The overview in IELTS Writing Task 1

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One-page cheat sheet · six questions, no-numbers wording, frames

> **Two sentences, 40–50 words, no numbers. Without a separate overview paragraph, Task Achievement rarely goes above 5 or 6 — however well the figures are described.**

What it is — and is not

- **Answers:** if you had one sentence, what would you say about this picture? 2–3 observations visible from two metres away.
- **Where:** second paragraph, right after the intro (at the end is allowed, but risky).
- **No numbers:** no %, no "doubled", no "fivefold" — a multiple is a number too.
- **No reasons or opinions:** ✗ because of new technology
- **Not about the layout:** ✗ The graph has four lines and the x-axis shows years.

> **Test: remove every number. Still true about the data → overview. Empty → body detail.**

Six questions to ask the picture (first 2–3 min)

1. **Overall direction.** All rise, all fall, or mixed? Compare only start and end.
2. **Highest and lowest.** At the start, end, whole period. The single highest point is almost always worth mentioning.
3. **Biggest change.** Judge by start–end difference, not slope (slope depends on axis scale).
4. **Peaks and troughs.** Rose then fell? A turning point is a separate observation.
5. **Change of leader.** Lines cross? Leader ended behind = almost certainly the headline.
6. **Groups.** Which behave alike? Groups become your two body paragraphs.

Worked example — households with four types of internet connection, 2000–2020

Type	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Dial-up	18%	34%	12%	3%	1%
Fixed broadband	1%	22%	55%	66%	61%
Mobile broadband	0%	4%	26%	52%	74%
Fibre	0%	0%	2%	14%	43%

Scrap-paper answers: 1 three rose, dial-up fell almost to zero · 2 highest point mobile 2020; dial-up led at start · 3 mobile, from nothing to three quarters · 4 dial-up peaked 2005, fixed peaked 2015 · 5 leader changed twice · 6 "peak and decline" (dial-up, fixed) vs "growth only" (mobile, fibre).

Overview (Qs 1, 2+5, 6)

Overall, dial-up almost disappeared, while the three faster types spread rapidly, and by the end of the period mobile broadband had become the most common connection. It is also clear that dial-up and fixed broadband both peaked and then declined, whereas mobile broadband and fibre never fell.

→ Sentence 1: direction + leader at the end. Sentence 2: grouping, which sets up the body (para 1: the two that peaked; para 2: the two that kept rising). Peak years, exact %, crossing dates stay in the body.

Words for main features without numbers

Say	How
Highest	X was the most common / widespread; accounted for the largest share; had the highest figure throughout
Lowest	X was the least common; remained the smallest category; played only a minor role
Direction	rose / fell over the period; the overall trend was upward; all categories except X increased
Peak	X peaked and then declined; rose at first before falling back
New leader	X overtook Y; replaced Y as the most common; the ranking had reversed
Biggest	the most dramatic change / the steepest rise / by far the largest increase
Stability	remained relatively stable; changed little over the period
Groups	A and B followed a similar pattern, whereas C and D…

almost, nearly, far, by far, most are fine (judgements). Prefer *at the beginning / by the end of the period, throughout* to years.

Other picture types

- **Bars, two years:** what rose, fell, did the order change? *Overall, walking and cycling lost ground to the car, which became the most common way of getting to school.*
- **Bars, no time:** leader, laggard, groups. *Overall, the youngest group was the most active in every category, while participation fell steadily with age.*
- **Pies:** *Overall, housing replaced food as the largest item of spending, while the remaining categories changed only slightly.*
- **Table:** highest and lowest in each column — the overview is whatever repeats.
- **Process:** *Overall, the process consists of eight stages, beginning with the collection of used bottles and ending with the production of new ones.*
- **Map:** *Overall, the area changed from farmland into a residential district, with most of the new building in the north.*

Common mistakes

- ✗ Overall, mobile broadband rose to 74%. — a body sentence.
- ✗ The graph shows four types of connection over twenty years. — intro, not overview.
- ✗ Dial-up fell. Fixed broadband rose. Mobile rose… → ✓ the three faster types spread
- ✗ factual error in the most visible place: "rose equally", "more than doubled" for 6→11.
- ✗ missed change of leader · reasons · overview repeated in the body · semicolon join → *whereas / while*.

Practise in 5 minutes

Take a graph, set a timer: **3 min** for the six questions, **2 min** for two sentences. Then check:

- □ No numbers (not even "doubled").
- □ Every claim true against the picture.
- □ No missed change of leader or peak.
- □ Grouping that sets up the two body paragraphs.

Ten such rounds a week do more than three full answers. Full Task 1 structure → **Task 1** cheat sheet.