

Course Companion

TOEFL iBT

Every topic handout in one volume

exercises.lol

Contents

1. About the test	2
2. Reading.....	5
3. Listening.....	8
4. Writing.....	11
5. Speaking.....	14

About the test

TOEFL iBT

What the TOEFL is and who takes it

TOEFL iBT is the English test most often accepted by universities in the United States, and it is taken all over the world. It does not test what you know *about* English. It tests whether you can **use** it: read a page from a textbook, follow a lecture, answer an email, and speak back.

- It is made by **ETS**, an American organisation, and it is taken **on a computer** at a test centre or at home.
- Almost every Chinese student applying to a university in the United States or Canada may use it. Many universities in the UK, Australia and Europe accept it as well — but always check the page for **your** course, because the number they ask for is written there and nowhere else.
- Four skills are tested in one sitting: **Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking**, in that order.

△ **The test changed in January 2026, and most advice on the internet is older than that.** If a book, a video or a shared question file talks about a 0 to 120 score, or about an “Integrated Writing” task where you read a passage and hear a lecture, it is describing the **old** test. The sections below describe the test you will actually sit.

The shape of the test from January 2026

The test is now **adaptive** : it looks at how you are doing and gives you items at a level that matches you. Two students sitting on the same day do not see the same questions.

Section	About	Items	What is in it
Reading	30 minutes	about 50	Complete the Words, Read in Daily Life, Read an Academic Passage
Listening	29 minutes	about 47	Listen and Choose a Response, Listen to a Conversation, Listen to an Announcement, Listen to an Academic Talk
Writing	23 minutes	about 12	Build a Sentence, Write an Email, Write for an Academic Discussion
Speaking	8 minutes	about 11	Listen and Repeat, Take an Interview

- ETS asks you to allow about **two hours** in total. The exact time and the exact number of items **vary**, because the test adapts as you go.
- Two things follow from “adaptive”, and both change how you should practise. First, **you cannot work out your score from a number of right answers** — the same 30 correct answers mean different things depending on how hard the items were. Second, **the test gets harder when you do well**. Meeting difficult items is a good sign, not a bad one.
- Notice how much of the test is now **everyday English** : a notice, an email, an announcement, a short conversation. The old test was almost entirely academic. Practise both.

The 1 to 6 score scale

- You get **four section scores** and one **overall score**. Each runs from **1 to 6** in **half-point** steps: 4, 4.5, 5, 5.5, 6.
- The overall score is the **average of the four sections**, rounded to the nearest half point. So 5.5, 5, 5.5 and 5 average 5.25, which is reported as **5.5**.
- The scale is lined up with the **CEFR** , the ladder used across Europe:

Score	CEFR level	Roughly what it means
1 – 1.5	A1	beginner
2 – 2.5	A2	elementary
3 – 3.5	B1	intermediate
4 – 4.5	B2	upper intermediate — the usual floor for undergraduate study
5 – 5.5	C1	advanced — what selective universities and most Master’s courses want
6	C2	near-native

- △ Universities usually set a minimum **overall** score **and** a floor on each section. An overall 5 with a 3.5 in Speaking is not the same application as a flat 5 — the weakest section decides the result. **Work on the lowest number, not the average.**

Old scores and new scores together

- Until **January 2028**, every score report shows **three** things: your **CEFR level**, your **1 to 6 scores**, and a **comparable 0 to 120 overall score**.

- That third number exists because universities write their requirement years in advance. A course page that still says “100 on the TOEFL iBT” can be compared against it.
- So when you read an offer, check **which scale it is written on** before you decide whether you have met it. The safest move is to look at the university’s own page in the month you apply.

How to use these notes

- The four sections that follow are one per skill, in the test’s own order. Each explains what the tasks ask for, what the marker is actually looking at, and the mistakes that cost Chinese candidates marks most often.
- A number in these notes is a **format fact**, and format facts change. Every one here was checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026. Before you book, check the two pages below yourself — it takes five minutes and it is the cheapest insurance you will ever buy.

