IELTS Writing Task 1: graphs, tables, processes, maps

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One-page cheat sheet · structure, timing, tenses, mistakes

> **Write nothing except what is drawn: the overall picture, the figures that confirm it, comparisons. No causes, opinions, conclusions or recommendations.**

Answer structure: four paragraphs

Paragraph	Sent.	Words	Rule
Intro	1	~25	Task in your own words: what, where, when. No “this report summarises”.
Overview	2–3	~40	Main trend + how the data groups. **No figures.**
Body 1	3–4	~55	First group, every statement with a number.
Body 2	3–4	~55	Second group, numbers + comparison with the first.

No conclusion. Under 150 words = you missed data.

20 minutes

Min	What you do
0–3	Find extremes and the overall trend; list facts, split into two groups (“rose/fell”, “large/small”, “before/after”).
3–15	Write the list top to bottom, one line = one sentence. Don’t go back.
15–18	Check: no figures in overview? every category? every number, year, “doubled”?
18–20	Typos, articles, % vs points, repeated verbs.

Seven task types

Type	What to look for	Key grammar
Line graph	Overall trend, peaks and dips, crossings, where growth sped up or slowed	Past Simple, verbs of movement
Bar chart	Largest / smallest, contrasts, what swapped places	Comparative structures
Pie chart	Which share dominates, how shares changed	a quarter, a third, accounted for
Table	Pick 5–7 key numbers, extremes and totals — don’t copy everything	As for a graph
Two pictures	A paragraph for each + a linking sentence	According to the picture types
Process	How many stages, start and end, two phases?	Present Simple passive, sequence
Map	What appeared, disappeared, moved, which direction	Passive (past/future), location words

Overview frames — no numbers

- **Opposite groups:** Overall, A and B declined steeply, whereas C, D and E increased.
- **Different speeds:** Overall, every category rose over the period, though X did so far more steeply than Y.
- **Dominance:** Overall, X was the most common category throughout the period, followed by Y.
- **Change of leader:** Overall, group A lost ground to group B, which overtook it during the period.
- **Turning point:** Overall, the figures rose until 2010, after which the trend reversed for most categories.

Body paragraph = a group, not a list

1. Topic sentence, no numbers: *Turning to the mobile devices, all three categories rose.*
2. Largest member + figures: *Smartphone ownership rose dramatically, from 5% to 96%.*
3. Second, tied to first: *Laptops followed a similar pattern, though from a considerably lower base.*
4. Closing comparison: *Even at its lowest point, laptop ownership remained well above tablet ownership.*

Glue: *by contrast · followed a similar pattern · The same was true of Z · …, whereas Y fell* (whereas never starts a sentence).

Tense is chosen by the dates

Situation	Tense · example
The picture	Present Simple: *The chart shows…*
Past years	Past Simple: *Coverage rose from 3% to 61%.*
No dates	*Housing accounts for 30% of spending.*
Future years	*is projected to reach 90%*
“By a year”	Past Perfect: *By 2020, the share had risen to 98%.*
Process	Present passive: *The wood is cut, dried…*
Map	*The factory was demolished.* / planned: *A car park will be built.*

✗ has grown (no “now”, only dates) · ✗ was growing (data are points).

Process · map · shares

- **Process:** *At the first stage, the clay is dug out… Once the bottles have been collected, they are washed… After being dried for 24 hours… In the final stage…* Mind *the first stage*, *consists of*.
- **Map:** *The woodland to the south of the river was replaced by a car park.*

Sentence patterns, steepness levels and vocabulary for change → see the **Describing trends** cheat sheet. Rule: % axis, 45%→65% = **20 percentage points**, not “a 20% increase”.

Typical mistakes

- ✗ “The table has three columns and five rows” → write about the numbers.
- ✗ “The share grew” → ✓ “…from 12% to 31%”. No figures: criterion drops to 5.
- ✗ “almost double” for “more than double”; wrong year or line.
- ✗ missed category → ✓ *Transport was the only category to remain broadly stable, edging up from 12% to 14%.*
- ✗ “As we can see from the graph” · copied intro (doesn’t count) · repeated overview.

Checklist before Task 2

- ☐ Four paragraphs, intro in your own words.
- ☐ Overview: separate paragraph, no numbers, with grouping.
- ☐ ≥3 numbers and ≥1 comparison per body paragraph.
- ☐ Every category, including the unchanged one.
- ☐ Past years → Past Simple.
- ☐ No “because”, “I think” or conclusion.
- ☐ Counter ≥150, ideally 170–190.