

IELTS GENERAL TRAINING

Grammar Essentials

The structures that separate Band 6 from Band 7, and the errors that hold you there

Ronacker Solutions · LaunchPad Career Toolkit

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1. What grammar is actually marked on

Grammatical Range and Accuracy is a quarter of your Writing band and a quarter of your Speaking band. The name matters: it is **range** as well as accuracy. A script with no errors but only simple sentences is capped around Band 6. You have to risk complexity to score above it.

Band	What the examiner sees
5	Limited structures; frequent errors that make meaning unclear
6	A mix of simple and complex forms; errors present but meaning is usually clear
7	A variety of complex structures; frequent error-free sentences; errors do not impede communication
8	A wide range used flexibly; the majority of sentences error-free; only occasional slips

The Band 6 ceiling, and how to break it

Most candidates stuck at 6 are accurate but plain. They write ten correct simple sentences in a row. The fix is not more vocabulary — it is joining ideas: relative clauses, conditionals, participle phrases and subordination. Three well-formed complex sentences per paragraph is the target.

2. Tenses

You do not need all twelve English tenses. You need six, used accurately and with the right time markers.

Tense	Use it for	Example
Present simple	Facts, habits, general truths	Employers <i>value</i> practical experience.
Present continuous	Current temporary situations, trends	The cost of housing <i>is rising</i> steadily.
Present perfect	Past action with present relevance; unfinished time	I <i>have worked</i> as a fitter since 2019.
Past simple	Completed actions at a stated past time	I <i>completed</i> my trade test in 2021.
Past continuous	Background action interrupted by another	I <i>was working</i> night shift when the fault occurred.
Future forms	Predictions, plans, intentions	Automation <i>will replace</i> some roles. I <i>am going to</i> apply.

Present perfect versus past simple

The single most common tense error in IELTS scripts. The rule is about **whether the time period is finished**, not about how long ago it happened.

DO	DON'T
• I <i>have lived</i> in Johannesburg for six years. (still there) • I <i>have completed</i> three assessments. (time unstated) • The company <i>has recently expanded</i>. (recently = unfinished) • I <i>worked</i> there from 2018 to 2021. (finished period) • I <i>completed</i> my diploma in 2022. (stated past time)	• I <i>have lived</i> in Johannesburg in 2019. • I <i>have completed</i> my diploma last year. • I <i>am working</i> there since 2019. • I <i>am living</i> in South Africa since I was born. • I <i>did not went</i> to the interview.

Never use present perfect with a finished time expression

Yesterday, last year, in 2020, two months ago and *when I was young* all require the past simple. If the sentence names a finished time, present perfect is wrong — no exceptions.

Tense consistency

Choose a time frame for each paragraph and stay in it. Drifting mid-paragraph between past and present is a visible error even when each individual verb is correctly formed.

DRIFT, THEN FIXED

Drifting: I started at the plant in 2019 and I am working on the assembly line. My supervisor trained me and then I become a team leader.

Fixed: I started at the plant in 2019 and worked on the assembly line. My supervisor trained me, and I later became a team leader.

3. Articles

Articles are the highest-frequency error in scripts from Southern Africa, and they are entirely learnable. Shona, Ndebele and Zulu have no article system, so the instinct is simply absent — which means it has to be built by rule rather than by ear.

Article	Use when	Example
a / an	Singular countable noun, first mention, not specific	I attended a training course.
the	Specific, already mentioned, or unique	<i>The</i> course was run by <i>the</i> Department of Labour.
no article	Plural or uncountable nouns spoken of in general	<i>Employers</i> value <i>experience</i> .

The three-question test

1. Is the noun countable and singular? If no, you probably need no article or *the*.
2. Have I mentioned it before, or is it obvious which one I mean? If yes, use *the*.
3. If it is countable, singular and new to the reader, use *a* or *an*.

ARTICLES IN ONE PARAGRAPH

*I applied for **a** position at **a** mining company in Limpopo. **The** position required **a** trade certificate, which I obtained in 2021. **The** company offered me **the** role after two interviews. In general, **[no article]** mining companies in **[no article]** South Africa prefer candidates with **[no article]** practical experience.*

An before a vowel **sound**, not a vowel letter: *an hour, an honest answer*, but *a university, a European country*.

4. Subject–verb agreement

Simple in principle, and reliably wrong once a phrase separates the subject from its verb.

DO	DON'T
• The list of requirements is long. • Each of the applicants has a reference. • The number of applicants is rising. • Everyone in the team works shifts. • There are several reasons for this.	• The list of requirements <i>are</i> long. • Each of the applicants <i>have</i> a reference. • The number of applicants <i>are</i> rising. • Everyone in the team <i>work</i> shifts. • There <i>is</i> several reasons for this.