Exam tips

- **Do not buy a practice book printed before 2026.** It is not a slightly old book; it is a book about a different test.
- **Decide early which scale your universities use**, then write the target number on the first page of your notebook. A target you can see is a target you work towards.
- **Practise everyday English deliberately.** Chinese candidates usually arrive strong on academic reading and weak on emails, notices and short conversations, because that is what school rewarded. The new test rewards both.
- **Type, do not write.** The whole test is on a computer, including the two writing tasks. If you type slowly in English, that alone costs you marks in a 23-minute section — practise on a keyboard from today.
- Sources, checked on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT score scale update, TOEFL iBT content and structure.

Reading

TOEFL iBT

The Reading section and its clock

About **30 minutes**, about **50 items**. That is much faster than the old test, and the items are shorter — so the skill being tested is not endurance any more. It is speed with accuracy.

- Three kinds of task appear: **Complete the Words**, **Read in Daily Life** and **Read an Academic Passage**. The first two are new in 2026.
- The section is **adaptive**, so the passages you see depend on how you are doing. Do not try to read the difficulty of the test as a sign of how you are performing.
- You cannot go back to a section once you have left it. Answer every item as you meet it.

△ There is no penalty for a wrong answer. An item left blank scores exactly what a wrong answer scores: nothing. **Never leave an item empty.**

Complete the Words

A short text with letters or whole words missing, which you supply.

- This is a test of **grammar** and **vocabulary**, not of finding information. You are not hunting through a passage; you are asking “what word belongs here?”
- Use the sentence around the gap. The word class is usually decided before the meaning is: after *the* you need a noun, after *very* an adjective, after *to* a base verb.
- **Spelling counts.** A word with a letter missing is a wrong word.
- Read the completed sentence back to yourself. If it does not sound like English, it is not.

Read in Daily Life

Emails, notices, timetables, advertisements and other short practical texts.

- The question is almost always **what should the reader DO** — or what has changed, or what is not allowed.
- Practical texts hide their key information in small places: a date, a room number, a word like *except, unless, only, from Monday*. Those words carry the answer far more often than the long sentences around them.

- Watch the **register** . An email from a tutor is polite and indirect: "you may wish to consider" means *do this*. "It would be helpful if you could" is an instruction, not a comment.
- △ A daily-life text is short, so students read it too fast and answer from memory of a similar text. Read the one in front of you.

Read an Academic Passage

A passage from the kind of book a first-year university course would set.

- **Skim** first, thirty seconds, for the shape: what is this about, how many parts has it, where does the argument turn? Then answer, and scan back for each fact.
- The **topic sentence** — usually the first sentence of a paragraph — tells you what that paragraph is for. When a question asks which paragraph contains something, you are matching against topic sentences, not reading everything again.
- A question about a word asks what it means **in this passage**, not what it means in general. Answer from the sentence, not from your dictionary memory.
- Guess an unknown word from its **parts**: a prefix (*un-*, *re-*, *over-*) and a suffix (*-tion*, *-able*, *-ly*) narrow the meaning and fix the word class before you have understood the root at all.
- An **inference** question asks what the passage lets you conclude, not what it says. The right answer is always supported by a line you could point at. If you cannot point at the line, it is the wrong answer.

What costs Chinese candidates marks

- **Translating while reading.** Turning each sentence into Chinese in your head takes two to three times as long as reading it. At about 30 minutes for 50 items there is no room for it. This is not a habit you can drop on test day; it takes weeks of reading without a dictionary to lose.
- **Subvocalising** — saying each word silently. It caps your speed at speaking speed, around 150 words a minute, when you need double that.
- **Hunting for a word from the question.** The test writes questions in different words on purpose. A synonym in the passage is the normal case, not a trick.
- **Perfectionism on one item.** Every item is worth the same. Two minutes spent rescuing one hard item costs you three easy ones later.

Exam tips

- Practise with a **timer** from the first day. Reading well and reading fast are two different skills, and only one of them is trained by reading slowly.
- Read **one academic page and one practical text** every day — a science article and an email, a history page and a noticeboard. The section now asks for both.
- Build vocabulary from the **Academic Word List**, but learn each word in a sentence. A word you have only met on a flashcard is a word you will not recognise inside a line of prose.
- After every practice set, write down **why** each wrong answer was wrong: did you misread the question, miss a word, run out of time, or not know the vocabulary? Four different problems need four different fixes, and only your own list tells you which one you have.
- Format facts in this section were checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT content and structure.

