

## Chapter 8 –The Key to IELTS Writing

### A Quick Fix for IELTS Writing

I suspect that many people will open this book and skip the previous chapters in the hope of finding a quick fix for their writing problems here. If this is what you have done, then you are likely to continue to remain stuck at the same band that you are now. So, my first advice is to go back and read Chapters 1 to 6. As with all of my books, this book is good at multi-tasking: reading it will not only teach you about the test, but it will also help you to learn the language you must produce in the test.

### Two key problems in IELTS writing

In my view, as well as causing the most anxiety, the writing test also attracts the widest range of opinions, theories, and ‘advice’. While many people attempt to write their own versions of IELTS reading tests, with the writing test this number is much greater. Such materials often do not reflect the real test questions, and in my view, a great deal of the myths and ‘bad advice’ for IELTS writing stem from examples like this.

A further problem arises from the fact that writing is a very personal skill that requires us to explain what we think and feel. For some people this feels unnatural, and can make them feel awkward and clumsy; others even describe it as a painful process. As a way of combating this, perhaps people develop more coping strategies for writing than for other skills - ways of tackling something they see as a problem task rather than an enjoyable one. As a result, people tend to hold on very tightly to any existing ideas they have about the writing test, which may be why I often find it takes a long time to convince people to try a new approach.

#### Key idea:

You may find it difficult to let go of old ideas and beliefs about the writing test. Try to keep an open mind.

### What is the aim of the IELTS writing test?

As always, to fully understand what you must do in the test, we must begin by looking at what the test is designed to measure. The IELTS writing test aims to find out whether or not you have the writing skills needed for academic study and professional life. Above band 6, we could say that it aims to measure how advanced or developed these skills are. Academic and professional writing involve describing and summarise facts in an objective way, and clearly explaining your own arguments and views about serious topics. These skills are assessed in task 1 and task 2 respectively.

It is important to note again that you are **not** being assessed on your ability to write an academic paper or dissertation. So, it is more accurate to think of the writing tasks as reflecting the general aim of science, which is often described as ‘explaining the world around us’.

### How is the writing test assessed?

Your IELTS examiner will assess your two writing tasks using 4 criteria. Looking at these in detail helps us to understand what the examiner is looking for at each level. Each criterion

has 9 'descriptors', which broadly describe the answers typically found at that band. The criteria that help us to understand **what you must always include in your answer** are called Task Achievement (for task 1) and Task Response (for task 2). Your writing task 2 answer is more important than your writing task 1 answer, in fact it is worth double the marks. To understand how this works, double your writing task 2 score, add it to your writing task 1 score and then divide the total by 3. So, if your task 1 answer is band 7.5 and your task 2 answer is band 6, your score would be 6.5 ( $7.5 + 6 + 6 = 19 \div 3 = 6.5$ ).

### Writing task 1

Task Achievement tells us that, a band 9 candidate will produce an answer that 'fully satisfies all the requirements of the task.' So, we need to examine both the task and the Task Achievement criterion to understand what is required for the test. You can find a copy of these at the end of this book.

If we look at the instructions that accompany **every IELTS writing task 1 question**, we can see that you must '**Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.**' We are also told that you must '**Write at least 150 words.**' Looking at the descriptors for Task Achievement, gives us an even more detailed idea of what you must include in your answer. One word that appears several times is 'overview'.

### What is an overview?

In Task Achievement an 'overview' is mentioned at several key points in the scale. In fact, we can see that a key difference between bands 5, 6, and 7 relates to whether an answer provides an overview (band 6) or not (band 5), and whether the overview is clear, and consists of the main trends (band 7). Clearly, it is important to learn about writing an overview when it comes to preparing for the test. The free Cambridge online dictionary defines a summary as 'a short, clear description that gives the **main** facts.'

**summary**

noun [C] • UK  /'sʌm.ə'ri:/ US  /'sʌm.ə.i/ (FORMAL summation)

★ **B2** a short, clear description that gives the main facts or ideas about something:

While an overview is defined as:

**overview**

noun [C] • UK  /'əʊ.və.vju:/ US  /'oʊ.və.vju:/

★ **C1** a short description of something that provides general information about it, but no details:

Thus, if you need to score band 7 or above, then **your summary must contain a clear**

**overview of the main trends, and which contains no details.** You can see an example of an overview in my sample answer on page 7. And you can find more help with identifying the main ideas and writing your overview, on pages 97-99 of The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS.

