

TOEFL Writing

Test Preparation and Strategies

Preparing for any international English exam can be a stressful and time-consuming experience. However, if you’ve gotten this far, congratulations! It takes a lot of hard work to arrive at this level. Now is when the real work begins. Taking an international exam requires discipline and not only a high level of English, but also a strong understanding of test taking strategies and a deep knowledge of the structure of the test. This document will address the structure of the writing section of the TOEFL test and some strategies to help you best tackle the exam.

Overview

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an international exam written and assessed in the United States of America. On the writing section of the exam, test takers are expected to respond to two individual tasks and convey meaning and understanding showing their level of English. The writing section is the last part of the test, taken in the fourth hour. This document will outline the structure of the writing exam and some strategies for your success.

This exam, like most international exams, follows a very strict pattern for each test. The writing section of this test is no different. There are two unique tasks in the writing section, which are outlined below, along with some strategies for each individual task, and then some overall strategies for the writing section as a whole.

Structure

The writing section of the test is presented in two tasks, known as the integrated writing task and the independent writing task. Their structure can be seen in the chart below:

Integrated Writing	Independent Writing
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Sources:
http://toefl.uobabylon.edu.iq/papers/ibt_2015_1842462.pdf
<http://www.fluentu.com/toefl/blog/toefl-independent-writing-topics-sample/>

<p>20 minutes</p> <p>You will first read an excerpt, then listen to a lecture on the same topic, and finally present the similarities or differences in your writing.</p> <p>150-225 words</p>	<p>30 minutes</p> <p>You will be given a prompt to write about, typically an 'agree or disagree' prompt or listing of some sort of characteristics.</p> <p>250-350 words</p>
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Below is a breakdown of both sections of the writing exam and some strategies for each one.

Task One—Integrated Writing

1. Take Notes

Remember that during this section of the exam you will be given a short reading followed by a listening passage. You will have a limited amount of time to read and will only have one opportunity to listen, so taking notes will be especially important. When you take your notes, focus only on the content of what you are reading or listening to, and draw your conclusions later. It can be distracting to try to take notes and draw conclusions at the same time, so it is important to separate the two. In addition, getting details is important, but your focus should first be on the larger ideas. Once you understand what those larger ideas are, it will be much easier to add the details.

2. Consider Your Structure

As with all writing, structure is very important to your success. In this section of the test, you must think about presenting your writing in a coherent way. Oftentimes this section of the test will ask you to summarize the main points of the lecture, and discuss how it either complements or contradicts the reading. In this way, you need to structure your paper from the point of view of the listening, and then implement parts of the reading as necessary. The most advised route of action is to write a brief one or two sentence introduction of the topic, followed by your analysis in one or two paragraphs, and finally a short conclusion of your findings. There is no golden ticket in this section as regards to structure, but making sure that you know how you are going to write your paper before you start the majority of your work is vitally important.

3. What Are the Facts?

This section is not looking for an analysis. It is looking for your ability to understand and digest data or facts. For this reason, you should focus most of your energy on drawing conclusions between the reading and the lecture, and worry less about the meaning of them individually. You will have access to the reading passage while you write for the sake of vocabulary and familiarity with the concepts, so use that to your advantage to remain within the realm of facts.

Task Two—Independent Writing



1. Make an Argument

The concept of the independent writing task on the TOEFL is to have you make an argument and defend it. For this reason, it is important that you choose one side of an argument and vigorously defend it. Again, as with other sections of the exam, it is not required that you actually believe your argument, but rather that you can find justification and examples that best back up your statement. While you plan, take some time to consider both sides of the argument try to find three strong justifications. Whichever one you feel most comfortable with is the one that you should defend.

2. Consider Your Structure

Structure of the independent writing task is especially important. It is highly recommended that you follow the five-paragraph form in presenting your paper. This structure includes an introduction with thesis statement that summarizes your argument and outlines the paper as a whole, three body paragraphs with topic sentences and justification that represent your three arguments, and a concluding paragraph that summarizes your overall thesis. It is by no means required, but is the most widely accepted and used form of presenting a discursive essay.

