onto an attached answer sheet.*

**6. Dictation**

Dictation is great all-round language practice as it involves listening, reading and writing (and speaking if students take turns to read the text out). Read aloud the information about an exam while students try to write it out. Then give them a copy of the information so they can check their answers.

**7. Which one is false?**

As a quick lead-in to an exam knowledge lesson, ask students to individually write three sentences about the exam you are focusing on in the lesson that day; for example, the listening exam. Students write two sentences they know are true about the exam and one sentence that is false. Then they read the sentences to their partner who has to try and decide which fact is incorrect. For example:

Student A: *In the listening exam, you hear the recording once. You write your answers on a separate answer sheet and you have time to read the question before you listen.*

Student B: *The first one is false. You hear the listening twice.*

**8. Rules and anti-rules**

If you have spent the lesson working on one part of the exam in particular, the final task can be to put students in groups and ask them to write five useful rules for anyone taking the exam, such as 'You should bring a spare pen' or 'You are not allowed to speak to anyone else'. A fun alternative is for students to write 'anti-rules', giving very bad advice. For example: 'Don't bother to bring in a spare pen' or 'You can chat to the person next to

you if you need help'. Having students write the complete opposite of the real rules allows them to be imaginative, but it also ensures they are aware of all the key rules of taking the exam. Alternatively, the students could create colourful posters to teach future exam students about the rules of different parts of the exams.

## 9. Exam jargon

As students come across jargon and terminology relating to the exam, write it down on separate pieces of paper and keep them in an envelope. The terms could be words like *invigilator, open cloze, gap, multiple matching, tick, register, key word transformations, delete, items* (see Unit 4 for more). When you have more than 10 new terms, start a lesson off by asking students to get into pairs. One student picks a piece of paper out of the envelope and has to define the term without using the word itself. Their partner has to guess it. They can then draw another piece of paper. If you spend a few minutes on this activity from time to time (as a filler), the students will eventually become confident with the terms and not be daunted when they come across them in the actual exam.

## 10. A future interview

The idea of a future interview based on a creative thinking idea from a book by Jurgen Wolff (Wolff J (2009) *Creativity* Pearson, p. 58-9); it can be usefully adapted for exam classes.

The basic idea is that students think about how they will achieve their future goal of passing the exam. Write these five questions on the board:

- ▶ *What's the best thing about having passed your exam?*
- ▶ *What was your biggest motivation?*
- ▶ *Think of one obstacle. How did you overcome it?*
- ▶ *Which people helped you pass the exam? How?*
- ▶ *What advice would you give someone else who is going to take the exam?*

Put students in pairs and tell them to imagine that it is the future and they have just passed their exam. They take turns to interview each other with these five questions. The process makes students think about what they will need to do in order to pass the exam. Note that you can also set this as a writing activity for homework, with students writing their responses to the questions and reporting back to the whole class: it's useful for students to share their ideas and future advice. (See page 161 of the Appendix for a photocopiable page with these questions.)