**Key idea:**

To score band 7 or above in writing task 1, your summary **must contain a clear overview of the main trends, which contains no details.**

**Using the band descriptors to help you improve**

In previous chapters I have advised seeing your current IELTS score as a useful indicator of the areas where you need to improve. The descriptors for the writing task criteria can give you quite a detailed picture of the gap between your current level and the level you would like to achieve. It is very important for any teacher or student to become familiar with these criteria, especially if you feel that you are not making any progress in your writing. Notice how a detailed look at the descriptors helped us to understand how important an overview is in task 1.

**Why do I only have 20 minutes for writing task 1?**

As with reading, the time limit is an important factor in the test. Given more time, you would be likely to write a longer and more detailed answer. However, writing task 1 is a short task, and should aim to write a brief summary of only the main trends rather than a detailed description. Those who spend too much time on task 1 tend to write too much and include minor details from the information in the question. Remember, the instructions tell you to 'select information' to include. Try to train yourself to use the time limit to your advantage and help you focus on only the most important information.

**What structure should I use for my summary?**

As with any formal writing, you should always begin with an introduction. However, as this is a short piece of writing, a complete paragraph is not necessary; an introductory sentence is sufficient. In some cases, where the visual information consists of several different elements (e.g. a chart and a table), it may be better to introduce these in two separate sentences.

Even though this is a short task, the Task Achievement criterion tells us that, in order to achieve a high band, you must organise your answer into logical paragraphs and make sure that you support your description with accurate data. Thus, following your introduction, you should give a clear overview of the main trends and write one or two paragraphs giving the details that support your overview.

You cannot hope to achieve a clear, accurate, and logically organised summary of the information without spending a few minutes studying the information, and selecting the most relevant details to include, before you begin writing. Try to practise doing this as a quick activity as often as you can, even if you do not have time to write a complete answer to a question.

## Should my overview come at the end or the beginning? Should I write a conclusion?

These are the two most frequent questions I am asked about writing task 1. To answer the first, there is no rule about where to write your overview – it is only important that you make your overview clear. It may help to see this as a sentence that explains the main idea of your summary. It can come after your introduction or at the very end.

When it comes to a conclusion, it is important to be clear what we mean by this. The word conclusion can be used to simply mean ‘the ending’ or final part of something:



Some people like to use their overview as a final point in their summary. Personally, I tend to write my own overview after the introduction and I often advise others to do the same simply to be sure they do not forget to include it.

But in essay writing (such as with task 2) the word conclusion has another meaning; it means summing up your arguments and giving your own personal judgment or conclusion on a topic.



When we are presenting and reporting data, it is not appropriate to write in a personal way, using personal pronouns or giving your personal views. So, you must not include this type of conclusion in writing task 1.

### Key idea:

You must **not** write a personal conclusion or give your own opinions about the information in your writing task 1 answer.

We can sum up what you **must** do in writing task 1 as follows:

- you must write at least 150 words
- you must select the main features in the visual
- you must summarise the main features giving a clear overview of the main trends
- (if relevant) you must make comparisons between the main features

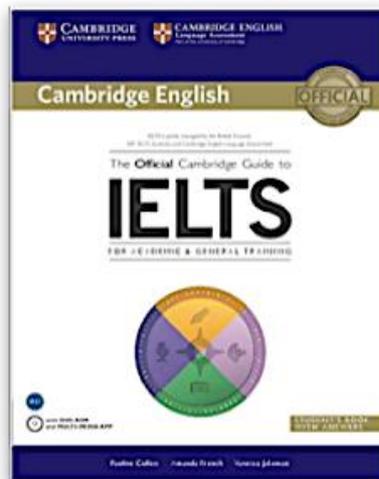
The last point tells us you need to make comparisons **only if** this is relevant to the question. So, if your task is to describe a process, or a flowchart, then a comparison may not be

necessary.

It is very important to note that, if your own list of what you **'must'** do in task 1 includes anything extra, then you are effectively writing your own version of the Task Achievement criterion and so your practice may not be helpful.

