IELTS Academic: how the exam works

Tilmashq

One-page cheat sheet · four sections, timing, scoring, what costs marks, how to prepare

> **Find where you stand section by section with a full test, then spend your time on the gap. One weak section is expensive: lifting it almost always beats polishing your strongest.**

The exam as a whole (Academic)

Section	Length	What you do	Questions
Listening	about 30 minutes	listen to four recordings and answer as they play	40
Reading	60 minutes	read three passages and answer the questions on them	40
Writing	60 minutes	describe a graph and write an essay	2 tasks
Speaking	11–14 minutes	talk to an examiner: questions about you, a monologue from a card, a discussion	3 parts

Order and stamina

Listening → Reading → Writing back to back, no break: about 2.5 hours of continuous work. Speaking is separate — same day or within a week either side — always with a live examiner, even on a computer. You start Reading tired and write the essay after two hours: **practise full tests in one sitting**, not only sections in isolation.

Academic vs General Training

Listening and Speaking are identical. General Training differs only in Reading and Writing: everyday and workplace texts, a more forgiving Reading band scale, and a **letter** instead of a graph description in Task 1. This sheet is about Academic.

How answers turn into a score

- Each section: band **0–9 in steps of 0.5**.
- **Listening, Reading:** correct answers out of 40 → band via a table. No penalty for a wrong answer — **never leave a field empty**.
- **Writing, Speaking:** a human awards the band against four criteria, each weighted equally.

Overall = average of the four, rounded to the nearest 0.5, halves rounded up:

Average	6.25	6.75
Overall	**6.5**	**7.0**

Section by section — what costs marks

Listening · 4 parts × 10 questions

everyday conversation → monologue about a place or service → discussion of 2–3 people about study → academic lecture

- Harder as it goes. Plays **once**, no pausing or rewinding.
- Questions follow the order of the audio.
- Marks are lost on details, not understanding: one word over the limit, a missing plural, a date, a spelled-out name.

Reading · 3 passages, 40 questions, 60 min

- No extra time to transfer answers. Passages get harder from first to third.
- Questions are built on **paraphrase** almost every time — hunting for the same word will not work.
- Time discipline over speed: **~20 minutes per passage**; give up a hard question to win three easy ones.
- Each question type can be drilled on its own (T/F/NG and others).

Writing · 2 tasks in an hour

- **Task 1:** graph, table, process or map, at least **150** words — **20 min**.
- **Task 2:** essay, at least **250** words, worth twice as much — **40 min**. Hold this line firmly.
- Criteria: task response, coherence, vocabulary, grammar.
- Commonest low band = an unfinished job, not poor language: no overview in Task 1, no clear position in the essay.

Speaking · 11–14 min, fixed script

- **Part 1:** short questions about you.
- **Part 2:** two-minute monologue from a card, one minute to prepare.
- **Part 3:** discussion of a broader topic connected to the card.
- The examiner follows a protocol and may cut you off mid-sentence — not a judgement on your answer.
- Four criteria: fluency and developed answers count for more than rare words. Developed answer → AREA (essays and Part 3).

Common traps

✗	✓
Leaving a Listening/Reading field empty	Always answer — no penalty
Only drilling sections separately	Full tests in one sitting train stamina
Polishing your strongest section	Lift the weakest — it drags the average
Matching words from question to passage	Look for the same meaning (paraphrase)
More than 20 min on the graph	20 / 40 — the essay is worth double

How to build your preparation

- ☐ Measure where you are with a **full test**.
- ☐ Pick out the **weak section**.
- ☐ Work on it **deliberately**, with your mistakes reviewed.
- ☐ **Once a week**, another full test under exam conditions.

The theory about the format takes an evening to read; the score is moved by hours of practice.

Next: the section guides on the blog — Listening, Reading, Writing Task 1 and 2, Speaking, AREA, linking words.