

Common Mistakes Preventing a Score of 7



By: Gwendolyn: 5+ Common Grammar Mistakes in IELTS Writing

Common IELTS Grammar Mistakes

Using Contractions

Contractions are used frequently in spoken English to shorten words. However, they should not be used in the IELTS Writing exams. You will lose silly points for making these common IELTS grammar mistakes.

So instead use:

- *Cannot* instead of *Can't*
- *Do not* instead of *Don't*
- *I will* instead of *I'll*
- *It is* instead of *It's*

Inserting Numbers Instead of Words

Similar to above, one of the IELTS grammar mistakes I regularly see is students typing a number instead of writing out the word for that number. This shortcut has its place in some forms of writing, but should not be used in the IELTS Writing exam.

- Wrong example: *“Recent research shows that only 2 out of 10 individuals around the world today do not have mobile phones.”*
- Correct example: *“Recent research shows that only two out of ten individuals around the world today do not have mobile phones.”*

Combining Two Complete Sentences with a Comma

I see this one time and time again. Unfortunately, you cannot combine two complete sentences with just a comma. You either have to use a semicolon (;) or a [conjunction](#) (and/or/but).

- Wrong example: *“This is because more ways of communication are now available, people are now being connected through mobile phones and a range of network devices.”*
- Correct example: *“This is because more ways of communication are available and people are being connected through mobile phones and a range of network devices.”*

Adding ‘s’ or ‘es’ To Uncountable Nouns

There are some nouns in the English language that are uncountable, and therefore you can NEVER make them plural by adding ‘s’ or ‘es.’ They will always appear in the singular form.

There are quite a few uncountable nouns, but the three IELTS grammar mistakes I see repeatedly occur with:

- Advice
- Information
- Research

If a noun is uncountable, you **cannot** use:

A plural verb

- Wrong example: *“Recent researches have shown...”*

- It should instead be: *“Recent research has shown...”*

A number

- Wrong example: *“Three advices I would give...”*
- It should instead be: *“Three pieces of advice I would give...”*

A few, a couple, many, a number of

- Wrong example: *“A number of information shows...”*
- It should instead be: *“A lot of information shows...”*

Using ‘The’ Correctly

Article misuse is one of the most common IELTS mistakes by ESL students. For many learners, it just isn’t part of their native language, so learning it in English makes it doubly hard. Here are a few guidelines to help you use ‘the’ in the correct way.

We use ‘the’ before:

- Places where the name refers to a group of islands or states: *the USA, the UK, the Middle East, the UAE*
- Cardinal numbers: *the first of day of the month, the second survey shows*
- Superlatives: *the shortest, the longest, the lowest, the highest*
- Nouns when you are talking about a specific person, place or thing: *the government of India, the river in Calcutta, India, the man across the street has a beard*
- Nouns where there is only one in the entire world: *the internet, the environment, the ozone layer, the atmosphere*

We don’t use ‘the’ before:

- A single place or country: *Germany, India, Korea*
- Nouns when you are talking generally about more than one. Often here the word converts to a plural: *governments around the world; rivers in India; many men have beards*

Common IELTS Mistakes: Task Response

Using Personal Examples

When [writing your academic essay](#), you will want to back up your idea with an example, but too often, I see students giving a personal example. As this is an academic essay, you need the language and examples to be formal and sound as if they have been researched. Using personal examples will get you lower points, so avoid them.

- Weak example: *“My parents frequently work late in order to make ends meet, and this has a big impact on the amount of time I get to communicate with them.”*
- Stronger example: *“Many parents today are working longer hours in order to sufficiently provide for their children, which is having an enormous impact on the amount available time for face to face communication.”*

Common IELTS Mistakes: Coherence and Cohesion

Being Too Verbose

When you are too verbose, you are using more words than needed. Try to cut out phrases and words that are not relevant to the task response. This will not only help reduce your word count if you tend to write too much, but will also help your writing to be more coherent and concise.

- Weak example: *“Even if employees engage in their jobs for a long time, they often fail to climb the business ladder, which is regularly the most common goal, therefore, they must face the harsh reality of staying in the same position for years.”*
- Stronger example: *“Even if employees stay in one job for a long time, they will often fail to climb the business ladder.”*

Not Using Linking Phrases

To make your sentences coherent and cohesive, you must [use linking words and phrases](#). Don't just list sentences, connect them together!

