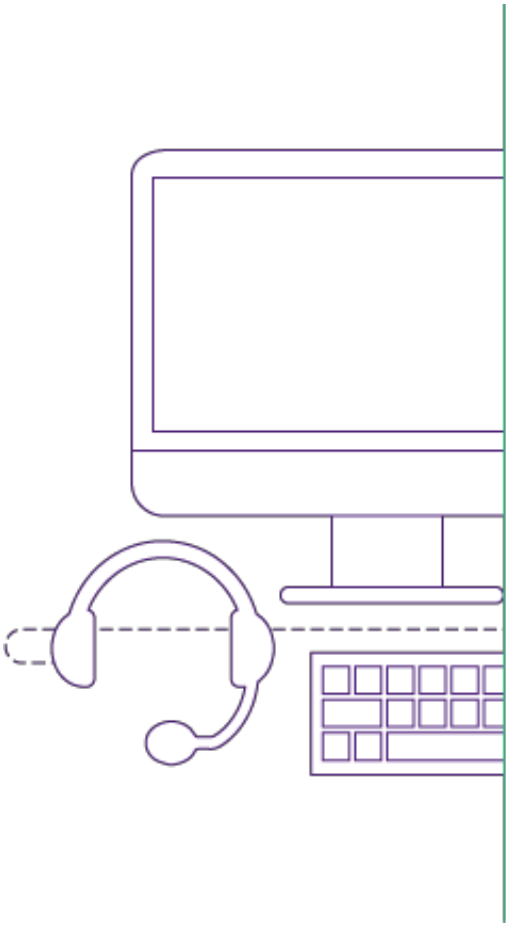


Magoosh Guide to the TOEFL iBT

Table of Contents

Introduction

This eBook is meant to serve as a roadmap that provides a comprehensive overview of the TOEFL, combining crucial information on test structure and question types and providing essential strategies and tips for doing the best you can on test day. The information in this eBook is a synthesis of some of the best content on the Magoosh TOEFL blog. No matter where you are in your studies, if you're preparing for the TOEFL, this eBook is for you!

The Magoosh Team

Who is Magoosh?

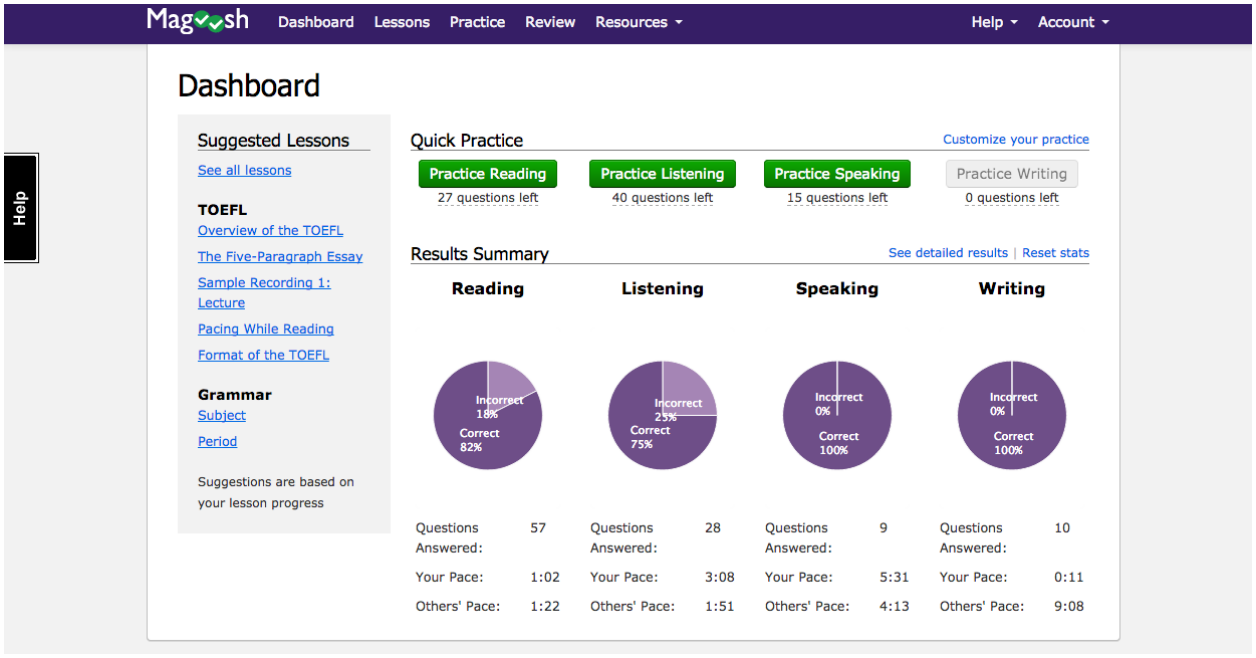
Magoosh is a group of passionate educators in Berkeley, California.

Email us at help@magoosh.com if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions!

What is Magoosh?

Magoosh is an online TOEFL prep course that offers:

- over 100 TOEFL video lessons
- practice questions
- material created by expert tutors
- e-mail support
- personalized statistics based on performance
- access anytime, anywhere from an internet-connected device

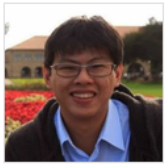


Featured in

Mashable San Francisco Chronicle Xconomy wiredacademic
The Telegraph KTVU THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. The Boston Globe

Why Our Students Love Us

These are survey responses sent to us by students after they took the TOEFL. All of these students and many more have used the Magoosh TOEFL prep course to improve their scores!



What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	102
What was your reading score?	27
What was your listening score?	23
What was your speaking score?	24
What was your writing score?	28

How did Magoosh help you?
I used it to find how the flow and the structure of the test is like. I did not have a lot of time to prepare for the test so reading the official ETS book was not advisable. I wanted something quick, interactive and not too pricey. I am glad that I turned to Magoosh! The videos, especially on the writing section gave really good tips and I am proud to say, it is the section that I scored the highest!

What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	103
What was your reading score?	26
What was your listening score?	25
What was your speaking score?	24
What was your writing score?	28

How did Magoosh help you?
Magoosh TOEFL is really good and i especially loved the reading and listening questions.

What was your overall score on the actual TOEFL?	110
What was your reading score?	27
What was your listening score?	27
What was your speaking score?	28
What was your writing score?	28

How did Magoosh help you?
Primarily, Magoosh taught me the test much faster than I ever would if I had to do it by myself. Considering I had very little time, and that I had very good experience with Magoosh previously with their GRE product, I thought I'd give it a go. From the time I had registered, I had about 3 weeks to my TOEFL.??

Being a non-native speaker, it helps to have your academic background in English medium--which I did. So, what I needed was to learn the TOEFL i.e. the test pattern, the kind of questions, how to practice (especially note-taking!), what counts as a good answer, etc. Mr. Lucas Fink of Magoosh did a great job at breaking every section down and explaining the best ways to prepare for and tackle them. Additionally, it was nice to see they had quite a lot of well-made grammar lessons to help those not quite as adept in English, especially in their sentence-making.

Although many tend to overlook the need to learn the test, I believe it is crucial to anyone who wants to attain a good score. And for that, I highly recommend prepping with Magoosh. They have helped me familiarize with and understand the TOEFL very quickly--all from the comfort of my home.