Listening

TOEFL iBT

The Listening section and its clock

About **29 minutes**, about **47 items**. Four kinds of task: **Listen and Choose a Response**, **Listen to a Conversation**, **Listen to an Announcement** and **Listen to an Academic Talk**.

- Every recording is played **once**. There is no second chance, and there is no pause button.
- You may take notes while you listen, on the paper the test centre gives you.
- The section is **adaptive**, so what you hear depends on how the earlier items went.

△ The single biggest cause of lost marks here is **dwelling** : a student misses one detail, keeps thinking about it, and misses the next thirty seconds as well. One missed item is one mark. Thirty seconds of not listening is five. **Let it go and stay with the speaker.**

Listen and Choose a Response

You hear one short turn of speech and choose what would naturally come next.

- This is a test of **everyday conversation**, not of academic English. The right answer is the reply a real person would give.
- Listen to the **function** of what was said, not only the words: was it a request, an offer, a complaint, an apology, a suggestion? The reply has to match the function.
- Intonation carries meaning here. “You’re coming to the meeting?” with a rising tune is a question; the same words falling are a statement.
- △ An answer that repeats words from the prompt is usually wrong. Natural replies use different words.

Listen to a Conversation, and to an Announcement

- A **conversation** is two speakers, often a student and someone at a university — a tutor, a librarian, an office. Track **who wants what**: one speaker has a problem and the other offers a solution, and most questions sit on that line.
- An **announcement** is one speaker giving practical information: a change of room, a deadline, a procedure. Listen for what has **changed** and what the listener must

do.

- In both, a change of direction is signalled before it happens. *Actually, but, the thing is, having said that, on second thoughts* — a signpost tells you the next sentence matters.
- Numbers, dates, room names and prices are exactly the details these tasks ask about. Write them down as you hear them; do not trust your memory for a number.

Listen to an Academic Talk

A lecture-style talk on a study topic, with one main speaker.

- Do not try to write everything. Write the **shape**: the topic, then each new point on its own line, with a dash for the example that supports it. Your notes should look like the talk's outline, not like its transcript .
- Lecturers signal structure: *today I want to look at, there are three reasons, the first of these, which brings me to, so to summarise*. Those phrases are the outline, spoken aloud.
- Listen for the lecturer's **attitude** as well as the facts. *Surprisingly, of course, it is often claimed* and a change of tone all tell you what the speaker thinks — and some questions ask exactly that.
- An example is there to support a point. If you catch the example but not the point, you have the less useful half; ask yourself “what is this an example **of**?”

Training your ear

- **Listen once, like the test.** Practising with replays trains a skill the test does not measure. Play a recording once and answer; only then replay it to see what you missed.
- **Shadowing** — playing a sentence and saying it back immediately — is the fastest way to improve both listening and pronunciation, because it forces you to hear the whole sentence, not the words you already know.
- Accents: the test uses speakers from North America and elsewhere. Listen to a range on purpose, not only to the one you find easiest.
- Fifteen focused minutes a day beats two hours on Sunday. Listening is a habit of attention, and attention is trained by frequency.

Exam tips

- Practise **taking notes with your hand while your ears keep working**. Most students can do either but not both, and that is a skill you build in about two weeks.
- Use **abbreviations** you already know: arrows for cause and result, + and -, initials for long names. Inventing a system on test day costs you the first recording.
- If you miss an answer, mark the item, choose the best guess **now**, and move on. There is no penalty for a wrong answer and a blank scores the same as a wrong one.
- △ Watch the everyday tasks. Chinese candidates often score well on the academic talk and lose marks on the short conversation, because school listening practice is almost entirely academic.
- Format facts in this section were checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT content and structure.

Writing

TOEFL iBT

The Writing section and its clock

About **23 minutes**, about **12 items**, across three kinds of task: **Build a Sentence**, **Write an Email** and **Write for an Academic Discussion**.

