

BandCheck

IELTS Writing -- examiner-grade analysis

The IELTS Writing rubric, annotated

Band 6 to Band 7 - the moves examiners actually look for

This guide is sent free to readers of the BandCheck blog.

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How to read this guide

Most students chase Band 7 without a clear picture of what it actually looks like. They aim for 'longer essays' and 'more advanced vocabulary' - neither of which appears in the band descriptors. This guide walks through the four criteria your essay is graded on. Each criterion gets three pages:

- What it really measures, plus Band 6 / 7 / 8 descriptors side by side.
- Three Band 6 -> Band 7 rewrites with the reason each one fixes the criterion.
- The most common Band 6 mistakes for this criterion, plus a concrete self-test.

The criteria are weighted equally. Your overall band is the average of the four, then rounded to the nearest half-band. To get an overall 7, you need 7s on at least three of the four - compensating with a single 8 is harder than students think.

How to use it

Don't read end-to-end. Pick the criterion you're weakest on, read its three pages, then run the test on your most recent essay. Move to the next criterion only after you've applied the previous one to a fresh essay.

1. Task Response

Did you answer the question, fully and on point?

TR isn't about word count. It asks three things: did you address every part of the prompt, did you hold one position, and did you develop your ideas with specifics rather than generalities? The single biggest TR loss at Band 6 is unanswered sub-questions. Prompts like 'Discuss both views AND give your opinion' have two questions; many candidates answer only one.

Band descriptors, side by side

Band 6

addresses the task only partially; tendency to over-generalise; position is not always clear; some main ideas are insufficiently developed.

Band 7

addresses all parts of the task; presents a clear position throughout; presents, extends and supports main ideas, but may still over-generalise occasionally.

Band 8

sufficiently addresses all parts; presents a well-developed response with relevant, extended and supported ideas.

Task Response: Band 6 -> Band 7 in practice

Three sentence-level rewrites. The 'why' line names the move that does the work - copy the move, not the words.

BAND 6

In my opinion, there are advantages and disadvantages to this issue.

BAND 7 FIX

While the freedom to work remotely improves employee well-being, the productivity cost outweighs that benefit for most knowledge teams.

WHY

Band 6 sits on the fence. Band 7 commits to a position and qualifies it.

BAND 6

Cities are becoming more crowded every year.

BAND 7 FIX

Cities like Lagos and Dhaka now grow at over 4% annually, faster than housing or transit can keep up, which forces millions into informal settlements.

WHY

Specifics plus a consequence turn a generic claim into a supported one.

BAND 6

In conclusion, both sides of the argument have valid points.

BAND 7 FIX

Having weighed both, I side with the second view: the long-term cost of unregulated automation exceeds the short-term productivity gain.

WHY

Prompts that ask for YOUR opinion need it explicitly. Closing without one caps TR at Band 6.

Task Response: common mistakes and a test

Most common Band 6 mistakes for this criterion

- Two-question, one-answer: prompt has two questions, essay addresses one.
- Hedge-only position: 'It depends' with no resolution.
- Generic illustration ('Many studies show...') without naming a study, sector, or country.

Test it on your own essay

Pick any sentence from your body paragraphs. Can you explain in five words why it supports your thesis? If not, that sentence is drifting, and TR drops with every drift.

2. Coherence & Cohesion

Can the reader follow your logic without re-reading?

CC measures organisation at two scales: BETWEEN paragraphs (does each paragraph push the argument one step forward?) and WITHIN paragraphs (does each sentence flow from the previous one?). The signature Band 6 marker is mechanical transitions: Firstly, Secondly, Thirdly, In conclusion. It reads like a checklist, not an argument. Band 7 uses RELATIONSHIP words, not ORDER words.

Band descriptors, side by side

Band 6

arranges info coherently; uses cohesive devices but cohesion may be faulty or mechanical; may not always use referencing clearly.

Band 7

logically organises information; clear progression throughout; uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately, though there may be some under- or over-use.

Band 8

sequences ideas logically; manages all aspects of cohesion well; uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately.

Coherence & Cohesion: Band 6 -> Band 7 in practice

Three sentence-level rewrites. The 'why' line names the move that does the work - copy the move, not the words.

BAND 6

Secondly, technology has changed jobs.

BAND 7 FIX

A more pressing concern is how quickly the skills involved are themselves changing.