Meet the Authors



Lucas Fink is the resident TOEFL expert at Magoosh. Standardized tests and English grammar are two of Lucas's favorite things, and he's been teaching both since 2008. He is a lifelong writer, a choosy reader, a persnickety editor, and a puzzle enthusiast.

David Recine has an MA TESOL and is an expert blogger at Magoosh. He has been teaching ESL since 2007, and has worked with students from every continent. When he's not teaching or writing, David studies Korean, plays with his four year old son, and takes road trips.

Kate Hardin has 6 years of experience teaching foreign language and writes for the Magoosh blog. She graduated from Sewanee in 2012, where she studied and taught German, and recently returned from a year spent teaching English in a northern Russian university.

Introduction to the TOEFL iBT

What's on the TOEFL?

The TOEFL iBT Format

The TOEFL iBT is divided into four sections, each of which tests one language skill. The test isn't adaptive, which means the questions don't get harder if you do really well or easier if you get a few questions wrong. Multiple forms of the test exist and they change often, which helps to prevent cheating, but all of the tests are close to equally difficult. You can learn about each of the four sections individually below, and later on, we'll dedicate an entire section to each part of the test.

The Reading Section

This first section tests your ability to understand academic written English. The material in this section may be different from the English you've read before, especially if you read fiction or popular literature, because it is based on material that English-speaking college students are expected to read and understand. So it's a good idea to get familiar with this style of writing. The reading passages can cover a wide variety of topics including art, history, science, and social sciences, which we'll cover later on.

You will have one hour to read the three reading passages and answer the accompanying questions. After the full text is printed, questions will be grouped by paragraph, which saves you some time and makes it easier to find the information you need. You will see some unfamiliar words in this section, but that's OK–if the word is necessary, can't be figured out from context, and is specific to the topic of the text (not used in normal English), the test may allow you to click on the word and get a definition. Each question is worth the same amount, so don't get stuck for too long on one question. You will have 20 minutes per passage, including the questions.

The Listening Section

Now that your language skills are warmed up, you'll move on to listening, which will test your ability to understand both academic lectures and conversations related to university life. Like the reading section, the listening section will last about an hour. Throughout the entire test, you will have the option of taking notes; in the listening section, this will be essential. Practice listening and writing at the same time, because the lectures are 3-5 minutes long, and you will not be able to remember all the necessary information. The conversations will be shorter, but note-taking will still be very helpful. In all you will listen to 4 or 6 lectures and 2 or 3 conversations.

The Speaking Section

The speaking section is the shortest, lasting about 20 minutes. It will involve some independent tasks, which require you to express an opinion briefly (you will have up to a minute to speak), and some integrated tasks, in which you will need to use information from reading and listening in your spoken answers. There are two questions that require you to read, listen and speak, and two that require you only to listen then speak. In all you will answer 6 questions in the speaking section.

The Writing Section

As in the speaking section, you will complete an integrated task (20 minutes) and an independent task (30 minutes). The independent task is a persuasive essay, meaning you should express and support an opinion. The integrated task will give you an excerpt from a lecture, an excerpt from a written article, and a question. Your task will be to combine the information from the lecture with that from the written article in order to answer the question. Manage your time well! On the TOEFL you will use a standard QWERTY keyboard. If you need to, now is a good time to practice typing in English, as you will not want to waste time searching for the right letter on the keyboard.

The Experimental Section

Generally speaking, we consider the TOEFL to have an hour of reading, an hour of listening, twenty minutes of speaking, and fifty minutes of writing. But you may have noticed that there's some flexibility in the schedule: the reading section, officially, can be sixty or eighty minutes, and the listening section may be just an hour or an hour and a half. This is because there are extra questions in one section of the test—the "experimental section."

All tests include an additional set of listening or reading questions that aren't graded. This gives ETS a chance to find any flaws in new material before it really matters. It's a trial for new exam questions.

The experimental section will be either an extra reading passage (20 minutes) or an extra set of listening prompts (up to 30 minutes)--not both.

The experimental section will be randomly placed. If it's a reading passage, of course, all the experimental questions will be together, as they will deal with the same reading; if it's in the listening section, however, the experimental listening samples will be interspersed with the graded ones. **Don't waste your time trying to guess which section is the experimental one. "**Experimental" questions do **not** look different from graded questions. If you think you've identified the experimental section and you don't try as hard on it, your score will suffer if you are mistaken.

In spite of the additional time and energy the experimental section will cost you, you may find that knowing what to expect in it helps calm your nerves. It means that if a reading passage is very difficult for you, it won't necessarily hurt your scores; it is possible that reading is experimental. So if there is a text or lecture that baffles you, answer the

questions to the best of your ability, but use the knowledge that it may be experimental to keep yourself on track.

How Hard is the TOEFL?

So... Is the TOEFL Easy?

When it comes to preparing for the TOEFL, the difficulty of the test is the elephant in the room (meaning everyone is wondering about it, but no one quite knows what to do). Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to this question. The research that has been done on the subject has one major, unavoidable flaw: it's very difficult to scientifically determine language difficulty. With that in mind, let's take a look at the individual sections of the test and consider their difficulty as best we can.

How Hard is the TOEFL Reading Section?

Generally speaking, TOEFL reading is near the same difficulty as reading authentic American news sources, although the subject matter and vocabulary aren't exactly the same. News media are not as focused on science and history as the TOEFL is.
That academic focus is a large part of the difficulty. According to a study from 2012, TOEFL reading is slightly more difficult than the average written English text, largely because the reading section uses more academic vocabulary. But this sense of "difficulty" depends on your native language, in part. That's because there is no conversational, informal English in the text—only material you might find in a book that you read for a university class. And if your native language has Latin roots (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, or French), then academic English may be easy compared to informal English, because academic English often has Latin roots. If your mother tongue *isn't* Latin-based, though, those academic words are more difficult, because they are rare in

general English. Words like "comprise," for example, show up more often in TOEFL reading, but only rarely in relaxed speech.

Meanwhile, the timing of the reading section can also cause some serious trouble. You must be able to read those academic texts at a natural pace. Maybe you can work slowly through an article in the New Yorker with the help of a dictionary, but that doesn't mean you're going to get a top score on TOEFL reading. You have to read 750 words and answer 14 multiple choice questions in just 20 minutes.

That said, the TOEFL reading is easier than reading comprehension on the GRE, GMAT, or SAT, because you don't need to understand as many subtle details. You only really need the plain information that is written, rather than the author's intentions.

How Hard is the TOEFL Listening Section?

For a lot of students, the listening section is the hardest. The reading section has the hardest vocabulary, but the listening section gives us two major problems that the reading doesn't. First of all, the recordings, though they are slightly slower than natural speech, are otherwise completely natural. They include all the “umms,” “likes,” “y’knows,” and sloppy pronunciation that make American speech sound the way it does. Second, you can only hear each recording once, and they can be over five minutes long. It’s tough to pay attention that long, and it’s even tougher to remember the information from the beginning of the lecture once you get to the questions. If you can listen to lots authentic speech (TV shows, for example), then you're in a good position.

That's not to say that the TOEFL listening is very similar to American or English TV. It's not. TV shows are *much* more difficult, on average, because characters speak more quickly, use more idioms, and often speak at the same time as each other. TOEFL listening is comparatively simple (even though it is often academic, about scientific

topics). But keep in mind that the listening section is difficult largely because of the amount of information you hear and the expectations of *memory*. You need to take notes and remember a lot of detail!

