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Tips for IELTS Reading

Academic/General Training Module by Adam Smith

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NOTE: THE ANSWER KEY IS PROVIDED IN A SEPARATE FILE FOR EASIER ACCESS.

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The **instagram** page contains lessons that show how to use the ideas from this book. You can keep in touch with the author there and ask your questions.

The IELTS Reading Test

What's in the Academic Reading test?

The IELTS academic reading test consists of three reading texts with a total of 2,200 to 2,750 words and 40 questions with a variety of task types. The texts come from magazines, journals, books and newspapers and have been written for a non-specialist audience. At least one text contains detailed logical argument. The texts may include diagrams, graphs or illustrations.

There is 1 mark for each correct answer. There is no negative mark. You have 60 minutes to answer 40 questions including time to copy your answers onto the answer sheet.

While answering, Candidates are required to transfer their answers to an answer sheet. Candidates must transfer their answers during the time allowed for the test. No extra time is allowed for transfer. Care should be taken when writing answers on the answer sheet as poor spelling and grammar are penalised.

Here are some of the problems students have with IELTS Reading:

- Time is the biggest problem. Many students don't manage to finish the test.
- The texts are long and contain some difficult vocabulary.
- Students find "paragraph headings" questions difficult.
- Students find "true/ false/ not given" questions difficult.

Tip: IELTS Reading is really a test of your vocabulary. If your knowledge of English words and phrases is good, you will do well.

Note: There are techniques that can help you to work faster and cope with the difficult question types. However, the best way to improve your IELTS Reading score is by doing a lot of reading and vocabulary work.

Approaching the IELTS Reading test

Many teachers and books talk about skimming and scanning as key techniques for IELTS reading. But, here we refer to the words 'skimming' and 'scanning' as 'finding' in my lessons as they may seem confusing to students. In fact, many students get the wrong answers because they 'skim' too quickly and miss the words that they are looking for. So, forget 'skimming' and 'scanning' and focus on 'finding' and intensive reading as referred to 'understanding' here from now on.

1. **Finding** that is reading the text to find words from the question.
2. **Understanding** that is when you have found some key words from the question, read that part of the text carefully in order to understand it and get the right answer.

In fact, IELTS reading is really a test of 2 things:

1. Can you **find** the part of the text that contains the answer?
2. Do you **understand** that part of the text?

Finding: Step I (Skimming)

You need to be able to find the right part of the text quickly. You should practice finding a lot and then decide which words in the question you need to search for. Then, you should try to locate those words (or words with the same or similar meaning) in the text.

While finding words, don't try to understand every word. Jump from paragraph to paragraph, finding the main point in each paragraph before moving on to the next paragraph, like jumping across stepping-stones in a river. The main point of each paragraph is often, though certainly not always, the first sentence in each paragraph. The sentence with the main point is called the 'topic sentence' or 'main idea'.

When you are looking at sentences to understand the main points, try to find the keywords in the sentence, namely the subject, the verb and the object of the main clause. Try to ignore the other words, particularly the relative clauses and adverbial clauses. Say, for example, you are skimming through the following sentence in a passage:

“Whale oil, rendered from the blubber, was used originally for lamp fuel and later as a principal ingredient of soaps, margarine, paint oils and lubricants.”

While finding words or the main idea, it is enough to understand that 'this oil' was used for something. Now, let's find the main idea in this sentence:

“Tea plants are grown on tea plantations, called gardens or estates, in areas that have a great amount of rainfall and rich loamy soil.”

It is enough to understand that tea plants are grown on/in somewhere/somehow. If you later find a question that relates to this sentence, you can come back and read it more intensively.

Mapping: Pin Dropping

Every passage you see in the IELTS academic reading test may seem completely strange to you. It is easy to get lost inside all the words you face in a passage. What you need is a map which will help you orientate. Every paragraph in a passage has its own main idea, which is different from all other paragraphs. On the margins near each paragraph, write briefly what its main idea is. You can also underline the main idea or the words in the paragraph which explain its main idea. This process is called mapping or pin dropping. You can create a map while **finding**.

You can now practice finding main ideas and mapping. Make sure you find the main ideas in the passage below as quickly as possible within the time limit.

Exercise 1: Finding main ideas

Read the following passage as quickly as possible and underline the sentence that gives the main idea (the topic sentence) of each paragraph. **Time limit: 1 minute**

Libraries

Libraries are quite difficult to define. If you ask most people to define a library, they will probably say that it is a building with a lot of books. Strictly speaking, a library does not have to be a building: it can be a room, or indeed any area where material is kept. Equally, a library is not merely a collection of books: there are journals, newspapers, CD-ROMs, microfilm, audio-visual materials and so on. So, to be more accurate we can say that a library is a collection of information and material.