<b>IELTS Writing</b>	p91
<b>1 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing a chart, table or graph</b>	p93
1 Understanding graphs, tables and charts	p93
2 More complex charts	p96
3 Improving your Task Achievement score	p97
<b>2 Academic Writing Task 1 – Comparing and contrasting graphs and tables</b>	p100
1 Avoiding repetition	p100
2 Comparing and contrasting data	p102
3 Grammatical Accuracy – describing numbers and figures accurately	p104
<b>3 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing diagrams</b>	p106
1 Understanding a diagram	p106
2 Describing a process – coherence and cohesion	p107
3 Lexical Resource – being accurate	p108
<b>4 Academic Writing Task 1 – Describing maps</b>	p110
1 Describing a map	p110
2 Describing changes in a place	p111
3 Grammatical Accuracy	p112
<b>5 General Training Writing Task 1 – A letter</b>	p113
1 Understanding the task	p113
2 Improving your score	p115
3 Checking and correcting	p117

In The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS, there are 4 units (21 pages) of exercises devoted to each type of writing task 1, including how to write about maps, diagrams and different types of charts. (see pages 91-112). You can find information about GT writing task 1 on pages 113-118)



You can also find more help for writing task 1 in my other books: Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS, Cambridge Vocabulary for IELTS Advanced, and Common Mistakes at IELTS Intermediate.

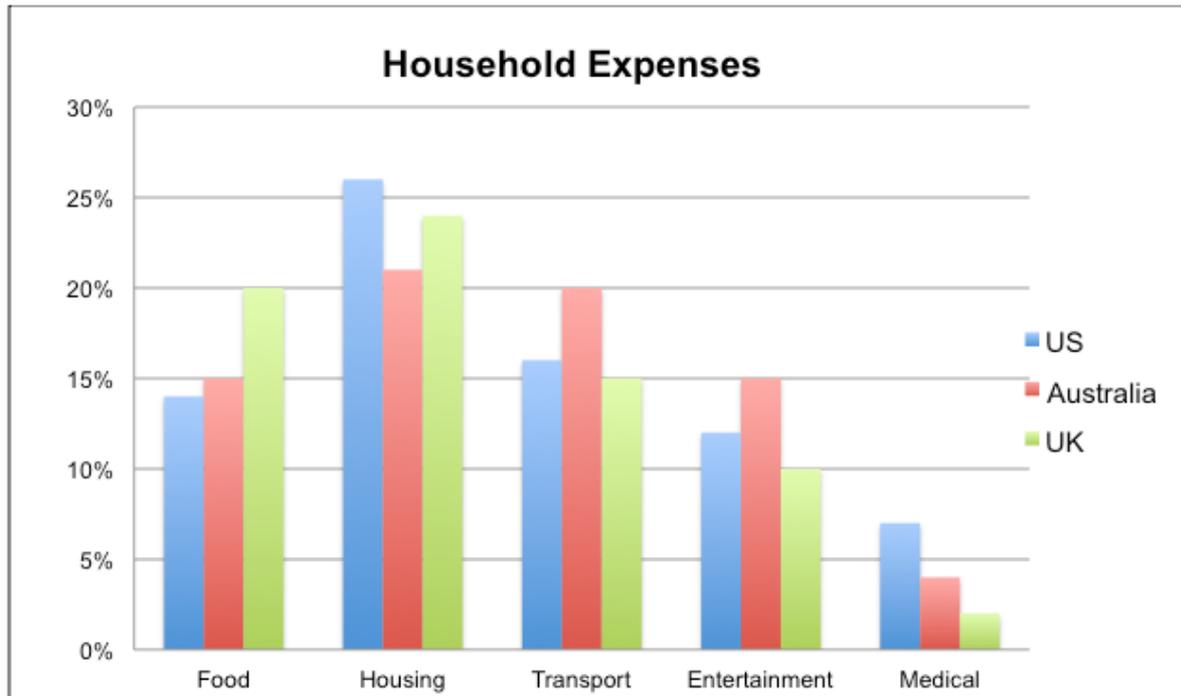
### What language should I use in writing task 1?

For a more detailed explanation of the most common language problems in writing task 1, look back at chapters 4 and 5. A further note I will make here is that people often think of writing task 1 in terms of describing data, a map, or a process etc. However, every writing task has a topic, and it is your ability to report on that topic in an impersonal way that is being assessed. You may need to do this using the language of data and numbers, or by explaining how something is made, or how something has changed over time. But the same problems related to vocabulary, and the need to study a wide variety of general topics apply in both task 1 and task 2. To demonstrate this, look at the following paragraph based on a writing task 1 exercise I set on my Facebook page. Here is the writing task:

The chart below gives information on the percentage of the family budget typically spent on five different household expenses in the US, Australia and the UK.

Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.

Write at least 150 words.



And this extract shows an attempt by one of my followers at writing an introductory sentence and an overview of the information:

The bar chart compares The American's, Australian's and British expenditure on four different household food, housing, transport, entertainment and medical. Overall, it can be clearly seen that the most of money is spend on housing in the three countries, while the least amount of money spend on medical.