How Hard are the TOEFL Speaking and Writing Sections?

I'm going to group these two sections into one, here, because they're equally hard to measure. Consider two things:

- 2/3 of speaking and 1/2 of writing are about reading and/or listening
- There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to measure difficulty with

On that first point, the difficulty of these sections is very similar to the difficulty of the other sections, because they include the same skills, the same academic vocabulary, and the same "natural" speech that you listen to. So you might say that these two sections are similar in difficult to the reading and listening sections.

But on the other hand, answering a question such as "Name a person you respect, and explain why" can give a very wide range of answers, depending on your level of English. So you might say that it's a "hard" question because you can give a complicated answer. But you could also say it's "easy," because a simple answer with common vocabulary is also possible. What we mean to is that the difficulty here is based largely on how advanced your vocabulary and grammar are. It's really just a range from non-communicative up to native-speaking. The difficulty depends on **you** and your vocabulary and grammar.

What to Expect on Test Day

The Testing Center

Many testing centers are computer labs in schools or universities. You need to be at the testing center about half an hour early to fill out paperwork and get settled, but plan on arriving even a little before that so you have time to figure out where to go. There is usually a security screening of some type (so that people don't bring in recording devices). There will be a second room where you can keep anything that isn't allowed into the testing site, which brings me to my next topic.

What to Bring

Almost everything will be provided for you at the testing center. You do need your registration number, two *original* forms of picture ID (driver's license, national/international passport). You don't need paper or a pencil, as those will be provided. Bring some water and a snack, but leave everything else at home, unless you're comfortable with leaving it in the (possibly unsecured) storage area throughout the test.

We recommend that the snack (or drink) you bring have a bit of sugar in it. Studies have shown that lemonade or something sweet can help your test-taking ability and stop you from getting tired. But don't drink a liter of coca-cola! Too much sugar has the opposite effect, and makes it harder to think clearly.

During the Test

During the test, you'll be given paper for taking notes, a pencil, and headphones with an attached microphone with which to record your answers. ETS says that the headphones are noise-canceling, but we've never seen that—don't expect it. There will be a mandatory 10-minute break about halfway through (after the reading and listening

sections), just enough time to have your snack and stretch a little. You *can* take breaks at any time during the test, but the clock will not stop, so only do that for a real emergency. If you do need to get up, raise your hand and wait for somebody who works at the test center to come to you.

After the Test

When you're finished, you can submit your answers, collect your belongings, and go. You can even go early if you want, but why would you do that? Unless you somehow managed to break your leg during the test and require medical attention, use all the time you're given.

Scoring

How the TOEFL Scoring System Works

Unfortunately, the TOEFL score scale isn't the most straightforward. So hopefully we can make it a little bit clearer for you.

How are TOEFL Scores Created?

Like any standardized test (e.g. the GRE, GMAT, SAT⋯) the TOEFL has its own unique scoring system. It is not a percent-correct score, so getting 100 on the TOEFL doesn't mean you're a native speaker!

Instead, the maximum score on the TOEFL is 120. The test is broken into four parts, and the scores reflect that. Each of the four sections—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—is worth 30 points. Generally speaking, graduate school or college programs do not look seriously at the individual scores, though: the combined score out of 120 is the most important number.

How Is the Percent Correct Related to the Final TOEFL Score?

Since the TOEFL is standardized, the scores are "equated." This means that the number of correct answers you have does not correspond perfectly with the final mark.
This is because one version of the exam might be harder than another version. One test might have a reading passage which average students have a lot of trouble on, but another test might have slightly easier reading passages. Equating the tests means that TOEFL scores are comparable even though test-takers read different passages, hear different lectures, and answer different questions on different days.

ETS does not share their system for equating scores, so it's not easy to calculate your TOEFL score using just a percentage correct. Each test must be scored differently from other versions of the test.

What's a Good TOEFL Score?

Unlike most other tests we take, you can't pass or fail the TOEFL. No score can really be said to be "good" or "bad", just as no level of English is inherently "good" or "bad"—it all depends on what kind of language you use and what you need it for. Fortunately, most universities take the guesswork out by stating exactly what score you need to qualify for their programs.

There's a huge range here: some schools require a score as low as 70 points, and others as high as 110. From a practical standpoint, the score required by the school you're interested in should be considered a "good" score.

If you're taking the SAT or GRE, you may have noticed the culture of scraping up as many points as possible; it's not uncommon for people to spend months and months studying and then take the test multiple times over a period of six months or a year. There's absolutely nothing wrong with this, since even a fairly small increase in score can give you the competitive edge that gets you admitted or wins the scholarship that allows you to attend the school of your dreams.

The TOEFL, however, is a little different. If a school states a score, then the office of admissions has determined that that score is what's necessary to perform well in that school's curriculum. So as long as you meet the requirement, your score probably won't play much of a role in your admission or rejection. Let's say you were sick the day of your test, and you didn't perform your best. You scored a 95, but you think you should have scored a 100. If your program only requires an 90, then it's probably not worth taking the test again. Instead, focus on other parts of your application that the admissions department is more interested in, like your essays, interviews, and portfolios.
Of course, this is different at every school in every program. If you are trying for admission to a top graduate school, the minimum score might be 90, for example, but in

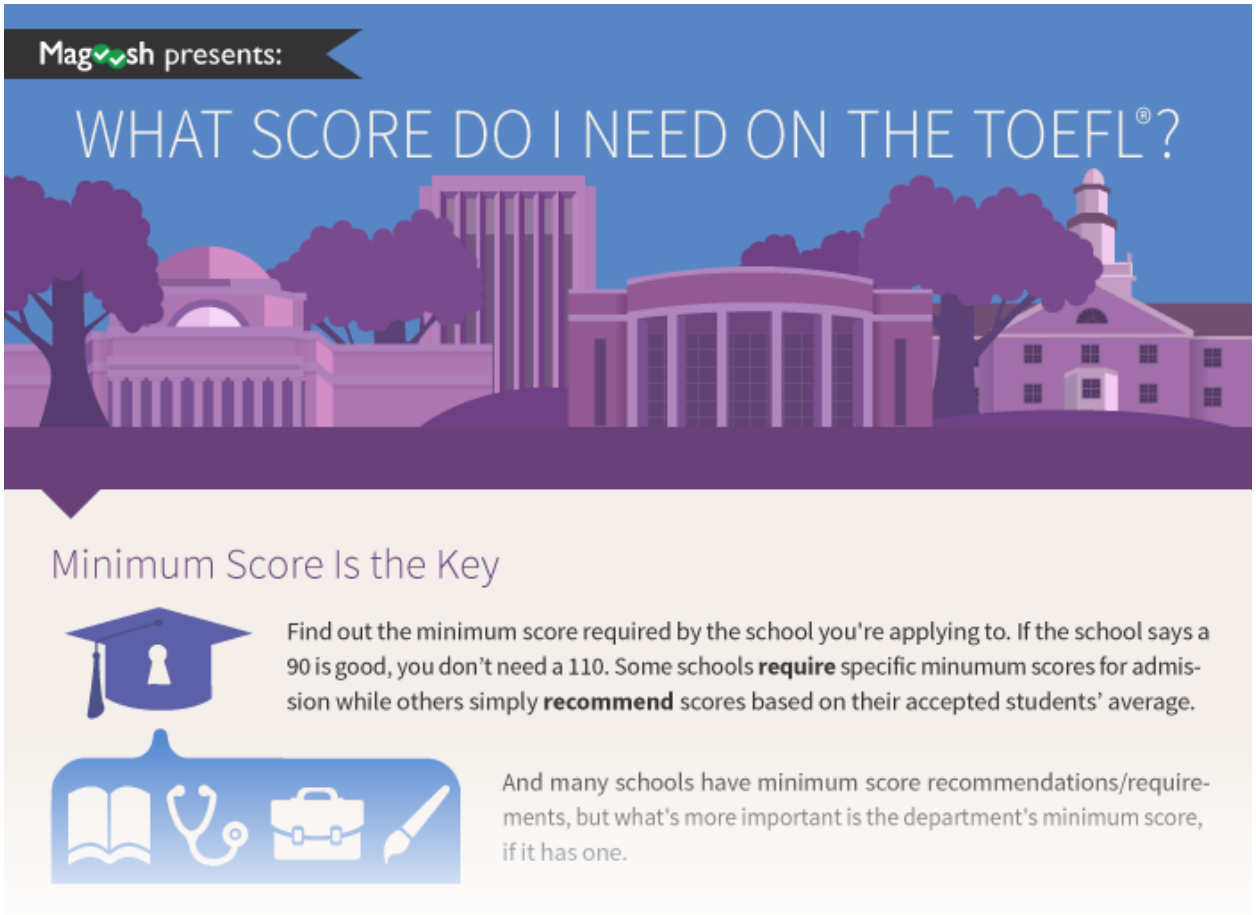
order to get a TA (a teaching assistantship), your minimum speaking score might be 26. Research your schools well to find exactly what they want from you.

