IELTS study plan, to take you from day one, to test day...
IELTS study plan...how to prepare yourself for the IELTS step by step, from day one to test day.

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**Introduction.**

Welcome to my new e-book, I decided to write this after several students asked me if I could create an IELTS study plan for them, to take them through the various stages of preparation in the weeks and months before the test. I wanted to put as many resources and links into this document as possible, so this is more or less everything I recommend.

First, a disclaimer, I want to make this clear from the start, although it should be obvious, we need to be realistic here, if you only have a week or so before your test then you will be very lucky (miraculous more like) to get the score you need. For most people the optimal time is three months (more is better obviously) as you not only need to have a good level of English (upper-intermediate for most people looking for 6.5-7.5) but you also need to understand everything about the IELTS, how it works, how it is assessed, the difference between the question types, the common topics, and the techniques and strategies you need to answer them. What I will outline here is a general strategy for the four sections and also more specific strategies and links to various resources which will help you in your preparation.
General strategy

Step 1
So, if you haven’t taken the test before I suggest that the first thing is to have someone who knows what they are doing to give you a thorough assessment and see what your current level/score is, and what specific areas need to be improved. Even if you have taken the test before, I still recommend you have a consultation with a professional IELTS teacher, they can look at your writing and speak to you and get some idea of why you didn’t get the score you want, and offer advice as to what needs to improve.

If you want to test your listening and reading yourself, then try these links below…

http://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/prepare-your-test/free-ielts-practice-tests/listening-practice-test-1

As for writing and speaking, you can contact me (kevin@prepareielts.com) and I will send you some writing tasks (if needed) and you can mail them back and I will assess them, and we can arrange a Skype session where I will ask you a complete speaking test and assess you accordingly.

Step 2
Then, you need to have a thorough understanding of what the IELTS is, how it works, how it is assessed, etc. Two overviews are available from IELTS.org and the British Council that will explain more about this and the different question types.

https://ielts.britishcouncil.org/FAQ.aspx

You will also need to get a sense of what the current and past topics and questions are, I recommend these sites below

http://www.ielts-blog.com/category/recent-ielts-exams/
http://ielts-yasi.englishlab.net/PAST_PART_ONE_TOPIC_INDEX.htm
You will also need to know how exactly your scores are calculated

Now you need to understand what the criteria are for writing and speaking, you can find the public rubrics for download below along with a couple of videos which explain what they mean in practice.

Step 3

Next step, set yourself a time frame for your study. One reason for this is that you need to be (again, the key word) realistic, if your current level after assessment is 5.5 and you want 7.0, and you are taking the test in a week, it’s not happening, sorry. One thing I get every week is students with unrealistic expectations, they are taking the test in a matter of days (seriously!) or weeks and they have no study plan, no idea what to do, and they expect me to wave my magic IELTS wand and make them get band 7.0 or whatever. If only I could, I would be a rich man, however….

So, you need to consider this, as a general rule, for most people to increase their overall band score by 0.5 it can take around 200 hours of guided study and practice. Obviously, if you are just wanting to improve one skill then it may well take less time, depending on the individual and circumstances. However, in general as I said, you are looking at around 200 hours per half a band score. This is why if they have not taken IELTS before I always give my students a thorough assessment, I calculate their current level, then I ask them when is their test, what score do they need, what time they have available for study, and what preparations they currently do, etc. The reason for all these questions is so I can make a calculation and see if what they want is realistic. If it is, then great, I make them a study plan and off they go, if not, I do the best I can but I know that they in all probability will not succeed.
The best thing to do is to discuss this with me and we will see what your weak points are and set an achievable and practical time frame for you to improve them. As I wrote above, the general guidelines are just that, “guidelines”, and if you are only wanting to improve one or two skills then the time frame may be less.

**Step four**

Create a study plan, or ask me for advice and we will create one together.

As with the IELTS, and with all things, the “secret” is to have regular and consistent practice, this is true in all activities, whether learning a language, learning to play an instrument, or whatever, the people who are successful are those who put in the hours, it really is that simple! What that means for your purpose is to spend some time everyday, doing something in English. You can try to make the most of your day, maybe do some listening on your morning commute to work, some reading at lunchtime, and in the evenings, talk to a language partner on Skype, or do some writing practice to send to me. See the sample table below for some ideas, remember you need to tailor this to meet your needs and your time.