The bar chart compares **The American's, Australian's** and British expenditure **on** **In the following four five** different **types of** household **expenses**: food, housing, transport, entertainment and medical. Overall, it can be clearly seen that **the most of** money is **spent** on housing in the three countries, while the least amount of money **\*is spent goes on \*medical expenses.**

*\* Medical is an adjective so needs a noun – the normal collocation is 'medical expenses' but saying 'money is spent on expenses' is again tautology (see above), so we would need to say 'the least amount of money goes on / goes towards medical expenses.'*

As you can see, many of the language problems relate to the vocabulary associated with

money and how to write about this accurately. Below you will find the sample answer I wrote and shared for this same task. You can find many more examples like this on my IELTS Weekly with Pauline Cullen Facebook page by looking through the photos on the page.

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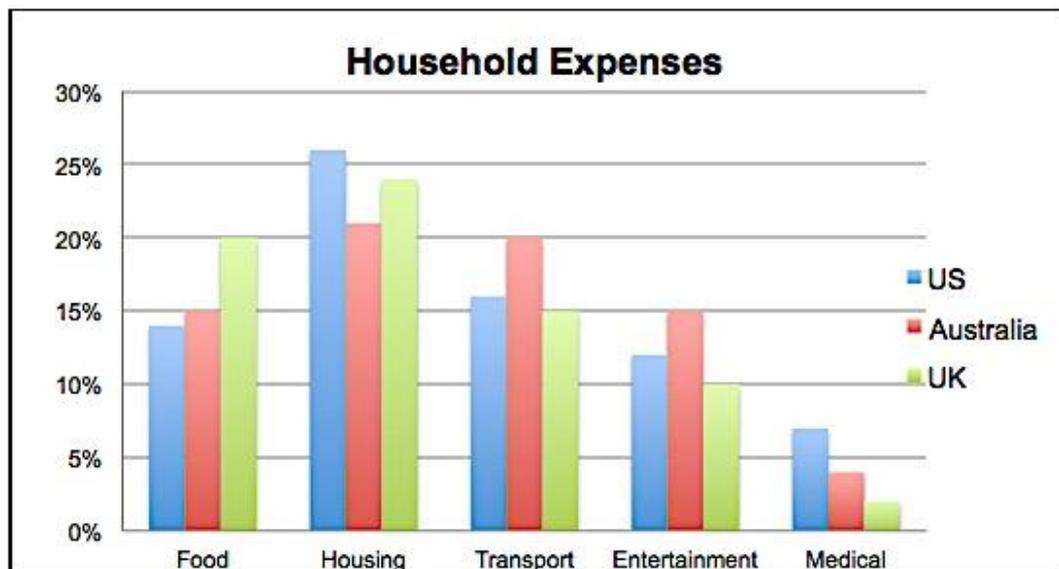
web: [www.ieltsweekly.com/](http://www.ieltsweekly.com/)

twitter: @CullenPauline

*The chart below gives information on the percentage of the family budget typically spent on five different household expenses in the US, Australia and the UK.*

*Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.*

Write at least 150 words.



### Sample Answer

The bar chart compares household expenditure in five different categories, in three countries. Overall, households in these countries spend the greatest proportion of their budget on housing, while medical costs are the lowest expense. However, if we look at the three countries in more detail, there are some noticeable differences in terms of spending.

Firstly, while accommodation is by far the greatest expense in the US, in both the UK and Australia it is only slightly greater than the cost of food. Secondly, transportation in Australia makes up 20% of the total budget, which is only slightly less than their housing costs and is equal to the food costs in the UK. Entertainment is also a more significant expense in Australia compared to the other countries, with households there spending up to 10% of the budget in this sector, a third more than in the UK.

So, while there are generally similarities, the UK spends most on food, the US spends the most on housing and medical costs, while Australian families spend the most on Transport and entertainment.

