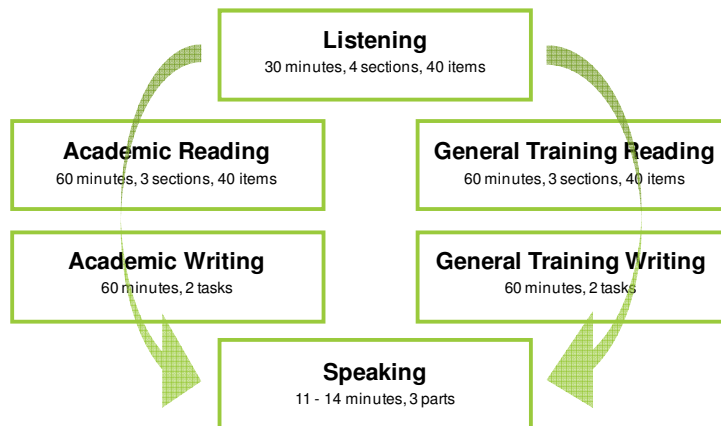


## IELTS – ACADEMIC AND GENERAL TRAINING

There are two versions of the IELTS test, Academic and General Training (GT). The two tests are designed to meet the needs of differing candidate populations and differing stakeholders using the test scores.

### What is the difference between the Academic and General Training tests?

All IELTS candidates take a test to assess proficiency in Listening, in Reading, Writing and Speaking modules. The Listening and Speaking modules are common to both the Academic and General Training test. The Reading and Writing modules are different.



### ***IELTS Academic***

The Academic test is available for those candidates intending to study in English at undergraduate or postgraduate level, or for those seeking professional registration in an English-speaking country (e.g. health professionals).

### ***IELTS General Training***

The General Training test is available for candidates who are going to an English-speaking country to work or train at below undergraduate level, such as vocational training courses or work experience. GT is also used for immigration purposes to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

### ***Key differences relating to Reading***

In relation to **Reading**, the Academic and GT modules are differentiated in terms of

- the choice of texts (topic, genre, length, number, etc);
- the level of difficulty of the 40 test items.

The Academic and GT texts and items are marked according to the same criteria and therefore require the same level of proficiency to be demonstrated in order to achieve a particular band score. General

Training typically contains a higher proportion of items which model everyday language rather than academic text types because of the nature of the reading texts used.

Both Academic and GT reading tests operationalise a common reading construct and cover the same difficulty/ability continuum within an item banking approach. This common reading construct is operationalised through differentiated texts and tasks across the two tests for the reasons explained above. The reading materials in the two modes come from the same item banking pool and the item difficulties overlap across the two ranges of ability. The values in the scale date back to the period between 1989 and 1995 when the IELTS went through its first revision and the original anchoring exercises took place. Targeting of reading item/task difficulty to level of candidate ability is important in achieving response validity. For example, the Academic Reading module has more items designed to identify proficiency at bands 5-8 whereas the GT has more items designed to identify candidate proficiency at bands 3-6. The GT scale has a lower SEM at ranges below Bands 5-6, whereas Academic has a lower SEM at Bands 5-8. This is a reflection of the different demands of Academic and GT discourse for language learners.

Academically oriented discourse is suitable for testing higher levels of proficiency; however it is more demanding for learners below band 5 and this partly explains why academic institutions typically require a minimum proficiency at band 6 and above in the Academic version.

Research exercises are carried out to monitor the levels on both modes (bands 4-6) using vertical anchoring techniques that ensure the scale does not drift overtime. Common anchors are used in these exercises as a measure to determine the relative difficulty.

Khalifa and Weir (forthcoming) are currently writing a volume on assessing second language reading which addresses in detail some of the issues concerned with targeting texts and tasks at different proficiency levels.

### ***Key differences relating to Writing***

For **Writing**, the Academic and GT modules are differentiated in terms of

- the content and nature of the two writing tasks;
- the cognitive demands of the tasks;
- the contextual parameters of the tasks.

In a recent volume on assessing second language writing, Shaw and Weir (2007) discuss in considerable depth the many different parameters involved in writing tests and how these can be manipulated to achieve differentiation across proficiency levels and domains.

### ***Similarities between the Academic and General Training***

Despite the clear differentiation described above between the Academic and General Training modules for reading and writing, there are some common features across the two versions:

- the time allocation
- the number of reading items and writing tasks
- the length of written responses
- the writing assessment criteria.

In addition, both modules report scores on a scale from 1-9, with half-bands. However, given the level of differentiation described above, this clearly does not mean that the scores across Reading or Writing modules undertaken as part of the Academic and GT are interchangeable.

All IELTS candidates take the same **Listening and Speaking** modules. This is due to the fact that a distinction between 'academic' and 'general' literacy has traditionally been seen as most marked in relation to reading and writing skills. IELTS has adopted this approach since the tests were launched.

However, the common Listening module does contain some material and tasks relevant to an academic study context. It is also true that the more socially-oriented language skills which are tested in the common IELTS Listening and Speaking tests are equally important in an academic study or professional context.

Alan Davies' recently published book on the historical development of various tests designed to assess academic English proficiency offers a helpful discussion on the complex issues in this area (Davies 2008), and research studies which have informed the development of the Speaking and Writing modules can be found in Taylor and Falvey (2007). **How are the reporting scales for Academic and GT related?**

Both Academic and GT modules report scores on the same scale from 1-9, with half-bands. When it was introduced in 1989, IELTS followed the example of its predecessor ELTS and reported the overall band score for the whole test on a 9-band scale. Subscores for the

Listening, Speaking, Academic Reading and Academic Writing modules were also reported on a 9-band scale. At that time, however, subscores on General Training Reading and Writing, however, stopped at Band 6.

In 1995 IELTS was revised to ensure that it would remain a valuable and reliable assessment instrument and that it would continue to meet the needs of all stakeholders, both test-takers and score users. Amongst other changes to the GT Reading and Writing modules, the length of the band scale for these was increased from 6 to 9 bands, in line with the scale used to report scores on the other modules. This removed the Band 6 ceiling for the GT Reading and Writing modules, thus allowing higher-scoring candidates to be credited rather than penalised. It also allowed for a more balanced contribution of the GT Reading and Writing band scores to the overall band score, which is computed and reported from the four band scores for reading, writing, listening and speaking.

This means that both test versions - Academic and GT - are now able to reflect the full range of ability from non-user to expert user on a reporting scale of 0-9 (0 for those who did not attempt the test, 9 for the most proficient users).

Once again, however, it is important to recognise that neither the individual Reading and Writing module scores nor the overall IELTS band score are interchangeable for the Academic and GT variants given the different content and task demands they make in the reading and writing components (see above).

### **How do you know if a candidate took the Academic or GT version?**

The IELTS Test Report Form (TRF) shows test score users whether the candidate took the Academic or General Training modules for Reading and Writing. The online TRF Verification service also makes this clear.

**USEFUL REFERENCES****Studies in Language Testing (SiLT):**

Davies, A (2008) *Assessing Academic English: Testing English proficiency 1950-1989 - the IELTS solution*. Cambridge: UCLES/Cambridge University Press.

Khalifa, H and Weir, C J (forthcoming) *Examining Reading: Research and practice in assessing second language reading*. Cambridge: UCLES/Cambridge University Press.

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Issue 1: January 2008

Authors: Stuart Shaw and Peter Falvey

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