Libraries are organized in three ways. Most libraries will use one or more of the three main classification systems that have been developed to detail the material in the collection. They referred to as the Dewey Decimal System, the Universal Decimal Classification and the Library of Congress System.

Nowadays libraries are under threat for a number of reasons. The primary challenge, as never before, is funding. Hardware and personnel costs increase each time technology expands. Equally there are challenges in the skills needed by users and resource professionals.

It is difficult to predict the future of libraries. Our basic concept of libraries will almost certainly, it would appear, change dramatically in that we will not think of them (and access them) as physical places, which is the prevailing concept at the moment. But beyond that, it is difficult to predict both usage patterns and preferred systems of data recording and retrieval.

What are keywords?

Keywords are the words which carry information such as nouns and verbs in sentences. In IELTS reading it is very important to be able to find and understand similar or synonymous words and phrases in passages. Underline the keywords in the questions and the passage so that you can refer to them more easily.

While finding and looking for keywords, for example, draw a circle around Proper Nouns (words which start with a Capital letter) and numerical values such as dates, percentages and number strings. By doing this, the finding process up will speed up especially if you need to refer to the same part of the passage to answer another question relating to that part again.

Finding: Step II (Scanning)

When you have finished finding the main ideas in the passage, look at the questions quickly. You need to know how many questions and what question types there are, and you should approximately know what the questions are about.

When you have found the keywords in the questions, you need to find synonymous or similar words and phrases to answer each question by the help of your map. Read the sentences before and after the keywords that you have found. Then it becomes a test of your vocabulary knowledge: if you don't understand the words that you are reading, it will be difficult to get the right answer. However, remember that sometimes you don't need to understand the meaning of every new word! It is often helpful to guess the meanings of new words by paying attention to the words that come before and after the keywords.

When you look at each sentence in the passage, you need to understand only enough to answer the question: ***“Is this what I am looking for?”*** So, you only need to understand the topic of each sentence.

Let's say you are doing the IELTS test and you are trying to answer a question about 'shoes'. You look for keywords in the passage to find the information that will give you the answer. You look at each sentence quickly. For example, you see this sentence:

“Like perfumes, cosmetics were originally used as an adjunct to religious ritual, the ceremonial aspect gradually being lost as both men and women adorned themselves with cosmetics.”

You locate the subject of the sentence 'cosmetics' and it is enough. It is not necessary to read all the details. You now know that this sentence probably does not contain the information you need. So, you should quickly move on to the next sentence. This is

finding. You can now further practice the finding technique. Make sure you answer the questions below as quickly as possible within the time limit.

Exercise 2: Finding Keywords

Now that you have a map of the passage about libraries, read again as quickly as possible. Which sentence contains the information you need to answer the questions below? Write the number of the sentence from the passage to each question.

Time limit: 2 minutes

Libraries

(1) Libraries are quite difficult to define. **(2)** If you ask most people to define a library, they will probably say that it is a building with a lot of books. **(3)** Strictly speaking, a library does not have to be a building: it can be a room, or indeed any area where material is kept. **(4)** Equally, a library is not merely a collection of books: there are journals, newspapers, CD-ROMs, microfilm, audio-visual materials and so on. **(5)** So, to be more accurate we can say that a library is a collection of information and material.

(6) Libraries are organized in three ways. **(7)** Most libraries will use one or more of the three main classification systems that have been developed to detail the material in the collection. **(8)** They referred to as the Dewey Decimal System, the Universal Decimal Classification and the Library of Congress System.

(9) Nowadays libraries are under threat for a number of reasons. **(10)** The primary challenge, as never before, is funding. **(11)** Hardware and personnel costs increase each time technology expands. **(12)** Equally there are challenges in the skills needed by users and resource professionals.

(13) It is difficult to predict the future of libraries. **(14)** Our basic concept of libraries will almost certainly, it would appear, change dramatically in that we will not think of them (and access them) as physical places, which is the prevailing concept at the moment. **(15)** But beyond that, it is difficult to predict both usage patterns and preferred systems of data recording and retrieval.

Questions:

1. What kinds of materials does a library collect? ...
2. What is the most accurate way to define 'library'? ...
3. What is the main problem that libraries are facing? ...
4. What aspect of libraries is sure to change? ...