When you get your TOEFL scores, they will be accompanied by a document called “performance feedback.” This document will contain a summary of your general level, including strengths and weaknesses. It breaks the score into 3 levels, so you can use that information to figure out how good your score is in a very general sense.

Here is a summary of the different levels for each section:

Section	Level	Score Range
Reading or Listening	High	22-30
	Intermediate	15-21
	Low	0-14
Speaking	Good	26-30
	Fair	18-25
	Limited	10-17
	Weak	0-9
Writing	Good	24-30
	Fair	17-23
	Limited	1-16

You should also check out our TOEFL scores infographic to learn more about minimum scores for a lot of top universities.



The Reading Section

Meet the Reading Section

The reading section is designed to test how well you understand and interpret college-level academic writing similar to that found in introductory textbooks. The reading section of the TOEFL will probably be more difficult than most other tests you've taken, because not only is the language very advanced, but the texts are also about very specific topics that will probably be new for you.

There will be three or four passages in the reading section. This brings the total amount of time in the reading section to 60 or 80 minutes (20 minutes per passage). Although there are many, many possible subjects that the passages may come from, you don't need to know anything before the test about these topics in order to answer the questions. All the information you need will be written in the passage.

You will be able to read each passage before answering the questions that relate to it. After you've read the passage, clicking "next" will open the first question in a window next to the passage. Many of the questions are specific to a particular paragraph; if this is the case, the relevant paragraph will be marked with an arrow. Even when a question only relates to one paragraph, you'll be able to view the entire passage if you want. Most of the questions in the reading section have exactly one correct answer. The most important exception to this is the table questions, which will give you five or more answer choices, of which you must pick all of the correct answers and organize them properly within the table. We'll deal with table questions in greater detail soon. Other questions with two or three answers are very rare, and they are clearly marked. There are special instructions that say "CHOOSE TWO answers" for those questions.

Finally, be aware that some of the reading passages may use technical vocabulary that you aren't expected to know. These words will be underlined, and clicking on one of

these words will show the definition for that word. But you will never be asked about the definition of one of those words in the questions. The words that the TOEFL asks about are all used in general English or explained in the passage.

The Topics You'll See in Reading Passages

The reading passages on the TOEFL can come from almost any subject that first-year university students could take a course in. Here's a list of *some* of the possible subjects:

Social Sciences

Psychology

Sociology

Anthropology

Professional and Pre-Professional Disciplines

Marketing

Public Relations

Architecture

Hard Sciences

Physics

Astronomy

Chemistry

Biology

Geology

Meteorology

Humanities

History

Art

Art History

Music

Literature (the study of literature, not literature itself—there won't be any Shakespeare on the test)

Philosophy

The Takeaway

Remember that although the topics are varied, the passages are chosen to be understood by somebody who has no experience with the subject. Most of the passages will deal with broad concepts that are fundamental to understanding the subject. You won't need to learn or demonstrate any skills on the test—that is, if you had a passage from a physics text book, you wouldn't be expected to learn the material and solve a physics problem. Instead, you would be asked about the big ideas, and, often, details or examples that help to explain those big ideas.

You will, however, probably still find it easier to answer questions about a topic you're already familiar with. You will have to reread less, which will save you time, and you may be able to fill in information that you missed with your prior knowledge. So while you don't need to run outside right now and buy a book about every topic that could be used on the TOEFL, do make an effort to vary your reading material. That way, you'll have at least some familiarity with some of the reading material on test day, and your study sessions will be more interesting, too!

Reading Question Type Overview

ETS recognizes ten different types of reading questions on the TOEFL. They divide these ten types into three broad categories according to the kind of skill the question is designed to test. We'll take a look at these broad categories here, and then later on, we'll go over each question type in more detail.

Basic Information Skills Questions

Basic information questions are probably pretty similar to what you've encountered in other English classes. They are designed to test your ability to understand the words on the page. These questions will almost always begin "In the first/second/third paragraph..." because the answer is always stated or strongly implied in the passage, usually in no more than a sentence or two. Don't get fooled into thinking that these questions are easy. Even though the answer is on the page, you may have trouble finding it, or you may find that the question is designed to look easier than it actually is. Identifying wrong answers can be trickier than you might expect. Basic information skills include factual information questions, negative factual information questions, vocabulary questions, and reference questions.

Inference Skills Questions

Inference skills questions require you to use the information in the passage to answer questions that aren't directly addressed in the passage. One common type of inference question in the reading section will imply a change over time, then ask you about the nature of that change. For instance, you may have the following:

Methanol, or methyl alcohol, although related to ethanol, which is the type of alcohol found in wine, is far more harmful when swallowed, as it breaks down into poison in the body.

Based on paragraph 1 (the sentence above), which of the following can be inferred about methanol and ethanol?

(A) Of the two types of alcohol, the type that occurs in wine is more widely abused and therefore toxic.
(B) Although only ethanol must be drunk carefully to prevent damage, both types occur naturally in wine.
(C) While methanol is unlike other alcohols, it resembles ethanol closely, except for some differences in toxicity.
(D) Methanol, as opposed to its relative ethanol, does not appear in significant volumes in wine.

The correct answer, although not said specifically in the sentence, is the fourth answer choice. Methanol must not be in wine—at least, if there is some, it must only be a small, insignificant amount—because it is poisonous. And we do know that wine is not poison.

Other inference questions will deal with the author's implied intentions or opinions and vocabulary items that aren't defined, but whose meanings are implied in the passage.

Reading to Learn Questions

Reading to learn questions test your ability to synthesize and re-organize information from a passage. Whereas the first two types of questions cover most of the skills you need for day-to-day student life and homework, this third type tests skills you'll need for doing research and writing papers. You may need to add new information to an existing part of a passage, summarize the passage, or group statements in a new way.