WHY

'Secondly' announces a list. 'A more pressing concern' tells the reader WHY this idea matters more than the last.

BAND 6

Governments should fund renewable energy. This is important. It would help.

BAND 7 FIX

Governments should fund renewable energy. Doing so directly cuts greenhouse output and signals to markets that fossil-fuel investment is winding down.

WHY

Strings of vague This/It/They weaken cohesion. Replace each one with the noun phrase you actually mean.

BAND 6

Now I will discuss the disadvantages of this approach.

BAND 7 FIX

Yet this flexibility comes at a cost.

WHY

Don't announce the paragraph. Hand the reader a thread that connects to the previous one.

Coherence & Cohesion: common mistakes and a test

Most common Band 6 mistakes for this criterion

- Over-use of Firstly / Secondly / Finally - examiners flag three uses as overused.
- Vague 'this' / 'it' without a concrete antecedent the reader can point to.
- One-sentence paragraphs in academic Writing - rare but raises CC concerns.

Test it on your own essay

Read your essay out loud. At every paragraph break, can you predict the next paragraph's main idea from the LAST sentence of the previous paragraph? If yes, your cohesion is at Band 7+.

3. Lexical Resource

Precise vocabulary, not 'advanced' vocabulary.

LR rewards range AND precision. A precise common word beats an imprecise advanced one every time. Examiners can spot 'thesaurus disease' instantly: 'utilise' for 'use', 'ameliorate' for 'improve' - same dictionary entry, different collocations, different registers. Wrong collocation = LR loss, regardless of how impressive the word looks.

Band descriptors, side by side

Band 6

manages an adequate range; uses less common items but may have errors in word choice or collocation; tries to paraphrase but with mixed success.

Band 7

a sufficient range with some flexibility and precision; uses less common items with some awareness of style and collocation; may produce occasional errors.

Band 8

a wide range fluently and flexibly; skilful use of less common lexis; produces rare errors only as slips.

Lexical Resource: Band 6 -> Band 7 in practice

Three sentence-level rewrites. The 'why' line names the move that does the work - copy the move, not the words.

BAND 6

Governments should ameliorate the prices of public transport.

BAND 7 FIX

Governments should subsidise public transport to keep fares low.

WHY

'Ameliorate' doesn't take 'prices' as an object. Either say 'lower prices' or use a verb that fits ('subsidise', 'cap').

BAND 6

We must do efforts to protect the environment.

BAND 7 FIX

We must make a sustained effort to protect the environment.

WHY

'Make an effort' is the fixed collocation. 'Do an effort' marks L2 speech in one phrase.

BAND 6

Climate change is a very big problem.

BAND 7 FIX

Climate change is the largest collective-action problem of this century.

WHY

Empty intensifiers ('very big', 'really important') are dead weight. Reach for the precise scale word.

Lexical Resource: common mistakes and a test

Most common Band 6 mistakes for this criterion

- Thesaurus-pulls: 'utilise' instead of 'use' - no nuance gained, often wrong register.
- Word-form errors: 'He has many advantage' - should be 'advantages'.
- Inflated abstract nouns: 'the situation of poverty' instead of just 'poverty'.

Test it on your own essay

Highlight every adjective and adverb in your last paragraph. Cross out the empty ones: very, really, many, some, important. For each, either substitute a precise word - or delete it. If the sentence still works, you didn't need the word.

4. Grammatical Range & Accuracy

Sentence variety AND error-free execution.

GA tracks two dimensions: the RANGE of structures you produce (simple, compound, complex, complex-compound) AND the ACCURACY rate. A short error-free sentence outscores a long error-ridden one. 'Complex' doesn't mean 'long': a complex sentence has at least one dependent clause. Most Band 6 essays use one complex structure (relative clauses with 'which / who'); examiners want to see subordinators (although, because, while, despite), conditionals, and participial phrases.

Band descriptors, side by side

Band 6

uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms; makes some errors in grammar/punctuation but they rarely impede meaning.

Band 7

uses a variety of complex structures; produces frequent error-free sentences; good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors.

Band 8

uses a wide range of structures; the majority of sentences are error-free; makes only very occasional errors or inappropriacies.

Grammatical Range & Accuracy: Band 6 -> Band 7 in practice

Three sentence-level rewrites. The 'why' line names the move that does the work - copy the move, not the words.

BAND 6

Public transport is cheap. Many people use it.

BAND 7 FIX

Because public transport is cheap, it remains the dominant commute mode in most large cities.