Understanding (Intensive reading)

Intensive reading or, as referred to here, 'understanding' is reading one section of the passage carefully to understand what is needed to answer the question.

After you have found and located your information, you must read those sentences intensively. In this step, it might be necessary to understand every word. Otherwise, you might have difficulties finding the right answer. You can now practice understanding (reading intensively). Make sure you answer the questions below as quickly as possible within the time limit.

Exercise 3: Understanding

Time limit: 2 minutes

First, find the keywords in the questions below. Then, locate the sentences in the passage about libraries on page ... which contain the keywords of the questions. Then, read the necessary parts of the passage and answer the following questions as quickly as possible using **NO MORE THAN FOUR WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER**.

1. What is ONE type of material that libraries collect, beside books? ...
2. How many types of classification systems are there? ...
3. What kinds of costs increase when technologies expand? ...
4. How do most people conceptualise libraries? ...

Now further practice the reading strategies and techniques which you have learned so far in the following exercises. Be careful to follow the suggested time limits.

Exercise 4: Finding and understanding

Read the following passage and answer the questions below. Use **NO MORE THAN FOUR WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** in each answer. Make sure to do the task within the time limit.

Time limit: 3 minutes

Esperanto

Esperanto is an artificial language designed to serve internationally as an auxiliary means of communication among speakers of different languages. Esperanto, the creation of Ludwig Zamenhof, a Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist, was first presented in 1887. An international movement to promote its use has continued to flourish and has members in more than 80 countries.

Esperanto is used internationally across language boundaries by about one million people, particularly in specialized fields. It is used in personal contacts, on radio broadcasts, and in a number of publications as well as in translations of both modern works and classics. Its popularity has spread from Europe – both East and West – to such countries as Brazil and Japan. It is in China, however, that Esperanto has had its greatest impact. It is taught in universities and used in many translations (often in scientific or technological works). *El Popola Cinio*, a monthly magazine in Esperanto from the people's Republic of China, is read worldwide. Radio Beijing's Esperanto program is the most popular program in Esperanto in the world.

Esperanto's vocabulary is drawn primarily from Latin, the Romance languages, English and German. Spelling is completely regular. A simple and consistent set of endings indicates grammatical functions of words. Thus, for example, every noun ends in *-o*, every adjective in *-a*, and the initiative of every verb in *-i*.

Questions:

1. Who created Esperanto? ...
2. When was Esperanto created? ...
3. How many people use Esperanto? ...
4. Name TWO countries where Esperanto is used. ...
5. In which country is Esperanto taught at universities? ...
6. Does Esperanto vocabulary come from eastern or western languages? ...
7. What kinds of words end in *-a* in Esperanto? ...

Exercise 5: Finding and understanding

Read the following passage and then choose the best answer. Circle **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**.

Time limit: 3 minutes

Migrant Labour

Migrant workers, those workers who move repeatedly in search of economic opportunity, typically perform society's temporary jobs. The migrant's low-paid work includes 'stooped labour' like cultivating crops, menial services such as cleaning public rest rooms, 'sweatshops' work such as making apparel, and assembly-line factory work like putting together computer parts. Migrant workers are often pivotal for economic growth.

Until the twentieth century, most migrant labour was internal. For example, generations of former slaves from the southern parts of the United States annually followed the crops north. Recently, however, most migrant labour in Europe and America has been external – that is, workers from other countries.

Migrant workers rarely understand the customs and language of their host societies and are frequently ill-housed, malnourished, underpaid, and denied basic legal rights. Their children fall behind in school and are then apt to be put to work in violation of child labour laws. Poor sanitation, unsafe drinking water and overcrowded living conditions make migrant labourers especially susceptible to contagious diseases. In the 1980s and 1990s, their tuberculosis and hepatitis rates far exceeded national norms. AIDS also spread rapidly. In short, the lives of migrant workers tend to be less comfortable and shorter than those of non-migrants.

International economics determines where external migrants go. In the 1940s, when railroad workers and farmhands went off to fight in World War II, the United States reached an agreement with Mexico to provide millions of temporary Mexican migrants. In the postwar period, 'guest workers' from southern Europe, Turkey and North Africa helped rebuild north-western Europe. In the 1970s and 1980s, the oil-rich monarchs of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait flew Asians in to build their new cities.