Cross out the middle

When a phrase sits between subject and verb, mentally delete it. *The list of requirements is long.* The agreement becomes obvious immediately.

Note the pair that trips people: *a number of applicants* **are** (many people) but *the number of applicants* **is** (one figure).

5. Building complex sentences

This is where Band 7 is won. Four structures will cover almost everything you need, and all four can be practised deliberately.

Relative clauses

- **who** for people, **which** for things, **that** for either in defining clauses.
- **Defining** (no commas) — identifies which one: *Candidates who hold a trade certificate are prioritised.*
- **Non-defining** (commas) — adds extra information: *My supervisor, who trained me personally, wrote the reference.*
- **whose** shows possession: *an employer whose standards are high.*

Conditionals

Type	Form	Example
Zero — general truth	if + present, present	If a weld <i>fails</i> , the joint <i>leaks</i> .
First — real future	if + present, will	If I <i>pass</i> , I <i>will apply</i> immediately.
Second — hypothetical	if + past, would	If the government <i>funded</i> training, more people <i>would qualify</i> .
Third — past unreal	if + had + past participle, would have	If I <i>had known</i> , I <i>would have applied</i> earlier.

Never write “if I will”

The *if* clause does not take *will*. *If it will rain* is wrong; *if it rains* is right. Second conditionals also take *were* for all persons: *if I were in that position*.

Subordination

Joining a main idea to a supporting one with a subordinating conjunction. This is the fastest way to add complexity without risking much accuracy.

Relationship	Words	Example
Contrast	although, whereas, while, even though	<i>Although</i> the salary was lower, the training was superior.
Cause	because, since, as, given that	<i>Since</i> demand has grown, wages have risen.
Purpose	so that, in order to	I relocated <i>so that</i> I could take the position.

Relationship	Words	Example
Time	when, before, after, once, until	<i>Once</i> the assessment is complete, the visa can be lodged.
Condition	unless, provided that, as long as	<i>Unless</i> documents are certified, they are rejected.

Participle phrases

A compact way to combine two sentences. Use sparingly — one or two per essay signals range; more starts to sound artificial.

COMBINING WITH PARTICIPLES

Two sentences: *I completed my trade test. I applied for the assessment.*

Combined: *Having completed my trade test, I applied for the assessment.*

Two sentences: *The policy was introduced in 2020. It reduced unemployment.*

Combined: *Introduced in 2020, the policy reduced unemployment.*

6. Errors worth hunting in your own writing

Prepositions

Wrong	Right
discuss <i>about</i> the issue	discuss the issue
depend <i>of</i>	depend on
married <i>with</i>	married to
arrive <i>to</i> a place	arrive at / in
responsible <i>of</i>	responsible for
good <i>in</i> something	good at something
interested <i>to</i>	interested in

Countable and uncountable

These nouns are uncountable in English and take no plural -s: *information, advice, equipment, research, knowledge, training, furniture, machinery, staff, work, progress, accommodation*.

Use *much, little* and *amount of* with these; use *many, few* and *number of* with countables.

Plural endings

The cheapest marks you are throwing away

Dropped plural -s and past-tense -ed endings are the most frequent errors in Southern African scripts, and they are pure carelessness rather than lack of knowledge. In your final check, read only for word endings — nothing else. Most candidates find three or four every time.

Word order

- Adjectives before nouns: *a qualified diesel mechanic*, never *a mechanic qualified*.
- Adverbs of frequency before the main verb but after *be*: *I always check*, *I am always careful*.
- No inversion in indirect questions: *I asked what the requirements were*, not *what were the requirements*.

Your final check

In the last three minutes, do not reread for meaning — you will see what you meant rather than what you wrote. Instead run four separate passes, each looking for one thing only:

1. **Word endings.** Every plural -s, every past -ed.

2. **Articles.** Every singular countable noun — does it have one?
3. **Subject–verb agreement.** Cross out the middle of long subjects.
4. **Tense consistency.** Does each paragraph stay in one time frame?

How to practise grammar for IELTS

Not with exercise books. Write a paragraph, then mark it yourself against the four passes above and count the errors. Write another the next day. Tracking your own error count over three weeks tells you exactly which of the four is your weakness — and it is almost always just one of them.

Ready to practise properly?

Reading a guide tells you what to do. Marked practice tells you whether you are doing it. The Ronacker LaunchPad gives you full timed IELTS practice with band feedback on every answer — Writing marked against all four criteria, Speaking with a live examiner-style roleplay, and Reading and Listening scored instantly.

Start free: launch.ronackersolutions.co.za

WhatsApp: +27 68 522 8197

Email: ronald@ronackersolutions.co.za