WHY

Two facts joined into one causal claim. Same information, stronger structure.

BAND 6

Cities are crowded, this creates many issues.

BAND 7 FIX

Cities are crowded, which creates issues with transport, housing, and air quality.

WHY

Comma splice (two independent clauses joined by a bare comma). Either use a conjunction ('and'), a relative ('which'), or a semicolon.

BAND 6

If governments will invest more, the situation would improve.

BAND 7 FIX

If governments invested more, the situation would improve.

WHY

Second conditional: 'if + past simple, would + base verb'. No 'will' in the if-clause.

Grammatical Range & Accuracy: common mistakes and a test

Most common Band 6 mistakes for this criterion

- Subject-verb disagreement with intervening phrases: 'The number of cars on the road have grown' (should be 'has grown').
- Dangling participles: 'Looking at the chart, sales were rising' (should be 'Looking at the chart, we see sales were rising').
- 'There is many' / 'There are much' - verb has to agree with the real subject.

Test it on your own essay

Pick any 10 consecutive sentences from your last essay. Count the completely error-free ones. At Band 6 it's typically 3-4. At Band 7, 5-7. At Band 8, 8+. Below 5? Accuracy is hurting you more than range.

Cheatsheet: four questions to ask before you submit

Print this page or screenshot it. Before you press submit on any essay, run all four questions. Answer 'yes' to all four and you're at Band 7+.

TR Task Response

Have I answered EVERY part of the prompt with a clear, committed position?

CC Coherence & Cohesion

Could a stranger follow my logic without re-reading any sentence?

LR Lexical Resource

Is each adjective and adverb doing real work - or is it filler?

GA Grammatical Range & Accuracy

How many of my last 10 sentences are completely error-free? (Aim: 7+.)

Seven essay killers

Specific anti-patterns that drop a Band 7-capable essay to Band 6. Memorise the names; spot them in your own drafts.

The memorised opening

'In today's modern world...' / 'Since the dawn of civilisation...' - examiners are trained to spot these from the first line. Start with the topic, not a template.

Both-sides-without-resolution

Discussing both views and never picking one. If the prompt asks for your opinion, not having one caps the essay at Band 6 even if everything else is perfect.

Fabricated statistics

'Studies show 90% of...' - naming no study. If you don't know a real number, don't invent one. Specifics without source name are fine ('In countries like Denmark...'); fake statistics get noticed.

Reaching for the big word

'We must utilise governments to ameliorate environmental deterioration.' Every word reaches; the collocations break. 'We must pressure governments to protect the environment' is Band 7 because every word fits.

Wall-of-text paragraphs

No paragraph breaks between intro and conclusion. CC drops immediately. Aim for 4-5 sentences per paragraph, four paragraphs total for a Task 2.

Conclusions that introduce new ideas

A conclusion summarises and resolves. New points belong in the body. If a new point came to you in the conclusion, you needed a fourth body paragraph, not a conclusion.

Tense-shifting mid-paragraph

'In the past, people walked. Today, most are driving but soon they will be cycle more.' Pick a tense per claim and stay there until the claim changes.

Your next seven days

Reading this guide changes nothing on its own. This is the minimum-effort routine that turns the information into a band.

Day 1 - Read

Read this guide. Pick the ONE criterion you're weakest on.

Day 2 - Diagnose

Take an essay you've written recently. Apply that criterion's test, sentence by sentence. Mark each sentence individually - no group judgements.

Day 3 - Rewrite

Rewrite five sentences from that essay using the Band 6 -> Band 7 examples on the criterion's page as your template.

Day 4 - Practise

Write a fresh 40-minute Task 2 essay on a new prompt, no help. Apply what you rewrote yesterday.

Day 5 - Self-grade

Run the four-question cheatsheet on this fresh essay. Then submit it to BandCheck for an external grade.

Day 6 - Compare

Where did your self-grade and the AI grade diverge? Each divergence points at a blind spot - usually CC ('it sounded fine when I wrote it') or LR ('I thought that word worked').

Day 7 - Pick next week

From the AI report, pick the lowest-scoring criterion. Next week, repeat the same loop on that criterion.

Grade your next essay in 30 seconds

BandCheck grades any IELTS Writing essay against the same four criteria covered in this guide. AI feedback, per-criterion scores, a band estimate, and the specific top three improvements for your essay. Free for new users.

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