3. Support, Support, Support

One of the most important parts of your TOEFL writing is not only presenting coherent and well thought out arguments, but also defending them with vigor. Think of examples that best defend your point and that can apply in the real world, and tell a personal story (or invent one) if you can to try to demonstrate your argument even more fully. An essay that only makes statements but does not work to reinforce them is not a successful one and the TOEFL is looking for your ability to convey an idea in English. Justifying is your best route to achieving this, and should something to which you devote a large amount of your mental energy.

General strategies

1. Focus on Content

The TOEFL is an exam that assesses your ability to draw conclusions and communicate concepts in English. These things should be your number one goal. Yes—you should strive to write flawless English, but your focus must be on conveying ideas. Once you feel very comfortable with the content of your writing, move on to your effective use of the technicalities of the language.

2. Keyboard Proficiency

The TOEFL writing exam is administered 100% using computer technology. You will definitely want to brush up on your keyboard skills before the exam, especially if you use the old one-finger method of typing. Knowing your way around the keyboard is an incredibly helpful skill, as it can save you loads of time especially in this section of the exam. If this is a worry for you, be sure to take a keyboarding class before the test date.



3. Implement Key Phrases and Vocabulary

Coming to the test with a few idioms and advanced vocabulary in your back pocket can be very helpful. Phrases and idioms demonstrate a mastery of the language because native speakers use them constantly. But be careful—don't come with a list of 30 phrases and words, and use them only if you feel very comfortable. Having a manageable list of five phrases and five vocabulary words is much easier to work with, and incorrectly using a phrase or word can be damaging to your score, so be sure that you know the context of their usage as well.

4. Planning is Paramount

These tests are administered with a time limit, so knowing how to best utilize that short time is very important. Even more important is to take some time and plan your essays. Yes, you're probably thinking 'but 20 or 30 minutes is *no time* to write, I just have to start writing like crazy!'. Yes, you may feel stressed about time, but taking five minutes to plan your essay before you start writing can really help to make the actual process of writing much faster. Once you are able to lay out your concepts, write a thesis statement and some topic sentences, you will find that the rest is just filling in with justification and language. It will also help you to structure your writing, which is a graded part of this test. Experiment with your planning it will pay off bigly.

5. Answer the Question

One thing that will certainly lower your score is not answering the question. For instance, if the integrated writing task asks you to frame your answer from the point of view of the lecture, and you write mostly about the reading passage, you have not answered the question. Similarly, if the independent writing task asks you to either agree or disagree with a statement, and you spend most of your time summarizing the argument itself, you have not answered the question. Before you begin and while you plan, you should be constantly asking yourself what the question is and how you are going to answer it. In this way, you can be assured that your score will go up.

6. Use Transition and Signal Language

There are many words in English that can help you show the form of your paper. For instance, using words like 'first', 'additionally' and 'finally' can help the reader to see which point you are making seamlessly and easily. Additionally, using conjunctions and contrasting language can help the reader to see what you're talking about explicitly, and can help to really drive your main message home. Study up on this language and know how to use it effectively in context before the test.

7. Study the Rubric

Typically available to you online or in a test preparation book will be the rubrics that test graders use to evaluate your writing. Study this rubric in detail and know what exactly they will be looking for when they grade your paper in order to be more informed about your writing.

Sources:

http://toefl.uobabylon.edu.iq/papers/ibt_2015_1842462.pdf

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These same criteria will be used to grade you, so studying it can only benefit in your practice for the exam itself.

8. Practice Makes Permanent

The notion the “practice makes perfect” is a very flawed one. How you practice is how you will perform on the test. If you practice inconsistently and don’t have a plan, this will reflect in your test score, but if you look at the details and practice your weaknesses, you will certainly be more successful. Coming up with a plan, and seeking out valuable resources will undoubtedly result in a more ideal score and hopefully save you some time and money in the long run.

9. Take a Preparation Course

If there is one thing that is true about most international exams it is that they are not cheap. Oftentimes making an investment in a preparation course can mean the difference between taking the test once or three times, which can be a sound use of your money in the long run. Because these tests follow a specific formula, studying for the test and mastering test taking skills will often lead to a higher score and more positive outcome for the student.