Questions:

1. Cultivating crops is an example of ...
A economic growth.
B stooped labour.

- C** a typical job.
D factory work.
2. Migrant workers usually speak the language of their host society ...
A very fluently.
B very poorly.
C as well as their first language.
D quite well.
3. The flow of migrant workers generally relates to ...
A war.
B labour laws.
C legal rights.
D economic needs.

Do reading tests without a time limit

As said before, IELTS reading is a vocabulary test. When studying, make sure you learn some new vocabulary and collocation (words that usually come together) from each practice test that you do. Use a dictionary, and don't worry about the time.

Almost all academic reading tests contain difficult but useful words like "corpus" (a collection of written or spoken texts) and "lexicographical" (related to writing dictionaries). Here are some more words from academic texts that you can look up in a dictionary:

- incorporate (e.g. they are incorporating spoken English into their data)
- verbal / non-verbal (e.g. a verbal warning, non-verbal communication)
- portrayal (e.g. the portrayal of feelings)
- convey (e.g. to convey feelings, convey a message)
- an initiative (e.g. a Government initiative)

Exercise 6: Finding and understanding

Are the statements below True, False or Not Given according to the passage? Circle T, F or NG.

Time limit: 3 minutes

Rice

Since ancient times, rice has been the most commonly used food grain for the majority of people in the world. A member of the grass family Graminae, rice (*Oryza sativa*) can be grown successfully under climatic conditions ranging from tropical to temperate. Properly cultivated, rice produces higher yields than any other grain with the exception of corn, and although the total area planted in rice is far smaller than that devoted to wheat (the world total is about one-third less), the rice crop feeds a far greater proportion of the world's population.

In contrast to wheat and corn, only a small percentage of the total rice crop enters international trade. Not quite 40% of the total worldwide becomes an export commodity, although the United States exports approximately 45% of its production. Limited international trade in rice has prevented the establishment of large, active trading centres like those for marketing cereal grains, and formulation of official grain standards for rice has been slow to develop.

During the past quarter of a century, rice-breeding programs have been initiated in several countries. Resistance to diseases and insects was the major objective of the earlier research, but hybrid programs have dominated recently. High-yielding dwarf plants that can withstand deep water and that respond to fertilizers have been developed. Improved grain quality and higher protein levels have been added objectives of new programs designed to improve nutrition.

Questions:

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|----|
| 1. Rice has been eaten since ancient times. | T | F | NG |
| 2. Rice is a member of the grass family. | T | F | NG |
| 3. Rice can only be grown in tropical climates. | T | F | NG |
| 4. Some people eat rice three times a day. | T | F | NG |
| 5. Rice feeds more people than wheat. | T | F | NG |
| 6. Most rice is traded internationally. | T | F | NG |
| 7. Thailand is a major exporter of rice. | T | F | NG |
| 8. Rice breeding programs are concentrated in one country. | T | F | NG |

IELTS Reading is a vocabulary test

You can't get a high score in the IELTS reading test without having a profound knowledge of understanding paraphrased or reworded forms, that is conveying the same message in other words by changing the words or grammatical structures in a sentences. Look at the examples below.

By Words: I need some water. = I am thirsty.

By Structures: John is taller than Pat. = Pat is not as tall as John (is).

Here are some more examples of similar words and phrases that you may find in academic reading passages.

- remained = stayed
- took a long time = slow
- of varying (size, price etc) = of different (size, price)
- virtually any = almost any
- non-stop = continuous
- unblemished = perfect, without a mark or scratch
- molten (glass or metal) = in liquid form due to heat
- instant commercial success = made a profit straight away
- flaws = faults, mistakes, weaknesses
- detecting = locating, finding, discovering

Tip: Write the new words or phrases that you read or hear and their synonymous equivalence in a notebook - that's the best way to improve your vocabulary knowledge step by step. Don't forget that vocabulary learning is a gradual and time taking process.

Read to improve your vocabulary

While you are looking for keywords it is not necessary to understand every word in the passage. However, you must know over 50% of the words if you want to understand the main points of the passage. It is very important to have a program of vocabulary development to learn 5 to 10 new words a day. One good useful way to do this is by reading articles that you find interesting in newspapers, magazines, encyclopedias and textbooks. The best way to improve your vocabulary knowledge is to read things that interest you. Collect vocabulary (words, collocations, phrases) in a notebook. For every new word you learn, find a good example sentence which includes the new word in it. Expanding your vocabulary is important not only for your reading, but also for your writing, speaking and listening.