- You type everything. There is no handwriting anywhere in the test.
- Twenty-three minutes is short, so there is no time for a long plan — but there is always time for a thirty-second one, and it is the best thirty seconds you will spend.
- △ The old **Integrated Writing** task, where you read a passage, heard a lecture and wrote about both, is **gone** from the 2026 test. If a practice book teaches it, the book is out of date.

Build a Sentence

You assemble or complete a sentence so that it is grammatically correct.

- **Accuracy is the whole point.** Nothing is being measured except whether the sentence is right.
- The traps are the ones Chinese candidates already know: **articles** (*a / the / nothing*), **agreement** (*the data show, each student has*), **tense** across a sentence, and the preposition that a particular verb takes (*depend on, consist of, result in*).
- Word order in English is fixed in ways Chinese is not: subject, verb, object; adverbs of frequency before the main verb; adjectives before the noun in a set order.
- Read your finished sentence once, slowly. Most errors here are visible on a second look and invisible on the first.

Write an Email

A short email that does a job: reply to a message, make a request, explain a problem, decline politely.

- Start by deciding **who you are writing to** and **what you want to happen**. Everything else follows from those two answers.
- **Register** is graded here. To a tutor or an office you are polite and slightly indirect: *I was wondering whether, would it be possible to, I would be grateful if*. To a classmate you are direct and warm.

- A good short email has four moves: **why you are writing, the detail, what you are asking for, a close**. Four sentences can carry all four.
- △ Do not open with *Dear Sir or Madam* when the prompt names the person, and do not sign off *Yours faithfully* in a message to a classmate. Getting the register wrong is more visible than a grammar slip, because it is wrong in every sentence at once.
- Answer **everything the prompt asks**. An email that is beautifully written and leaves out one of two requests has failed at the job the task set.

Write for an Academic Discussion

You are shown a professor's question and two students' replies, and you add your own contribution to the discussion.

- This is the task that most resembles real university work, and it is scored on whether you can **join a conversation**, not on whether you can write an essay.
- A contribution that scores well usually does four things:
 1. **States a position** clearly, in one sentence.
 2. **Gives a reason** for it.
 3. **Supports the reason** with an example, a consequence or a piece of evidence
 4. **Engages with a classmate** — agreeing and extending, or disagreeing and saying why.
- That fourth move is what separates a good answer from an average one, and it is the one Chinese candidates leave out most often. *I agree with Mei that... but I would add that...* is worth more than another paragraph of your own opinion.
- **Length:** one solid paragraph. You have minutes, not an hour. Write fewer sentences and make each one carry weight.
- △ Do not restate the professor's question before you start. It costs you a quarter of your time and earns nothing: the reader already knows what was asked.

What the marker is actually looking at

Across the writing tasks, four things are judged, and they are the same four that any English marker looks at:

What	What it means here
Task completion	you did everything the prompt asked, and nothing it did not
Organisation	a reader can follow your argument without going back
Vocabulary	precise words, used correctly, not long words used vaguely
Grammar	accurate sentences, with enough variety to be natural

- **A memorised phrase is a risk, not a shortcut.** *With the development of society* and *every coin has two sides* appear in thousands of scripts and add nothing; a marker reads straight past them and the words you spent on them are gone.
- **Precision beats decoration.** *Cost fell sharply after 2015* says more, and scores better, than *there was a considerable diminution in the pecuniary outlay*.
- **A short correct sentence outranks a long broken one.** Complexity only earns marks when it is accurate.

Exam tips

- **Type in English every day**, not just in practice tests. Typing speed is part of this section whether you like it or not.
- **Plan for thirty seconds** before the Academic Discussion task: position, reason, example, whose comment you will answer. Then write straight through.
- **Leave sixty seconds to read your answer back.** Look for articles, plurals and verb endings — those three account for most of the errors a Chinese candidate makes and can fix.
- Practise writing **to a person**: a tutor, an office, a classmate. An email with no sense of its reader is the commonest weak answer in this section.
- Format facts in this section were checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT content and structure.

