

How to speed read to improve your IELTS reading score

Do you have problems with timing in the reading test and find it difficult to finish the reading paper or answer all the questions in 60 minutes? Well, you are not alone, lots of candidates find timing to be a challenge with the reading paper, as you only have about 90 seconds to answer each question. They either run out of time and leave questions blank, or don't leave enough time at the end to check they have spelt their answers correctly, and lose marks. However, if you train your brain to read more quickly by using speed-reading techniques, it is possible to finish the paper with time to spare to check your answers and potentially get a higher score.

However, speed-reading doesn't mean reading every single word more quickly. In fact it's about using techniques to pick out the important words and phrases in a text, so you can actually understand the main ideas in the text more quickly. Developing your speed-reading skills will not only help you with the IELTS test but will be invaluable in other areas of your life, as anyone who has ever studied or worked in an environment where they have to assimilate large amounts of information will tell you.

The first thing to understand is that the way you read a passage for the IELTS test is not the same as when you read an article or a novel in English; here you would normally read slowly and methodically, maybe stopping to look up a new word or to record new vocabulary in a notebook. Reading like this will help improve your vocabulary and your English in general but it won't help you finish the paper in time. Advanced students often make the mistake of spending too much time reading the text, trying to understand the meaning of every single word, believing this will help them answer the questions, only to panic when they see the clock ticking down! Also, some candidates unconsciously read the passage aloud in their head, pronouncing every word, which means they also end up reading much more slowly than they realise.

One aspect of speed-reading is 'skimming' which simply means reading a long text quickly, in order to get an overall understanding of its content and structure. You do this by focusing on the key words, or content words, and ignoring all the extra ones. This is actually something we do a lot in everyday life, whenever we scroll through the messages on our phones or 'flick' through a newspaper, deciding what article or news story is interesting enough for us to want to read it more closely.

So, in the test, you should aim to spend no more than 3 minutes looking at the title of the passage, any headings, the questions, and skim reading the whole text. Whilst skimming you should also underline or highlight names, dates, places, and any other key information, to help you navigate



your way around the text, when you start answering the questions.

If you find it difficult to skim read, or are tempted to read every word, try the following to find out which technique helps you read and grasp the general idea of a text more quickly:

- Read the title and the first sentence and last sentence of each paragraph to get the main idea or the 'gist' of the passage.
- Take a paragraph and underline the nouns and verbs ignoring everything else.
- Read phrases and not individual words by jumping over words or make your eyes focus on groups of words.
- Use your finger to sweep along the line as you read so your eyes move as quickly as your finger does.
- Hold a pencil below the line you're reading and move it down the page as you read.

Whatever you do, don't re-read a sentence you have already read, or allow words or phrases you are not familiar with to distract you. Instead, if you're practising at home, write them down and look them up afterwards.

Another feature of speed-reading is scanning, which is about locating specific information as quickly as possible by running your eyes over a page of text in a 'zig-zag' pattern or from right to left or top to bottom, it doesn't matter how you do it. The idea is to find the part of the text that contains a key word or synonym from the question you're answering and then read this part of the text carefully. For example, if the question involves a date this should be easy, as you should have already underlined this information when you were skim reading. Remember, when scanning the text, most of the answers are in order, so if you find the answer to number 1 then the passage containing the answer to number 2 will come after, so you don't need to keep re-reading the text. Also, some paragraphs might contain the answers to several questions and some may not contain any answers.

To practise scanning, you could ask a friend to give you a list of words from a passage, for you to find as quickly as possible or, if you have a study partner, you could have a scanning race and each pick out 10 words from a text, swap them and see who can find theirs the quickest! Or, if you are studying on your own, have a look at this BBC website for some great worksheets and practice exercises.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/skillswise/skimming-and-scanning/zd39f4j>

As you start to read faster, you will find that skimming and scanning will become more natural, so it really is worth becoming aware of and practising these two skills as part of your preparation, to make sure that you achieve your best possible score in the IELTS reading paper.