Now, let's look at each question type in greater detail.

Question Type: Vocabulary in Context

Vocabulary questions are multiple-choice and always have a single correct answer. In the original excerpt, all of the words that you'll have to define later are highlighted. This helps you find the words quickly and see the context easily.

The wording of vocabulary questions is almost always "The word '_____' in the passage is closest in meaning to" followed by four answer choices. The word or phrase in the questions might be a word you're familiar with already, or it might be something you've never seen or heard before. If you know the word, then you should go straight to the answer choices—you may be able to identify the correct answer without looking at the text, which can save time. You should still check the text, but if you already have an answer choice in mind (again, because you **already know** the definition of the tested word), then checking is pretty fast.

If you don't know the tested word, then it's important to pay attention to the context the word is used in, as this may impact your answer. Here's how to answer in that situation:

1. Read the paragraph of the passage containing the vocabulary word.

2. When you get to the vocabulary question, put your finger over the highlighted word and read the sentence again. Try to substitute in a word that makes sense.

3. Think about the possible meaning of the word in question. Do you know any related words? Do you know other words that look like it? Any memory of the word or association will help. Be sure to do that *before* looking at the answer choices.

4. Look at your answer choices and see if any of them match the meaning you expect. If so, that's probably the correct answer. Double-check it and mark it on the test.

5. If not, eliminate fluff answers and try plugging in the remaining answer choices. Choose the option that makes the most sense to you logically.

Example

Read the following passage and answer the question.

A vaccine against chickenpox was originally invented by Michiaki Takahashi, a Japanese doctor and research scientist, in the mid-1960s. Dr. Takahashi began his work to isolate and grow the virus in 1965 and in 1972 began clinical trials with a live but weakened form of the virus that caused the human body to create antibodies. Japan and several other countries began widespread chickenpox vaccination programs in 1974. However, it took over 20 years for the chickenpox vaccine to be approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA), finally earning the U.S. government's seal of approval for widespread use in 1995. Yet even though the chickenpox vaccine was available and recommended by the FDA, parents did not immediately choose to vaccinate their children against this disease. Mothers and fathers typically cited the notion that chickenpox did not constitute a serious enough disease against which a person needed to be vaccinated.

The word notion in the passage is closest in meaning to
(A) history
(B) findings
(C) fact
(D) belief

A "notion" is an idea. In the passage, we see that parents *"cited the notion that chickenpox did not constitute a serious enough disease."* In other words, they said chickenpox was not a big problem, so children did not need vaccinations. This is false—the chickenpox virus **can** lead to serious health problems. So even if we don't know the meaning of a "notion," we know that "notion" must be false, based on the text. (Some of that information is missing, here, because it is only one paragraph of the whole text, but in the full text it's clearer that chickenpox can be very harmful.)

(A) is incorrect. While it's true that parents in the past believed the chickenpox virus wasn't serious, we can't say that belief is a "history." In fact, it turned out not to be true.

(B) "findings" are what information we collect from a scientific study. There was no study, here, so *(B)* is incorrect.

(C) is wrong because these parents only **believed** that chickenpox was not a problem. The fact was actually the opposite—the virus was a problem after all.

(D) is correct. A "belief" is an idea that is not proven to be true. Parents thought it was true, but they didn't definitely know.

Saving Time

Because vocabulary questions are about the definitions of single words, and not really about the passage as a whole, if you are running out of time on the final text of your reading section, it's a good idea to answer all of the vocabulary questions first without reading. If you know the definitions of the words, you can usually find the correct answers without reading (although not always).

Question Type: Paraphrase

Paraphrase questions will ask you to decide which of the given answer choices best summarizes a particular sentence from the passage. The correct answer choice will contain all the important points ("essential information") from the first sentence and will retain the original sentence's basic meaning.

You will never have more than one paraphrase question in the same passage, and some passages will not have a paraphrase question at all.

There are a couple of ways to identify wrong answer choices: wrong answer choices may be missing important information from the original sentence, or they may change the relationships between parts of the sentence or the focus of the sentence. If you read "the

audio speakers in headphones function by the use of small magnets," an incorrect paraphrase might say that "small magnets are included in headphone speakers." The focus in the original sentence was on how the speakers function. The incorrect paraphrase changed the focus to the magnets.

Paraphrase questions tend to be very tricky because the incorrect answer choices are similar to the correct answer, with just one detail to differentiate them. Be sure to take your time on these questions. You will recognize the sentence you will be asked to summarize immediately because it will be the only fully highlighted sentence in the passage. So when you read it, make a note of the essential information the sentence contains. Once you've finished the passage and you reach the paraphrase question, take your time reading and re-reading the answer choices. Find any answers that completely change the relationships and eliminate them. Then start comparing each answer choice to the essential information you selected while you were reading, and make an initial guess. Before you mark your answer, check yourself in two ways. First, make sure that your answer contains *all* of the important information from the passage, and second, double-check that you didn't overlook a positive or negative that changes the meaning of your chosen answer. Often there will be an answer choice that looks very convincing if you overlook a "not" or "still" that changes the meaning completely. By taking the time to double-check your answer, you can avoid falling into that trap.

Let's try an example. Read the following excerpt from that same text about chickenpox.

Example

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infectious disease caused by the Varicella zoster virus; sufferers develop a fleeting itchy rash that can spread throughout the body. The disease can last for up to 14 days and can occur in both children and adults, though the young are particularly vulnerable. Individuals infected with chickenpox can expect to experience a high but tolerable level of discomfort and a fever as the disease works its way through the system. The ailment was once considered to be a "rite of passage" by parents in the U.S. and thought to provide children with greater and improved immunity

to other forms of sickness later in life. This view, however, was altered after additional research by scientists demonstrated unexpected dangers associated with the virus. Over time, the fruits of this research have transformed attitudes toward the disease and the utility of seeking preemptive measures against it.

Which of the following best expresses the essential information in the highlighted sentence? Incorrect answer choices change the meaning in important ways or leave out essential information.

(A) U.S. parents believed that having chickenpox benefited their children.
(B) U.S. parents believed that chickenpox led to immunity against most sickness.
(C) U.S. parents wanted to make sure that their children developed chickenpox.
(D) U.S. parents did not think that other vaccinations were needed after chickenpox.

The highlighted sentence tells us two things:

- Parents considered chickenpox a “rite of passage”
- Parents thought chickenpox might give their children greater immunity to other illnesses

A “rite of passage” is an event in your life that shows you’re growing older. Graduation, for instance, might be a rite of passage. So parents felt that chickenpox was normal. They also thought it might actually help their children: “greater and improved immunity” is a good thing.

(A) is correct. It may seem simple at first, but this is the **most** important information from the given sentence. If you are unsure, and think that it needs more detail to be complete, then mark it as correct but check the other answers for something more complete.

(B) is close, but it is incorrect because of the word “most.” Although parents believed that chickenpox helped immunity, the passage does not say anything about “most” or the majority. It was possibly about only one or two sicknesses.

(C) is incorrect like *(B)* in that it is too strong. While chickenpox was not so bad, and possibly a bit helpful, those parents did not **try** to get their children sick. That’s what “make sure” would mean.

(D) is wrong and says almost the same thing as *(B)* but in different words. If parents thought vaccinations after chickenpox were unnecessary, then that means they thought their children were immune to almost all diseases. The text does not say how many diseases parents thought their children would be immune to. Besides, this sentence misses the focus on parents' attitude toward the disease—not on the vaccines.