(178 words)

### Is it ok to repeat the same vocabulary and grammatical structures in task 1?

In task 1, you are given a lot of information in the test question. For your introductory sentence, and throughout your answer, it is important not to simply copy the information or the exact words from the question. Nevertheless, some key words do not have commonly used synonyms. For example, if you are given information about a hospital, then you would need to use that same word in your answer. Similarly, you should not try to replace words like 'pie chart', or 'table', and even the verb 'show,' which often appears in the question because it is the most natural verb to use. Rather than trying to replace **every** word in the question, it is often better to simply try to rephrase it. You can do this by changing some of the words, or the word order, by making changes such as replacing a verb with a noun. Look at the following extract from one of the 8 practice tests at the end of The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS (p.283):

***The maps below show the village of Stokeford in 1930 and in 2010.***

***Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and making comparisons where relevant.***

We can't rewrite this without using some of the same words, but we can make sure that it is different, like this:

*The two maps show how a village called Stokeford changed between 1930 and 2010.*

As I mentioned earlier, a common problem that I see is people trying very hard to avoid using the verb 'show', but this is often the most natural or accurate verb to use. If you look for synonyms for the verb 'show' you will find a long list of verbs, but a list of words cannot give you enough information. On page 10, you will find an image from my Facebook page that shows why many of these alternatives are not appropriate for most writing task 1 questions.

### I am worried that my answer sounds repetitive

As we saw in chapters 5 and 6, your writing will also be assessed based on the language that you use in your answer. If your language is repetitive, both in terms of the vocabulary you use, and the structures you use, then this will lower your score. Authentic IELTS writing tasks have several different elements that force you to use a variety of structures and vocabulary in your summary. If you look at the writing task I shared on the previous page, you will see that you need to compare the way that money is spent in 3 different countries and on 5 different household needs. Describing this involves writing about food, accommodation, transport, entertainment and medical costs.

However, many of the free 'IELTS' test questions you can find online force you to write in a repetitive way, because they are too narrow in their focus and do not contain enough variety. For example, a task that compares the number of books borrowed from 4 different libraries will force you to only write sentences about how many books were borrowed. I don't know many synonyms for 'books' 'libraries' or 'borrowing' that can be used naturally. Thus, your answer to a question like this will force you to practise being repetitive (see chapter 11 for more problems with resources like this). As with all parts of the test, it is important to look for

authentic, well-written IELTS test material when it comes to useful and beneficial test practice.

### **How can I practise for writing task 1?**

As with all practice, you should divide your time between free practice (to help you learn and develop language skills) and timed practice (to be sure you can complete the task effectively within 20 minutes).

When practising for writing task 1, many people focus on describing data and numbers. However, it is also important to focus on tenses and how to accurately describe changes over time. These might be changes in data, or changes in a geographical area or building.

You can also practise identifying the main trends or patterns using the following technique. Find a writing task 1 question and record yourself describing only the main trends in no more than two or three sentences. You must not give any specific details, such as a percentage or number. Ask a friend to listen to the recording and to draw what you have described. If their drawing shows the most important points or patterns, then you have done a good job of identifying the main trends. If you don't have a friend or partner who can do this, listen to the recording yourself a few weeks later to see if you can recreate the main trends using only your description. If you are not happy with the result, then repeat the exercise until you are.

You can use this same idea to help practise the specific language needed to describe visual information. To do that, record yourself again, but this time describe the information in enough detail for your partner (or your future self) to recreate the information almost exactly. If they are confused at any point, then perhaps your language is not precise enough? This can be a good way to see what gaps there are in your language.

You can go on to write out your description in full then edit it and make any changes or corrections. Work on it over several days if necessary, so that you can practise being accurate and precise, rather than only practising writing quickly, and under exam conditions.

## Words often misused in task 1 as synonyms for 'show'

### Show and Tell

**Indicate** = shows that something is true

**Display** = place things in a place where they can easily be seen

**Demonstrate** = show how something is done (e.g. How to use a machine; prove something to be true (e.g. in a study)

**Tell** = give information (n.b. it needs an object – tell someone something)

**Indicate** = show that something is true (used to draw a conclusion about data)

**Reflect** = show an attitude (i.e. Act like a mirror)

**Reveal** = make people aware of something

**Provide** = give; supply

**Present** = give – used formally

**Represent** = stand in the place of (i.e. is a symbol of)

**Signify** = mean

### Example sentences:

The chart **shows** the number and gender of students in both part-time and full-time education in Britain in three time periods.

The chart **tells us** the number and gender of students in both part-time and full-time education in Britain in three time periods.

### How the other words are used:

The books were carefully **displayed** on a table.

The results **demonstrate** the need for further research.

These figures **indicate** that more funding is needed.

The protests in the street **reflected** the growing anger towards the government.

The survey **revealed** that fewer teenagers are planning on going to university than 10 years ago.

The lecturer **provided** us with a copy of his recent research.

In the chart, each line **represents** a different type of transport.

The dramatic increase in unemployment **signified** the start of the recession.