**Sample weeks study plan**

This is just an idea as to how it might look in general, as you see, you need to cover as much ground as possible, the general strategy of reading and listening, and the more focused strategy of getting to know the difference between the question types and the techniques you need to answer them. Also, you need some time for lessons and having your writing corrected, and general speaking practice with a study/language exchange partner, and the more skill specific sessions with your teacher.

This plan can be tailored according to your particular needs and time availability.
| Time   | Monday                                                                 | Tuesday                                                                 | Wednesday                                                                 | Thursday                                                                 | Friday                                                                 | Saturday                                                                 | Sunday                                                                 |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Morning| 30 mins listening to podcasts while commuting to work...               | Reading novel/any books on way to work...                               | 30 mins listening to podcasts while commuting to work...                 | Reading online newspaper articles about common IELTS topics              | 30 mins listening to audiobooks while commuting to work...            | Exam practice for listening, using online test websites               |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        |                                                                          |
| Lunchtime| Reading articles on internet about IELTS topics, noting new vocabulary, etc | Researching essay topics and thinking of ideas, topic specific language, etc | General reading, online news, fashion blogs, anything you are interested in | Reading articles on internet about IELTS topics, noting new vocabulary, etc | Researching essay topics and thinking of ideas, topic specific language, etc | Exam practice for reading, using online test websites               |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        | Revision of previous weeks work, consolidation, reviewing and revisiting vocabulary, etc |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        |                                                                          |
| Afternoon| Listening practice while heading home from work, listening to audiobooks, podcasts, etc | Listening practice while heading home from work, listening to audiobooks, podcasts, etc | Listening practice while heading home from work, listening to audiobooks, podcasts, etc | Listening practice while heading home from work, listening to audiobooks, podcasts, etc | Listening practice while heading home from work, listening to audiobooks, podcasts, etc | Online lessons with teacher focusing on writing skills               |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        | Speaking practice with study partner, discussing IELTS topics, developing general fluency, etc |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        |                                                                          |
| Evenings| Becoming familiar with different question types for listening section, | Speaking practice with study partner, discussing IELTS topics          | Becoming familiar with different question types for reading section,     | Online lessons with teacher focusing on speaking skills                  | Practising writing timed task 1 and 2 questions                      |                                                                          |
|        |                                                                        |                                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                          |                                                                        |                                                                          |
**Skill specific strategy: Listening**

Listening…to be fitted in everyday, when you have time. General listening, and focused exam listening.

Two part strategy, the first is to “tune” your ears into the sounds of English, by listening to podcasts, internet radio, etc...this can be done while you are commuting to work, or whenever you have some time to spare. Some of the podcasts allow you to download a transcript, which is very useful, as you can follow it and annotate it if you hear some new vocab, etc. What I would suggest is that you don’t simply listen to the audio passively, as background noise, you really need to concentrate on it to get the best out of this kind of practice. So, for some good links to pods, books, etc see below.

http://tunein.com/

http://www.internet-radio.com/

http://teacherluke.co.uk/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/6-minute-english

http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/the-english-we-speak

http://www.openculture.com/freeaudiobooks

**And for IELTS specific material.**

http://ielts.allearsenglish.com/episodes/

http://www.ieltspodcast.com/

The second part of the listening strategy is to become familiar with the different question types and the techniques for answering them, as well as the overall strategy for the four sections in the listening section. For that, I recommend these websites below.

**For lessons about the different question types**

http://ieltsadvantage.com/listening/

http://ieltsliz.com/ielts-listening/
Once you have a basic grasp of the techniques for listening, you have to put this knowledge into practice, try these sites for online tests below.

http://ieltsmaterial.com/listening/

http://ieltonlinetests.com/

So, in sum, you need to be doing some “active” listening everyday, as well as reading through the difference between the question types, and trying out your technique on the online tests. How you fit this in is up to you, but as you will see in the sample weekly plan, it could be by making the most of your travel time to work and back, as lots of my students do.
Skill specific strategy: reading

Reading...to be fitted in every day.

The main reason reading is so vital is several fold, the obvious reason is to develop your vocabulary. As we know the criteria for both writing and speaking calls for you to display a knowledge of topic specific language, if you don’t use such language then you won’t get a very high score as far as Lexical Resource is concerned. Another reason is ideas, a lot of students tell me that they have trouble in thinking of ideas for the essay task, especially if it is an unfamiliar topic. This goes for speaking also, although the IELTS questions are supposed to be on topics which the average educated person could speak about. One point regarding this I want to mention is that some of the topics are very “Western-centric”, one of the essay qs asks about “What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a year off between high school and university”, a gap year in other words. Well, for many parts of the world this is a nonsense idea, some of my students from Asia had no idea what this question referred to.