- Weak example: *"Mexicans will prefer Madrid as their most visited city. Americans will most likely go to Paris. Canadians love traveling to Istanbul the most."*
- Stronger example (linking phrases are bolded): *"**To begin with**, Mexicans will prefer Madrid as their most visited city. **In contrast**, Americans will most likely go to Paris. **Lastly**, Canadians love traveling to Istanbul the most."*

In vs. On

When to use the preposition IN or ON can be very challenging for ESL students. Here are a few basic guidelines:

IN is used to:

- indicate that something is contained or inside: *"She is in the house."*
- denote a moment enclosed in time: *"I completed my Masters degree in 2014."*
- refer to the names of cities, towns, and countries: *"There are many vegetarians in India."*

ON is used to:

- indicate that something is positioned on a surface or just above or outside an area: *"The coffee cup is sitting on the desk."*
- refer to days and dates that are not enclosed with a specific time: *"I visited your restaurant on 29 June."*
- refer to street name locations: *"The restaurant is located on Lakeview Drive."*

Common IELTS Mistakes: Lexical Resource

Not Using High Level Vocabulary

Twenty-five percent of your score is based on your lexical resource, so it is important to [learn and use a wide range of high level vocabulary](#) in your essay. I regularly see students use the word 'done' when citing their academic example. This should be replaced with a higher level word like 'conducted' or other alternative phrases like: 'carried out,' 'administered by,' or 'organized by.'

- Weak example: *“Recent research done by Harvard University shows that 65% of Americans work more than 50 hours a week.”*
- Stronger example: *“Recent research conducted by Harvard University shows that 65% of Americans work more than 50 hours a week.”*

More Advice:

Mistake 1: Not enough paragraphs

This is an easy mistake to make, so let's take a closer look at the band descriptors to see why paragraphing is so important.

Coherence and Cohesion

Band 8	uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately
Band 8	uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately
Band 7	presents a clear central topic within each paragraph
Band 6	uses paragraphing, but not always logically
Band 5	may not write in paragraphs, or paragraphing may be inadequate

Keep the following in mind when responding to Writing Task 2:

- Use paragraphs for each idea.
- Leave a space between each paragraph.
- Don't use one-sentence paragraphs.

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Mistake 2: Incorrect format

Writing Task 2 must be written in an essay format using paragraphs to break up your ideas. This will help to structure your essay in a way that is easy to understand. You should not use headings, bullet points or numbers.

Make sure your response includes the following:

- Introduction
- Body paragraphs
- Conclusion

But avoid using the following to structure your essay:

- Bullet points
- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Numbers

Mistake 3 – Partially addressing the question

Take time to read the question carefully and decide how many parts are in the question. Let's take a look at the question below. You are asked to discuss two viewpoints and give your own opinion.

So to fully address the question, you need to discuss **view 1** and **view 2** in separate paragraphs and finally, **give your own opinion**.

If you fail to answer all parts of the question, your essay will be incomplete.

Question:

Some people think that wild animals should not be kept in zoos.

Others believe that there are good reasons for having zoos.

Discuss both these views and give your own opinion.

Mistake 4: Presenting an unclear position

If you present an unclear position in Writing Task 2, this can affect your final band score. Make sure you decide on a position and maintain it throughout your response. If you discuss what 'some' people think and what 'other' people think, you have not yet expressed your opinion. Make sure the examiner knows what you think.

Keep the following in mind when writing your essay:

- Decide on your opinion and present it clearly
- Use personal pronouns to express your opinion
- Don't change your opinion during the essay

Mistake 5 – Spelling errors and typos

Spelling plays a major role in written communication, so it is important that you spell correctly. Remember that computer-delivered IELTS does not have spell-check. A ‘typo’ is considered a spelling error. Why don’t you turn off ‘spell-check’ on your device and then turn it on again after you complete your essay to see how often you misspell words. Make a list of your common errors and make sure you learn how to spell them.

Common typos and spelling errors include:

- teh/ the
- adn/ and
- tehm/ them
- thier/ their

Before you complete Writing Task 2, make sure you:

- Check your writing for spelling errors
- Make corrections
- Don’t type too quickly

Mistake 6: Using inappropriate memorised language, phrases and clichés

The examiner is looking for memorised language, phrases and clichés. Memorised language is easy to identify, so use your own words and avoid overused phrases.

When responding to Writing Task 2, remember to:

- Use your own words.
- Don’t use memorised phrases such as:
- Controversial topic/hot topic
- Two-edged sword/double-edged sword/2 sides/faces of a coin
- In a nutshell
- I pen down by saying
- There are pros and cons
- This essay will discuss
- Reasons why I hold this view
- This is a highly controversial/is a highly debated issue

Avoid proverbs and clichés – ‘old is gold’

Mistake 7: Using surveys and research to support your opinion

Use real examples and evidence from your own life experience to support your opinion.
Examiners cannot check if your research and survey examples are real.

Make sure you present a clear position supported by examples from your own life experience.
For example:

- Country
- Family
- Job
- Student experience

If you avoid these 7 mistakes, you will be well on your way to a band 7.