Question Type: Detail

Detail questions ask you about information that's specifically stated in a small part of the passage. They generally focus on the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why" *as explained by the author.*

Detail questions usually take one of these formats:

- According to Paragraph X, _____ occurred because…
- According to Paragraph X, which is true of _____?
- The author's description of _____ mentions which of the following?

There are two major traps that people fall into on detail questions. Both of them can be avoided if you're careful not to choose an answer simply because it contains key words from the passage. The first trap is to choose a true statement that was contained in the passage, but that doesn't answer the question. The second mistake people make is to accidentally choose an answer that contains a lot of words from the passage, but actually states a different idea or changes the relationships between things (for example, "sleeping makes me happy" is very different from "happiness makes me sleep").
Read the passage and answer the question below. (source)

Shrouded in the mist of an Andean cloud forest, the first newly discovered carnivore in the Western Hemisphere in 35 years rarely leaves its treetop home. Smithsonian researchers stumbled upon Bassaricyon neblina, also known as the "olinguito," while rifling through museum specimens and old field notes in search of information about other members of the genus Bassaricyon—a group of tree-dwelling meat-eaters commonly known as olingos.

As described by researchers, the olinguito weighs just 2 pounds and resides at 5,000 to 9,000 feet above sea level, making the orange-and-brown tree dweller the smallest and highest-venturing of the olingo species. Misidentified until now, olinguito specimens have existed in museums for 100 years, and at least one olinguito lived in several U.S. zoos during the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the passage, how was the olinguito discovered?

(A) It has been common in American museums for a nearly a century.
(B) A Smithsonian researcher who has spent 35 years in the Andean forest discovered it.
(C) The olinguito has been a known part of the olingo species for many decades.
(D) The olinguito was misidentified in museum records, and the mistake was only recently discovered.

Answer choice A falls into the first trap: it is generally a true statement (although the passage doesn't say that the animal was common in museums, just that it was found there), but doesn't address the question. Answer choice B is a great example of the second trap you have to watch out for, since it combines many key words of the passage into a very incorrect answer. Answer C is easy to eliminate: it directly contradicts the main idea of the passage. So the correct answer must be D.

Of course, you don't want to go through every answer choice if you can find the correct answer faster. The best way to answer a detail question is to read the question, then find the answer in the passage before looking at the answer choices. We find the answer in the second sentence.

If we take that idea, that researchers found the olinguito while "rifling through museum specimens and old field notes," we can decide on D much faster.

"Except" Questions

"Except" questions are just detail questions but reversed. They have 4 answer choices, and 3 of them will be true. Your task is to choose the statement that is **false** or that does **not** match the information in the passage.

All “except” questions will contain the word “NOT” or “EXCEPT”, and these words will always be written in capital letters. Be careful to notice them! The simplest way to get an "except" question wrong is to think that it's a detail question.

The only way to answer is by process of elimination. One by one, look in the passage for evidence of each answer choice. If you find evidence, cross that choice out. At the end, there should be only one answer remaining. Try out this sample question from ETS. (source)

The city of Teotihuacán, which lay about 50 kilometers northeast of modern-day Mexico City, began its growth by 200 –100 B.C. At its height, between about A.D. 150 and 700, it probably had a population of more than 125,000 people and covered at least 20 square kilometers. It had over 2,000 apartment complexes, a great market, a large number of industrial workshops, an administrative center, a number of massive religious edifices, and a regular grid pattern of streets and buildings. Clearly, much planning and central control were involved in the expansion and ordering of this great metropolis. Moreover, the city had economic and perhaps religious contacts with most parts of Mesoamerica (modern Central America and Mexico).

In the paragraph, each of the following is mentioned as a feature of the city Teotihuacán between A.D. 150 and 700 EXCEPT:

(A) regularly arranged streets
(B) several administrative centers spread across the city
(C) many manufacturing workshops

(D) apartment complexes

Here's the evidence for each incorrect answer choice:

A. "a regular grid pattern of streets and buildings"
B. None
C. "a large number of industrial workshops"
D. "over 2,000 apartment complexes"

As you can see, there is no evidence to support the claim that Teotihuacán had several administrative centers; in fact, the passage says that it had "*an* administrative center," meaning *just one*. So the correct answer choice is B.

Question Type: Reference

Reference questions ask about the meanings of pronouns and demonstratives such as they, it, he, she, which, who, that, and this. The goal of these questions is simple: you need to decide what the pronoun or phrase refers to. You probably already do this automatically when you read; if you don't, then you probably have trouble understanding the reading passages. Reference questions are one of relatively few question types that very basically test a skill that is necessary to read well.

It's much easier to show what reference questions are like than it is to explain them, so let's go ahead and look at an example:

Although people commonly associate the word clone with modern scientific advancements, its usage in botany (the study of plants) is far removed from those developments; a clone is, in the world of plants, a completely natural thing, even a common one. Generally speaking, a clone is an individual which is genetically identical to its progenitor, the parent from which the clone was produced. In this type of procreation, only one progenitor is necessary. There are, of course, relatively few

animals which reproduce in this way. While certain types of fish, reptiles, and insects (among others) do reproduce asexually, most creatures from the animal kingdom are born from two parent individuals with two discrete sets of genes. In comparison, plants frequently reproduce asexually, creating genetically identical offspring, or clones. The term for this type of procreation is vegetative reproduction, which includes a number of different processes by which various plants multiply.

The phrase "this type of procreation" refers to

(A) becoming genetically identical
(B) reproduction by cloning
(C) birth to a pair of parents
(D) producing individual sets of genes

The answer to a reference question is almost always going to be stated *before* the pronoun in question is used (there are exceptions, but this is a good general rule). But don't simply look in the previous sentence; it's possible that the reference is even earlier than that (two or three sentences before the pronoun) or in the same sentence, sometimes appearing after the pronoun in question.

In this case, we know that "this type of procreation" actually refers to "vegetative reproduction" by the sentence it's in. But notice that "vegetative reproduction" isn't in the answer choices. Still, it helps to know that "procreation" is a type of reproduction, meaning a way to create more plants. From that information, we can cross off A and D, which don't describe types of reproduction. Then, if we read the sentence before the one containing "this type of procreation," we see that at **that point in the paragraph**, the author is describing plants that reproduce and create clones. That matches (B) nicely.

Question Type: Inference

For inference questions, you'll need to use the stated information in the text to draw a conclusion about unstated information.

There are a couple of common themes among inference questions. For example, they often deal with a “cause and effect” situation by stating the effect of a change. The question will then ask you to identify the cause of that effect.

Similarly, you encounter a partial comparison in the text, which you will then have to complete in the question. Look out for phrases like “now” and “for the first time”, as well as general comparison words like “than” and “relative to.” If you see one of these in the reading, it may be a hint that you’ll have to answer an inference question about it later. When answering inference questions, be careful not to infer too much. If you assume information that's not in the passage, you will be wrong. Even though the correct answer will not be stated in the passage, be sure that you can find concrete evidence to support it.

Let’s look at an example (source). For this exercise, context is important. We recommend that you click the link above and read the whole passage; if you don’t want to, here’s a short summary: In this passage, scientists try to figure out why dinosaurs and other animals suddenly went extinct. They believe that the amount of the element Iridium in certain samples of border rock, or rock found just beneath the earth’s surface, may help them answer this question.