Speaking

TOEFL iBT

The Speaking section and its clock

About **8 minutes**, about **11 items**, in two kinds of task: **Listen and Repeat** and **Take an Interview**.

- You speak into a microphone at a computer. There is no examiner in the room, and no one reacts to what you say — which is exactly what makes it feel strange the first time.
- △ The old independent and integrated speaking tasks, where you prepared for fifteen seconds and spoke for forty-five, are **gone** from the 2026 test.
- Eight minutes is short. Almost all of your preparation is therefore about **starting quickly**, not about having more to say.

Listen and Repeat

You hear a sentence and say it back.

- This belongs to **Speaking**, and it is scored on what you say. It is not a listening warm-up.
- You are being heard on **pronunciation**, on **stress** and on whether you reproduce the whole sentence, not on inventing anything new.
- The skill is holding a whole sentence in your head long enough to say it. That is trainable, and the training is simple: take any recording, play one sentence, say it back, and lengthen the sentences as you improve.
- Say it at a **normal speed**. Slowing down to be careful breaks the rhythm of the sentence, and rhythm is part of what is being judged.
- If you miss a word, keep going and finish the sentence. A complete sentence with one wrong word is worth much more than half a perfect one.

Take an Interview

You answer a series of spoken questions, as you would in a conversation.

- Answer the question that was asked, **first**. Then add one reason, and one example. That shape — answer, reason, example — fits almost every question and starts you speaking within a second.

- **A silence is worse than an imperfect sentence.** Fillers that real speakers use — *well, I suppose, that's an interesting one* — buy you a moment and sound natural. Long pauses do not.
- **Do not recite.** A memorised answer is audible: the rhythm changes, the vocabulary jumps a level, and it usually does not quite fit the question. Markers discount it.
- If you lose your way mid-sentence, **repair it out loud** — *sorry, what I mean is* — and carry on. That is what fluent speakers do, and it is marked as fluency, not as failure.
- Give reasons, not lists. *Because the bus is cheaper and I can read on it* is one good answer; three unexplained items is a weaker one.

What the marker is actually listening for

What	What it means here
Fluency	you keep going, at a natural speed, without long silences
Pronunciation	you can be understood without effort — not that you sound American
Vocabulary	the right word for the idea, used naturally
Grammar	accurate, with enough variety to sound like speech rather than a list

- **Being understood is the standard, not sounding native.** An accent is not an error. Sounds that change a word's meaning are.
- **Word stress** matters more than individual sounds. *PHOtograph, phoTOgrapher, photoGRAPHic* — the vowels change with the stress, and a listener tracks the stress first.
- **Sentence stress** carries meaning: *I didn't say she stole it* means six different things depending on which word you lean on.
- Practise the sounds that Chinese does not use: final consonants (*cost, asked, fifths*), /θ/ and /ð/ (*think, this*), and the /l/-/n/ and /r/ distinctions. A few minutes a day for a month is enough to change how easily you are understood.

Speaking with nobody in the room

- Record yourself and **listen back**. It is uncomfortable and it is the single most useful thing you can do — you will hear pauses, repetitions and unfinished sentences you did not notice.

- Practise **with a timer running**, answering aloud, into a microphone. The format is the hardest part for most candidates and it is free to rehearse.
- Talk to yourself in English during ordinary tasks: describe what you are doing, argue with a podcast, explain your day. Fluency is built by speaking hours, not by reading about speaking.
- △ A typed answer always flatters you. When you practise writing what you *would* say, you get no hesitation, no silence to fill, and as much time as you like. Speak it aloud instead.

Exam tips

- **Start within one second** of the prompt ending. The clock is short, and a slow start costs more than a poor sentence.
- **Finish your sentences.** An abandoned sentence reads as a breakdown; a simple completed one does not.
- **Warm your voice up** before the test — read aloud for five minutes. A cold first answer is a wasted one, and in an eight-minute section you cannot afford it.
- Do not try to use difficult vocabulary. Use the right word. Markers reward precision and hear straight through decoration.
- Format facts in this section were checked on the ETS website on 13 September 2026: TOEFL iBT content and structure.