

IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 – A checklist for use in class

Rory O’Kane shows that encouraging use of assessment criterion as a resource in class can be very helpful in improving writing skills.

This article examines one way of improving student performance on the IELTS Academic Writing Task 1. In particular, focus will be on the Task Achievement criterion of the marking categories and on how to guide students towards achieving at least a Band 6 in this area given that much third-level study in various countries now requires an overall IELTS score of 6 or higher. A brief outline of common candidate mistakes will also be provided.

Background to Writing Task 1

IELTS Writing Task 1 requires candidates to describe some visual information: a chart, graph, table or diagram. They should use their own words and write no less than 150 words within about 20 minutes. The time spent is a matter for personal choice but given that Task 2 accounts for a considerable portion of the total writing marks, it is in the candidates’ own interests to spend no more than 20 minutes on Task 1.

Marking criteria

Four different criteria are used to assess Writing Task 1: Task Achievement, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy. As stated above, the aim of this article is to outline how the score for Task Achievement criterion may

Table 1 Task Achievement criterion for IELTS Writing Task 1

Task Achievement	
Band 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Covers the requirements of the task ■ Presents a clear overview of the main trends, differences or stages ■ Clearly presents and highlights key features/bullet points but could be more fully extended
Band 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Addresses the requirements of the task ■ Presents an overview with information ■ Presents and adequately highlights key features/bullet points but details may be irrelevant, inappropriate or inaccurate

be improved. The means of doing so is a peer checklist for use in class, and ultimately as a means of helping students assess their own work as they prepare to take the IELTS test. Before presenting the checklist, let us have a quick look at what is required of students to achieve a Band 6 or 7 in the Task Achievement criterion (see Table 1).

Requirements

Candidates should answer what they have been asked to do, present the main features of the visual information, avoid irrelevancy and inaccuracy and, importantly, give a clear overview. The presence of an overview is significant in that it makes the difference between achieving a Task Achievement Band 6 (or higher) instead of a Band 5. What exactly is meant by *overview*? It is a sentence that isolates the

overall impression given by the visual information – something along the lines of ‘The graph shows that over the given time period, there was an upward trend in three of the complaint areas and a downward trend in the other.’

Common mistakes

What, then, are the main areas in which candidates lose marks for the Task Achievement criterion of Writing Task 1? These are as follows:

1. Length: the piece of writing is shorter than the stipulated 150 words.
2. Answering the question: the candidate misunderstands the task or visual information, or fails to address what is required in the question.
3. Format: the piece of writing may be in the form of bullet points or notes and not as a continuous piece of writing.

4. Opinions: the candidate attempts to interpret or explain the visual information rather than presenting a factual description.
5. Accuracy: facts and figures from the graph, chart, table or diagram may be incorrectly reported.
6. Key features: the salient information from the graph etc. may be missing.
7. Detail: too much, or unnecessary, information may be given.
8. Own words: the candidate may not have paraphrased the wording used in the question to describe the visual information.
9. Grouping information: similar types of facts and figures may not have been grouped together.
10. Comparisons: these may be missing or insufficient in number.
11. Introductory sentence/summing up: these may not be present.
12. Paragraph length: either too many paragraphs or too few – indicating that information has not been appropriately grouped.

Peer checklist

One way of helping students to become more focused in the area of Task Achievement is to provide them with a checklist for use in class. This is given in Table 2.

The checklist has been devised with the common types of mistakes in mind. Once students have produced an answer to a Task 1 Writing, they exchange scripts and use the checklist as a means of marking for Task Achievement. Students can then discuss their assessments with each other. The activity has the added advantage of encouraging genuine communication and honing skills in opinion stating, justifying, defending and general interaction. As an additional task prior to using the checklist, students can be asked to complete a Question analysis table similar to that given in Table 3 on page 36: this can be done individually or in pairs leading to whole-class feedback. The task ensures that everyone is clear about what should or should not be in the answer and provides good training in isolating the key features of the visual information.



Table 2 Checklist for Task Achievement assessment criterion – IELTS Academic Writing Task 1

		Yes	No	Notes
1	Has the candidate used at least 150 words?			
2	Has the candidate included the key features/main information?			
3	Has the candidate reported information/statistics accurately?			
4	Has the candidate grouped similar types of information/statistics?			
5	Has the candidate included irrelevant information/statistics?			
6	Has the candidate used his/her own words?			
7	Is the format appropriate? *			
8	Is there an introductory sentence?			
9	Is there a concluding sentence?			
10	Is there an overview?			
11	Is the content of each paragraph clear?			
12	Has the candidate expressed any personal opinions?			

*The answer should be a whole piece of connected text – no notes or bullet points.

Table 3 Question analysis

1	Write down the description of the graph/chart/diagram as given in the task.
2	Break down the task instructions into three or four sentences.
3	Make notes on the main points/key features to include in an answer.

Checklists can obviously be of various kinds – declaratory, imperative, interrogative, etc. – and can aim at various stages of the writing process. The focus here is more on product rather than process. The checklist presented can be reduced or expanded according to the level of students in a class and can be of great use in making learners more objective about their own writing, and in instilling good revision techniques which will hopefully be of benefit under IELTS examination conditions.



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