Iridium has not been common at Earth’s surface since the very beginning of the planet’s history. Because it usually exists in a metallic state, it was preferentially incorporated in Earth’s core as the planet cooled and consolidated. Iridium is found in high concentrations in some meteorites, in which the solar system’s original chemical composition is preserved. Even today, microscopic meteorites continually bombard Earth, falling on both land and sea. By measuring how many of these meteorites fall to Earth over a given period of time, scientists can estimate how long it might have taken to deposit the observed amount of Iridium in the boundary clay. These calculations suggest that a period of about one million years would have been required. However, other reliable evidence suggests that the deposition of the boundary clay could not have

taken one million years. So the unusually high concentration of Iridium seems to require a special explanation.

The paragraph implies that a special explanation of the Iridium in the boundary clay is needed because

(A) the Iridium in microscopic meteorites reaching Earth during the Cretaceous period would have been incorporated into Earth's core
(B) the Iridium in the boundary clay was deposited much more than a million years ago
(C) the concentration of Iridium in the boundary clay is higher than in microscopic meteorites
(D) the amount of Iridium in the boundary clay is too great to have come from microscopic meteorites during the time the boundary clay was deposited

Answer choice *(A)* is tempting because it seems related to the second sentence of the paragraph. But earlier in the complete text, (not in the paragraph above) the passage tells us that the Cretaceous period was the time when dinosaurs lived. Meanwhile, a sentence in the paragraph above says that iridium was included in the Earth's core during the *formation* of the Earth, when it was "cooling and consolidating." This was long before the Cretaceous, so we can't assume that iridium also moved to the core during the Cretaceous.

(B) is incorrect because we're talking about how *long* it took for the clay to be deposited (about 1 million years), not how long *ago* it was deposited. That's discussed in another paragraph, so you may have had trouble with this one if you didn't read the whole passage.

(C) doesn't make any sense. If the iridium in the planet's rock was deposited by meteorites, then the meteorites must have a higher concentration of iridium than the planet.

(D) “However, other reliable evidence suggests that the deposition of the boundary clay could not have taken one million years.” It would have taken at least a million years to create as high a concentration of iridium as there is, yet scientists are pretty sure that the process took less than that. This is the correct answer, since it is definitely stated in the passage.

The inference is very, very small. Don't assume too much!

Question Type: Purpose

As with inference questions, purpose questions deal with information that isn’t directly stated. But while inference questions ask you to draw conclusions about the subject matter, purpose questions will ask you about the reason that an author says something or phrases something in a particular way, or they may ask more generally about why a passage is organized the way it is.

ETS recommends that you learn these words and phrases, which are useful in understanding purpose questions and answer choices. We recommend you learn them because they’re good academic words to use in your writing.

definition	to refute
example	to note
to illustrate	to criticize
to explain	function of
to contrast	

Most purpose questions will ask you to choose whether a given phrase provides an example, provides a counterexample, explains, or provides an exception to a statement made in the passage. Check out the following example (source).

While most of the major powers of Western Europe spent the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries racing around the world carving out empires for themselves, Japan felt threatened by the influx of foreigners and ended up spending this period as one of the most reclusive nations on the planet. In the 1630s, a series of proclamations closed the country's borders, marking the beginning of the period now known as sakoku *("locking the country") or sometimes* kaikin *("sea-restriction"). Non-Japanese citizens were not permitted on Japanese soil; potential violators were warned that they would be subject to capital punishment. Only a small amount of trade with China, Korea, and the Netherlands was permitted, and the Dutch were restricted to Dejima, an artificial island in the harbor at Nagasaki. Nor were Japanese citizens allowed to leave Japan. Even the construction of long-range ships was illegal. These measures remained in place well into the 19th century.*

Why does the author mention that "the Dutch were restricted to Dejima"?

(A) To provide evidence of Japan's refusal to trade with other European countries
(B) To note an example of another country which limited its own international interactions
(C) To illustrate the severity of limits imposed by Japan's isolationism
(D) To elaborate on the importance of a particular Japanese island in the period of sakoku.

First, let's look at the specific sentence in full: "Only a small amount of trade with China, Korea, and the Netherlands was permitted, and the Dutch were restricted to Dejima, an artificial island in the harbour at Nagasaki." Consider the function of this sentence and the main message of the paragraph in full. How does this sentence relate to the rest of the text?

(A) doesn't make sense because this sentence is telling us who the Japanese *did* trade with. The fact that Japan traded with the Dutch does not mean that they *didn't* trade with

other countries. This is a very good-looking answer, one you should think carefully about, because it is in line with the general meaning of the paragraph. But it's not connected to the information in the specific sentence, and that causes a problem.

To cross *(B)* off, it's key to understand that "another country" means the Dutch and "its own" means that they limit themselves; the Dutch limit the Dutch. That's factually false.

The sentence that we copied above suggests that *(C)* is the correct answer. Japan's isolationism was very strict. They only traded with three countries. And even within those countries, one country (the Netherlands, also called "the Dutch") could only trade on a single, specified island. In other words, they were very restricted, and the author is showing exactly how restricted.

As for *(D)*, the island may have been important, but that's not the purpose of the paragraph. The island is not mentioned in any other place, and it is not the author's focus.

So *(C)* must be the correct answer.

Question Type: Insert Text

Text insertion questions give you a sentence not found in the passage and ask you to choose where the sentence would fit best into the passage. Usually the new sentence will provide you with a clue as to where it should go; this can be a transition word that gives you an idea of how the new sentence relates to surrounding sentences, or it may be a pronoun, including demonstratives like "this" or "those." If it's the latter, you can use a process similar to the one you might use to answer a reference question to decide first what the pronoun or demonstrative refers to. That may help you choose the most logical place to put the new sentence.

Even if you think you know the correct answer, it's always a good idea to try the sentence in every possible location. You can insert and remove the sentence as many times as you need to by clicking on the squares that mark each possible location. Before submitting your answer, be sure that the sentence follows logically from the preceding sentence and leads logically to the next sentence, and that any pronouns agree with the nouns they should refer to.

In the example below (source), I've used letters instead of squares to represent each possible location. Give it a try!

In paragraph 5 of the passage, there is a missing sentence. The paragraph is repeated below and shows four letters (A, B, C, and D) that indicate where the following sentence could be added.

Consequently, the idea that the Ir in the boundary clay came from microscopic meteorites cannot be accepted.

Where would the sentence best fit?

Ir has not been common at Earth's surface since the very beginning of the planet's history. Because it usually exists in a metallic state, it was preferentially incorporated in Earth's core as the planet cooled and consolidated. Ir is found in high concentrations in some meteorites, in which the solar system's original chemical composition is preserved. Even today, microscopic meteorites continually bombard Earth, falling on both land and sea. By measuring how many of these meteorites fall to Earth over a given period of time, scientists can estimate how long it might have taken to deposit the observed amount of Ir in the boundary clay. ■ ***(A)*** *These calculations suggest that a period of about one million years would have been required.* ■ ***(B)*** *However, other reliable evidence suggests that the deposition of the boundary clay could not have taken one million years.* ■ ***(C)*** *So the unusually high concentration of Ir seems to require a special explanation.* ■ ***(D)***

First of all, read the passage and summarize it to yourself. This passage is about how the element iridium came to be found on Earth. The passage first suggests that the iridium was deposited by meteorites, but then concludes that that explanation doesn't really work. Now take a look at our sentence. Helpfully, the sentence begins with "consequently," so we know that the sentence before it will contribute to the statement that the sentence is making (as opposed to contradicting it). Structural words like this are key for answering Insert Text questions correctly! Always watch for words like that and for pronouns, to make sure the sentence can refer back to the appropriate part of the passage.