Even a short article about football can contain useful expressions:

The organisers of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa are hoping it will stimulate the nation's economy and leave a lasting physical and social legacy. Danny Jordaan, the man who led the bid to secure the event, believes hosting the World Cup could be worth as much as \$6 billion to South Africa, while also boosting the construction, telecommunications and tourist industries.

South Africa predicts at least 400,000 people will visit the country for the tournament, the first World Cup ever to be held in Africa. Some 160,000 jobs are expected to be created from hosting the event, according to the national football bid committee. Furthermore, it is estimated that for each visitor to the World Cup, another 150 will be indirectly influenced in their perceptions about the host country, through word-of-mouth by the fans when they return home, or as a result of global television coverage of the event.

Here are some "verb + noun" collocations from the text:

- stimulate the economy
- leave a legacy
- host/hold an event
- boost industries
- create jobs
- influence people's perceptions

Learning useful words

There are different ways of learning new words. Keep trying them to decide which approaches are the most useful for you. Write the words down. Write the words again and again. Say the new words aloud many times. Create your own vocabulary notebook. But, always write a simple example sentence to help you remember the meaning of new words. For example, if you want to remember the word 'various', you could write an easy sentence to illustrate the meaning of the word, for instance: ***"You can cook eggs in various ways."***

Tip: Only look up those words you think might be very useful. Don't try to learn every new word.

The Keyword Technique

By 'keywords' I mean words in the text that have a similar meaning to words in the questions. It is not possible or realistic to know the precise meaning of every word you see. Sometimes it is necessary to accept an approximate meaning of words.

The table below shows the keywords that helped my students to find the answers to the test on page 122 of Cambridge IELTS 6.

Keywords in Questions

- conflicting theories
- widespread destruction of life
- existed all over the world
- clear proof
- hunted from the air
- concrete evidence
- have been discovered

Similar Words in the Text

- a matter for disagreement
- wiped out three quarters of species
- colonised all continents
- establishing definitely
- catching fish over open water
- proof of this
- are known today

Note: The table above comes from a General Training test, but the technique is the same for both general and academic tests.

Look for Keywords

Imagine the question asks about "longer days". If you read the text and find "increasing day lengths", you know you have found the answer.

In other words, the technique for finding answers in the IELTS Reading test is to look for keywords (similar words in the questions and in the text).

Exercise 7: Match the keywords (information points) on the left with the similar words or phrases (words with the same meaning) on the right.

Keywords in Questions

1. there is no limit ...
2. depend on insects ...
3. the availability of food ...
4. temperatures are unpredictable
...
5. longer days ...
6. there is plenty of scientific
evidence ...
7. types of birds ...
8. the trigger for ...
9. scientists have yet to determine
...

Similar Words in the Text

- a. require fertilisation by insects
- b. increasing day lengths
- c. adequate food resources
- d. never reach a maximum
- e. the cue for
- f. species of birds
- g. temperatures fluctuate greatly
- h. the amount of experimental
evidence is considerable
- i. it is not yet known

Note: Try finding the keywords in the table above if you have a copy of the book Cambridge IELTS 5, page 94, to see whether they help you to get the right answer more easily.

Finding Similar Words or Phrases

A useful skill for IELTS Reading is to be able to match words in the questions with words in the text.

Exercise 8: Find words in the following text that are similar to the words in the list below.

What is an 'elevator pitch'?

An “elevator pitch” is an overview of a product, service, person, group, organisation or project, and is often part of a fund-raising, marketing, brand or public relations program. The name "elevator pitch" reflects the idea that it should be possible to deliver a short but effective presentation in the time span of an elevator ride from the ground floor to the directors’ boardroom on the top floor of a building.

An elevator pitch is often used by an entrepreneur pitching an idea to an investor to receive funding. Venture capitalists often ask entrepreneurs to give an elevator pitch in order to quickly weed out bad ideas and weak teams. Other uses include job interviewing, dating and professional services. Proposals for books, screenplays, blogs and other forms of publishing are often delivered via an elevator pitch, which may be presented in oral, written or video formats. (Text adapted from Wikipedia)

1. a summary
2. succinct
3. gain financial backing
4. eliminate
5. spoken

Exercise 9: IELTS Reading is basically a test of your vocabulary knowledge. You need to be able to find words in the text that are similar to words in the questions.

Part A. Read the following text about single-sex education (educating boys and girls separately).

You might have thought that boys brought up in a single-sex environment would find relationships with girls difficult to handle. Now research due to be published tomorrow proves it. It shows that boys taught in single-sex schools are more likely to be divorced or separated from their partner than those who attended a mixed school by their early 40s.