5 Common IELTS Coherence & Cohesion Mistakes

By: Shelly

Even though coherence and cohesion makes up 25% of a student's score for Writing Task 1 and Task 2, it is probably the area that most IELTS test-takers overlook in their preparation. Quite honestly, I am sure that 50% of students aren't even sure what the two words mean, let alone how they affect their band score! So, in today's post, I want to look at the 5 most common IELTS Coherence & Cohesion mistakes and show you how to avoid them.

What is Coherence?

Very simply, *coherence is how well your essay is organised and how easily it can be understood by the reader*. Is your essay divided into clear paragraphs? Do your ideas progress and build upon one another throughout your essay? Could a well-educated native speaker read your essay and understand your sentences easily? Yes? Great – then you have good coherence!

What is Cohesion?

If coherence is how easy an essay is to read, then *cohesion is how well your ideas are connected*. Do you have clear topic sentences that tell the reader the main idea in each of your paragraphs? Do you use transition signals to show the relationships between your ideas? Do you use referencing and substitution to replace key nouns that are repeated? Yes? Great – then you have great cohesion!

So, if this is what coherence and cohesion are, how do students go wrong in the test? Well, truthfully, in many ways, but here are the 5 that I see most often when I am **marking**.

1. No clear topic sentence in a paragraph

One of the main criteria in the band descriptors for IELTS Coherence & Cohesion is having a clear central topic in each paragraph. The way to signal to the examiner what the main idea in

your paragraph is to start with a sentence that clearly states what you are going to discuss *i.e. the topic sentence*. Now, when I was teaching English for Academic Purposes in universities, I would tell students that it didn't matter where in the paragraph the topic sentence came – it could be at the beginning, the middle, or the end, you just had to have one! **However, for IELTS, I strongly recommend that you always START your paragraph with the topic sentence.**

Why? Well, there are two reasons

1. If you know what the main topic is going to be before you start writing, you are much more likely to stick to that topic throughout the paragraph.
2. IELTS examiners are marking your essay according to the band descriptors. Why make them “hunt” or “search” for your topic, or make them question if you have one? Show them from the beginning what you are going to discuss so that they can relax and get on with assessing the other aspects of your essay.

So, what does a good topic sentence look like? Well, that will depend on the type of essay you are writing.

1. Paragraphs with MORE than one idea

If you are writing a paragraph that contains TWO ideas *i.e. a discuss both sides essay, a problem / solution essay, or an advantages / disadvantages essay* then you just need a GENERAL topic sentence that lets the examiner know the main idea of the paragraph. That's because you are giving two ideas that are united by the general purpose. For example:

- On the one hand, it could be argued that sportsmen's salaries are too high (*e.g. this paragraph will contain two reasons why some people think this*)
- On the one hand, there are several factors that lead to a person being obese (*e.g. this paragraph will contain two causes*)
- On the one hand, there are a number of advantages to working from home (*e.g. this paragraph will contain two advantages*)

2. Paragraphs with ONE idea

However, if you are writing a paragraph that contains ONE main idea *i.e. a to what extent essay, or a positive /negative development essay*, then we have to express the main argument in the topic sentence:

- First, removing parks from cities would result in an increase in pollution. (*e.g. this paragraph will discuss the first reason for my position = pollution*)
- The first negative is that private tutors are costly. (*e.g. this paragraph will discuss the first negative = cost*)

Top Tip for Topic Sentences

Before you write any paragraph, ask yourself the simple question “What is the main topic of this paragraph?” The answer will be your topic sentence.

2. Poor use of transition signals

Transition signals are words like “in addition” or “however” or “therefore” that are used to show the relationship between the ideas in your essay. I think many students believe that your whole score for coherence and cohesion is decided upon your use of transition signals alone (*which we now know is not true*), so they develop one of the following problems:

1. Overuse of transition signals

Weaker students often use transition signals between every sentence in their essay (*First, Secondly, Moreover, Finally*) Often, this is because they are not able to show the relationship between their ideas in other ways like using a **complex sentence** or referencing. Also, it can be a sign that a student is not developing their ideas enough (if you are describing each of your arguments in one sentence, you are not expanding and supporting them enough to achieve a high score for **Task Response**). The best illustration of this is students who use a transition signal directly after their topic sentence:

*Firstly, I believe that children should be taught in mixed classes. **In addition**, this will help them to learn how to socialise with the other sex.*

Do you see the problem? The topic sentence has told us the main idea (well done!), so how can you use “in addition” after it? Are you going to add a second main idea?!!!! No! You don’t need any transition here! So, don’t use transition signals mechanically at the start of every sentence!