So, to avoid this, as with all sections of the IELTS, a complete and thorough knowledge of possible topics and question types will serve you well.

First step then, as with the listening plan, you need to read more. What a surprise. Well, not really, what you can do is to read widely if you like, books, blogs, whatever, you are spoiled for choice online these days, or to focus on the kind of topics you might expect in the test, education, crime, technology, etc. A good resource for reading material is the Guardian newspaper from the UK, the articles are about the same length as the reading in the academic IELTS and the authors are generally very well educated, also the Guardian has different sections, travel, science, education, for example, you can browse through for some suitable articles. The Economist is very similar in this regard, both available online at the links below. I have written more about reading, good online tools, and about developing vocabulary in my other book, how to record it, etc, which if you don’t have it, you can download here.

https://prepareielts.com/2016/08/15/how-to-create-your-own-english-learning-environment-online/

https://www.theguardian.com/uk

http://www.economist.com/
Second stage, again, as with the listening plan, you need to know what the different reading questions are (matching headings, true/false/not given, etc) and know the techniques for all of them, such as skimming and scanning, close reading, etc. For that, as I don’t the time to make lessons for such things, I recommend the following websites.

http://ieltsadvantage.com/reading/


Now, in terms of developing topic specific language and ideas for the essay task, and also for some part three speaking questions which are more general and sometimes feature similar topics as for writing. As you may know, there are around 10 to 20 common themes which tend to crop up every year, such as crime, education, transport, health, etc. As a general strategy it is a good idea to familiarise yourself with these, what are the possible questions, (easy to find online), think of some ideas from your own research (google the essay question keywords and see what comes up), copy some ideas and language from sample essays (many available online), and put all this information together into your lexical notebook.

How to use this information: firstly, as mentioned above, topic specific language is crucial, if you fail to include relevant vocabulary then you will lose marks. For example, if you write (or speak) about Environment, and you don’t use use specific language such as “global warming, greenhouse gases, co2 emissions”, etc, then you will most certainly not get a high score.

You therefore need to develop a vocabulary list for every topic, if you identify 20 topics, then you need to cover one of these everyday or every couple of days. You can do your own research, or check the links below for topic specific vocab lists. Then, you need to review this language every few days, review and revisit.

You also need to focus your practice within these topics, your reading and listening should be based on these themes. When you study, it should be within these common topics, such as when talking on Skype to a foreigner, then talk about one of these issues. “Hello, John, I hear the education system in your country is a bit rubbish, what do you think?”. So instead of just reading in general, although any reading is good for you, read about eduction, transport, crime, and all the rest.
For a list of the common topics and sample answers that you can copy for your notebook/ideas book, see below.

http://ieltsadvantage.com/2015/03/05/most-common-ielts-writing-task-2-topics/


http://www.ieltsbuddy.com/ielts-writing-questions.html

http://www.ielts-mentor.com/writing-sample/writing-task-2

For topic specific vocabulary, see below.

http://ieltsliz.com/vocabulary/

http://www.dcielts.com/ielts-vocabulary/

http://www.ieltsbuddy.com/ielts-vocabulary.html

http://ieltsmaterial.com/vocabulary/

http://ieltsadvantage.com/vocabulary/

http://www.memrise.com/course/133393/vocabulary-for-ielts-8/

To summarise then, read about the general topics likely to be found in the reading section (this will also help for your writing and speaking), read about and become familiar with the different question types, focus on the possible essay questions, research language, ideas, and sample answers for them, practice within these themes, put all this information into your notebook, and review and revisit it often.


**Skill specific strategy: writing**

Writing, this is the one that most students dread, I get mail every week from people who have taken the test several times and can’t get through the 6.0/6.5 barrier and ask me to help them. So what to do first? Again, as before, you need to have your English level/current band score properly assessed by someone who knows how the writing section works, not just a random native, but someone who specialises in IELTS. The reason for this is that the writing section has certain criteria which you need to address, and if you have your writing looked at by someone who doesn’t know what these are, they will probably only correct your grammar and vocabulary and that’s all. Which is ok, but grammar and vocab are only half of the assessment criteria, task achievement and cohesion/coherence are the other half.

So, how to study for writing? Start with the criteria, found out what the examiners are looking for and what that means in practice.

