

Getting ready for your IELTS course

St Giles IELTS courses are designed to fully prepare you for the exam. However, the better your English is before you start, the greater your chances of achieving success. The IELTS exam is not a grammar test; rather it measures your reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and assesses your ability to communicate for work, study or life in an English-speaking country.

The focus of the test

There are two versions of the test: IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. Your course will prepare you for the **Academic version**, which is for people who want to

- study at university at undergraduate or postgraduate level;
- join a professional organisation in an English-speaking country; or
- for personal achievement

However, the tasks and tests do not require specific subject knowledge. They are accessible to everyone, irrespective of their background.

IELTS is internationally focused in its content, so you can expect a range of native speaker accents (North American, Australian, New Zealand, British) in the Listening test and all standard varieties of English are accepted in your answers to all parts of the test.

The level of the test

IELTS is designed to assess English language skills at **all** levels.

There is no such thing as a 'pass' or a 'fail' in IELTS. Results are reported as band scores on a scale of 1 (the lowest) to 9 (the highest).

The score that *you* need to achieve depends on the organisation which is asking for proof of your proficiency in English. If you do not know what it is, try and find out before you start the course with St Giles.

If you are studying for personal achievement, it is up to you to decide on the score you want to achieve.

Be realistic about your goals

It is important to be realistic about your goal taking into consideration your current level of English and the time you have available before sitting the exam.

St Giles IELTS courses are designed for people who want to achieve a score of 5.5 or higher, so you should have achieved at least an Intermediate (B1) level of English before you start. However, if you are planning to use the exam to enter University you will almost certainly need to score 6.5 or higher. This means your English will need to be at a strong Upper-Intermediate (B2) level.

Please note that a significant portion of time during the course will be devoted to developing strategies for the exam. Use the time at home to brush up on your language skills before you join the course.

Here are some tips!

Reading

The best way to improve your reading skills is to read as much as possible, and to read a wide range of different texts. This will also help you in the Writing paper. However, remember that the exam has an academic focus, so we advise you to choose longer, more formal texts, especially if you are aiming for a high band score. Try reading for example,

- articles from topical magazines (the Economist, Time magazine, National Geographic etc)
- newspapers (The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Telegraph etc.)
- books (both fiction and non-fiction)

Try and make sure you read on a variety of topics (the environment, the media, science and technology, etc.). If you have a special interest or hobby, try reading about it in English as much as you can. The more you read the better, so set aside maybe half an hour each day.

Look for texts that you find challenging but not too difficult. Remember, it should be enjoyable! If you cannot understand a text without using a dictionary, look for something a bit easier. Feel free to highlight words that interest you and come back to them later, but be selective; do not look up everything. Try also to be aware of how words are used together to make phrases; this will be really useful in the exam.

Writing

Although you probably won't have time to do much writing in English before your course starts, there are still things that you can do to improve. When you are reading, it can be really useful to think about the choices that the writer has made, particularly in the areas in which your writing will be marked. In the exam your writing will be assessed under four criteria:

- **Task Achievement**, which focuses on how well you have completed the task (have you done what you were asked to do) and on how appropriate the writing is for the task (have you used the right style, register and format)
- **Coherence & Cohesion**, which focuses on the way you put together the piece of writing, in other words, if ideas are developed and clearly linked together.
- **Lexical Resource**, which focuses on the range of vocabulary you display and the extent of your control over it (i.e. are you accurate?)
- **Grammar Range & Accuracy**, which focuses on the range of grammar you display and the extent of your control over it (i.e. are you accurate?)

When you are reading, look out for these features. What is the purpose of the writer and how do you know this? What style is the writer using and how do they create this style? How does the writer organise and link ideas? What words and structures do they use? If you are reading a range of different texts, you can start to get a feel for the different ways that language can be used, and this will all be a big help when you start writing for your course.

Listening

Try to listen to as many different things as possible. There's a huge range of recordings and videos on the internet, such as video clips, podcasts, talks, TV channels, radio stations and also websites specially designed for English-language learners. As with reading, if you have an interest or hobby, try to find video clips or podcasts about it. Just as for reading, don't worry about understanding every word, try to understand the general idea, and then listen again for more detail. Taking notes as you listen can be a useful activity.

Speaking

Speak English as much as possible! Like all language skills, your speaking will improve if you practise more. Speak to different people, in different situations and about different topics. If you don't have much opportunity to speak English to other people it can help to practice on your own. Why not spend a few minutes each evening simply telling yourself about your day? You could try recording yourself, and listening back to see what you could improve. For example, you could summarise an article you have recently read. Have fun with it – try speaking more quickly and then more slowly. Try using new words and structures. How about playing a role? Try speaking like a famous person – how would James Bond say that? What about the Queen? When you are listening, think about pronunciation – how do people use stress and intonation to express meaning? Try listening and then copying what you hear.

Grammar and vocabulary

While you shouldn't try to learn every new word and structure that you read or hear, reading and listening are both great opportunities to improve your grammar and vocabulary.

Be selective – choose words or phrases that you like or ones that you notice lots of times. Using an English / English dictionary, rather than one that translates into your own language is a good idea. Think about how and where a word is used and what other words are used with it.

You can do the same for grammar, noticing how the writer uses structures you are interested in. If you feel that you need to do some extra work, the book *English Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy will give you a good foundation at B1 level and is now available as an App. If you want to go further, *Advanced Grammar in Use* by Martin Hewings is a useful book and is also available as an App.

Think about creating your **own** vocabulary and grammar notebooks. How are you going to record the information and organise it so that it is easy to retrieve? Take time to think about this because, if you do it well, it will be a big help when it is time to revise for the exam.

Get started with some great reading and listening resources:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/>

<https://www.ted.com/talks>

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk>

... and finally,

Get to know the test

It is important to familiarise yourself with the format of the test. This, of course, will be part of what you will learn in class with your teacher. However, it can sometime be useful to already start the course with a basic idea of how the test is structured. You can find samples of IELTS test material and information about the test on the following websites:

<http://www.ielts.org>

<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/ielts>

<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/ielts/>

<https://www.idp.com/global/ielts>

<http://www.ieltsusa.org>