2. Use of “fake” transition signals

Because weaker students think that these transition signals are the key to achieving a high coherence and cohesion score, they also wrongly think that if they can “invent” some clever, unusual, rarely used transition signal, they will get bonus points from the examiner. They won’t! The fact is that these cohesive devices are standard expressions that have been used for literally centuries. While some slang may come and go, transition signals never change, and trying to use a “new” one will only damage your score not increase it. Here are some of my “favourite” fake transitions (and to be clear, when I say “favourite”, I mean the absolute worst!).

Top Tip for Transition Signals – Don’t use any of these phrases!

**To embark with, / To commence with,
On the one side / On the flip side
To recapitulate / By way of a conclusion**

3. Poor progression in a paragraph

Having progression in an essay is massively important for your coherence and cohesion score. But, what is progression? Well, very simply it means that your essay should feel like it is always moving forward. Every paragraph should tell me something new and be logically sequenced. It’s interesting to me that almost every IELTS forum is full of questions about how to “organise the paragraphs” in an essay, but never about how to organise the sentences in a paragraph. Nobody seems to care that their sentences progress, even though this is much harder than learning a simple “template of an essay”. So, let me show you what progression is by showing you a paragraph that has almost none:

A paragraph with NO progression

Firstly, the biggest down side to eating fast food is that it causes obesity. People who eat fast food for lunch and dinner are often overweight. For example, recent research shows that 90% of people who eat fast food every day have more weight than is healthy. This clearly shows that fast food is bad for our health.

Can you see the problem? Read the first sentence of that paragraph. What does it tell us? Fast food causes obesity. Now read the rest of the paragraph. Does it tell us anything new? NO!!!! All it does is give me the same information again and again in different words!!! This is a paragraph that does not progress. When you write your essay, every sentence should add something new or more convincing to your argument. This is an extreme example, but it is a problem I see time and time again. Compare that paragraph with this one that DOES progress.

A paragraph with GOOD progression

Firstly, the biggest down side to eating fast food is that it causes obesity. Most fast food contains a high amount of saturated fat, salt and sugar, all of which can cause people to put on weight. Worse, many of these damaging ingredients are hidden inside food that might seem relatively healthy at first glance . For example, it is often the salads on a menu that contain the most calories as they are covered in high-calorie dressings. As a result, even people who think they are making healthy choices when they eat out are actually consuming ingredients which will lead them to put on weight.

Can you see the difference? Every sentence here added something more to my argument – this is progression! **This is also why learning a “template” is not a good idea!!!** Most templates rely heavily on repeating one idea again and again – examiners are well-trained and spot this repetition.

Top Tip for Progression

Every time you start a sentence ask yourself if you are adding to your argument or simply repeating. If you are adding, great. If you are repeating, stop and think of a new way to develop your idea.

4. Unclear referencing

Students with good cohesion are able to use referencing to avoid repeating words. They do this by using pronouns like “they” and “it”, or determiners like “this” and “these” to replace words that have previously appeared in the sentence. Referencing is a key academic writing skill and if you don’t use it, it will be hard for you to achieve more than a 6.0 for Task Response. However, the problem I see most often is not students not using referencing at all, but students using referencing poorly. ***Every time you use a pronoun to replace a word, it must be 100% clear which word you are referring back to.*** However, even very high-level students can have problems here. Take this sentence for example

What is more, these antibiotic resistant **crops** are fed to **cows** and are, therefore, indirectly *consumed by humans*, which in turn makes **them** resistant to the effects,

Can you see the problem? Read it again. Tell me, who does “them” refer to here? The crops, the cows or the humans??? It is NOT clear and so this is faulty referencing! If the reader of your essay cannot tell immediately what your pronoun or determiner refers to, you need to write your sentence again to make it clearer!

5. Parts of the essay cannot be understood

This is the most basic requirement of coherence. The examiner needs to understand your essay *with ease* if you want to achieve a 7.0 or higher. So, you would imagine that most students would do everything they could to make sure that their sentences are clear and easy to read, right? Wrong! They do the opposite!!! I'm serious. Almost every student who comes to me for help is so obsessed with using "high-level vocabulary" that they end up writing sentences I can't read because they are full of such strange synonyms and **weird paraphrasing**. My advice here is simple – use the word that best conveys your message. Don't think of that word and then look in a thesaurus for the longest possible synonym. Trust me, examiners love essays that are easy to read!

Top 5 IELTS Coherence & Cohesion mistakes:

1. **No clear topic sentences** – tell the examiner what the main idea in your paragraph will be in the first sentence
2. **Poor use of transition signals** – don't use them between every sentence in a paragraph
3. **No progression** – every sentence in your essay should add something more to your argument
4. **Poor referencing** – it is great to reference, but it should always be clear what a pronoun refers to
5. **Parts of the essay cannot be understood** – don't let bad paraphrasing destroy your C&C score!