As I mentioned in the other sections, you need to know what the different question types are, and to have a strategy for writing. There are 8 or 9 possible academic task 1 question types, graph, chart, table, map, process, etc (general training is a letter, either formal or semi/informal) all of which have a slightly different approach and language required to write them. As for the essay, we have five different question types, to what extent, discuss both views, problems/causes and solutions, advantages vs disadvantages, and the two part questions. All of which have a typical four/five paragraph structure but a slightly different structure at the level of the sentence depending upon if it is an opinion or discussion question.

There is a lot you need to know, about the writing process, the importance of planning, of time management, of how to analyse the question, and how to structure your essay sentence by sentence. For general guidance I recommend the following resources.

**Task 1: general and academic**

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr_2H7sWzYMgb5J_aijixjFLB5DZCGRvRN

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr_2H7sWzYMih0a8Iz1wF_CssYTUZkCX1
These sites are the best around currently and have all the tips and hints you need, examples, etc, and of course, if you have any questions you can ask me at any time.

What I would suggest is that you spend some time every week (as per your plan) studying the differences between question types, and writing timed practice exercises. Then you send them to me, and we either discuss it in class, or I will send you back a video of my corrections and comments. If you want to see how that looks, click on this link below.

https://prepareielts.com/essay-correction-service/
Skill specific strategy: speaking

As mentioned above, you need to know what happens in the test, its format, and how it is assessed. If you have taken the exam before, then you already know what to expect, if not, read on.

So, the speaking test is in three parts and is around 14 mins in total, more or less. When you enter the room, you will be greeted and the examiner will introduce themselves and ask for your full name, then they will ask what you would like to be called and where you are from, they will ask for your ID and the test proper will begin.

In the first part (4-5 mins) the examiner will ask about you and your family, or your studies, hobbies, or any familiar topics. This is designed to get you “warmed up”, relaxed and talking naturally.

In part 2, you will be given a topic card, this usually asks you to describe and explain something, and will have a list of points that you should talk about. You have a minute to prepare and up to two minutes to answer the question, the examiner will not usually speak during this time.

For part 3, the examiner will ask general and abstract questions related to the topic on the card (4-5 mins). These questions might be about past, present, future, you might be asked to speculate, hypothesise, make comparisons, etc, there are 7 question types more or less.

See more here

http://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/prepare-test/understand-test-format/speaking-test

To see how the introduction works and the opening part 1 questions see the videos below

https://youtu.be/dlKw5SIPw7E?t=19
https://youtu.be/bP0frS2NbF8?t=150

And for part 2

https://youtu.be/_0DYAYAV6Xk?t=8

And 3

https://youtu.be/EyrccL7wGpU?t=8
These should give you an idea as to what to expect.

Next step is to understand what the criteria are for this section, you can download a table here

http://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/Speaking%20Band%20descriptors_0.pdf

If you want to see the difference between the band scores then search YouTube for IELTS speaking band 9,8,7, etc, and you will find many video examples of the differences and that should give you a better idea.

What you need now, if you have not taken the test before, is to get your current level assessed, this is what we will do/have done when you contact/ed me. I will tell you/have told you what you need to improve and offered advice on how to do so.

In our lessons together I will elaborate/will have elaborated on the strategies and techniques you will need to answer all three sections of the test. I have written more about this on my blog which you can find below.

https://prepareielts.com/blog/

The main thing is, to get more speaking practice, either or, in person, or possibly more realistically for some of you, online. I have written more about how this works in my other free e-books, so I won’t repeat my self here. All I will say is that there are opportunities to meet English speakers in some social activities (depending where you live) and/or online on several websites for language exchange. You can download my books at the links below and read all about it there.


https://prepareielts.com/2016/08/15/how-to-create-your-own-english-learning-environment-online/
**In conclusion.**

To put all this together now, as I wrote above, the “secret” to success in IELTS is basically regular and consistent practice, a thorough understanding of the test, and having an appropriate study plan to guide you along. Which is the reason for setting this down here, in black and white. If you follow the steps and advice in the book then, although I cannot offer personal guarantees, you will be as well prepared as you are ever likely to be.

As I see every week, as I again mentioned above, too many students contact me with totally unrealistic expectations of the score they want, in the time they want, and at the level they are at. If only I could wave my “magic” IELTS wand, then I would do so, and save both them and I, a lot of disappointment. So, what I would suggest is that you read this (and my companion e-books) thoroughly, check out the links and resources, and if you need any help or you have any questions then send me a message at kevin@prepareielts.com