Now summarize the sentence you're plugging in: the iridium cannot have come from meteorites. Since the beginning of the passage supports the theory of meteorites depositing iridium, this sentence fits best where the author begins to cast doubt on that theory. So A and B cannot be correct. The sentence flows more smoothly and logically in place C than in place D, so our final answer is C.

Question Type: Text Summary

Text Summary questions will make you grateful for the time you've spent outlining readings and essays (if you haven't done that, it's a good idea!). To answer a Text Summary question, you'll have to read and understand the entire passage and be able to distinguish between major and minor ideas.

After you read the passage, you will be given a topic sentence that summarizes the passage. There will be five answer choices, and you should pick the three that summarize the *most important ideas* of the passage. The order in which you choose the ideas does not matter. Partial credit *is* possible on these questions, so if you choose one incorrect answer, you can still earn one point (two points are possible).

There are two traps you can fall into in a text summary question. The first and most obvious is to choose an answer choice that contains incorrect information or that is not stated in the passage at all. The other is to choose a minor rather than a major idea. Try the example below to see what we mean. (Source)

Passage

Directions: *Read the passage below and answer the question.*

Paleontologists have argued for a long time that the demise of the dinosaurs was caused by climatic alterations associated with slow changes in the positions of continents and seas resulting from plate tectonics. Off and on throughout the Cretaceous (the last period of the Mesozoic era, during which dinosaurs flourished), large shallow seas covered extensive areas of the continents. Data from diverse sources, including geochemical evidence preserved in seafloor sediments, indicate that the Late Cretaceous climate was milder than today's. The days were not too hot, nor the nights too cold. The summers were not too warm, nor the winters too frigid. The shallow seas on the continents probably buffered the temperature of the nearby air, keeping it relatively constant.

At the end of the Cretaceous, the geological record shows that these seaways retreated from the continents back into the major ocean basins. No one knows why. Over a period of about 100,000 years, while the seas pulled back, climates around the world became dramatically more extreme: warmer days, cooler nights; hotter summers, colder winters. Perhaps dinosaurs could not tolerate these extreme temperature changes and became extinct.

If true, though, why did cold-blooded animals such as snakes, lizards, turtles, and crocodiles survive the freezing winters and torrid summers? These animals are at the mercy of the climate to maintain a livable body temperature. It's hard to understand why they would not be affected, whereas dinosaurs were left too crippled to cope, especially if, as some scientists believe, dinosaurs were warm-blooded. Critics also point out that the shallow seaways had retreated from and advanced on the continents numerous times during the Mesozoic, so why did the dinosaurs survive the climatic changes associated with the earlier fluctuations but not with this one? Although initially appealing, the hypothesis of a simple climatic change related to sea levels is insufficient to explain all the data.

Dissatisfaction with conventional explanations for dinosaur extinctions led to a surprising observation that, in turn, has suggested a new hypothesis. Many plants and animals disappear abruptly from the fossil record as one moves from layers of rock documenting the end of the Cretaceous up into rocks representing the beginning of the Cenozoic (the era after the Mesozoic). Between the last layer of Cretaceous rock and the first layer of Cenozoic rock, there is often a thin layer of clay. Scientists felt that they could get an idea of how long the extinctions took by determining how long it took to deposit this one centimeter of clay and they thought they could determine the time it took to deposit the clay by determining the amount of the element iridium (Ir) it contained.

Ir has not been common at Earth's surface since the very beginning of the planet's history. Because it usually exists in a metallic state, it was preferentially incorporated in Earth's core as the planet cooled and consolidated. Ir is found in high concentrations in some meteorites, in which the solar system's original chemical composition is preserved. Even today, microscopic meteorites continually bombard Earth, falling on both land and sea. By measuring how many of these meteorites fall to Earth over a given period of time, scientists can estimate how long it might have taken to deposit the observed amount of Ir in the boundary clay. These calculations suggest that a period of about one million years would have been required. However, other reliable evidence suggests that the deposition of the boundary clay could not have taken one million years. So the unusually high concentration of Ir seems to require a special explanation.

In view of these facts, scientists hypothesized that a single large asteroid, about 10 to 15 kilometers across, collided with Earth, and the resulting fallout created the boundary clay. Their calculations show that the impact kicked up a dust cloud that cut off sunlight for several months, inhibiting photosynthesis in plants; decreased surface temperatures on continents to below freezing; caused extreme episodes of acid rain; and significantly raised long-term global temperatures through the greenhouse effect. This disruption of food chain and climate would have eradicated the dinosaurs and other organisms in less than fifty years.

Summary Question

An introductory sentence for a brief summary of the passage is provided below.

Complete the summary by selecting the THREE answer choices that express the most important ideas in the passage. Some sentences do not belong in the summary because

they express ideas that are not presented in the passage or are minor ideas in the passage. ***This question is worth 2 points.***

Write your answer choices in the spaces where they belong. You can either write the letter of your answer choice or you can copy the sentence.

- ***The reason for dinosaurs' extinction is unknown and continues to fuel debate among scientists.***
-
-
-

Answer Choices
(A) Extreme changes in daily and seasonal climates preceded the retreat of the seas back into the major ocean basins.
(B) A simple climate change does not explain some important data related to the extinction of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous.
(C) The retreat of the seaways at the end of the Cretaceous has not been fully explained.
(D) The abruptness of extinctions at the end of the Cretaceous and the high concentration of Ir found in clay deposited at that time have fueled the development of a new hypothesis.
(E) Some scientists hypothesize that the extinction of the dinosaurs resulted from the effects of an asteroid collision with Earth.
(F) Boundary clay layers like the one between the Mesozoic and Cenozoic are used by scientists to determine the rate at which an extinct species declined.

The correct answers are B, D, and E. A is not true: the extreme changes in climate occurred at the same time as the retreat of the seas. C is true, but the retreat of the seaways is not as important in the passage as the ideas directly related to the dinosaurs' demise. F is probably true, but the passage doesn't deal with the Mesozoic period: it deals with the Cenozoic and Cretaceous periods.

Question Type: Categorization

The categorization questions are somewhat similar to the prose summary questions. Both of them test your ability to identify important ideas of a passage, and both involve putting those ideas into a table. But while prose summary questions only require you to choose the main ideas, categorization questions will have you choose which of several sub-headings each idea belongs under, and the statements in categorization questions might be a little less important than the statements in summary questions, which are really only the most important ideas from the passage.

A table in a categorization question will have two or three columns and two or three rows. There will be five correct answers for you to choose and categorize. Each table is worth three points total, and you will get partial credit if you get three or four correct answers.

Each table will deal with a certain kind of relationship such as cause and effect, problem and solution, or comparison. Correct answers will be clearly related to the category in the passage. The extra, unused answers will be about different topics from the passage, will change the relationships between things, or will be on the same topic but not stated in the passage. Basically, answering categorization questions is very similar to answering detail questions, but you must look for several correct answers on two or three different topics.

Check out this example to see what we mean.

History of the Chickenpox Vaccine

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infectious disease caused by the Varicella zoster virus; sufferers develop a fleeting itchy rash that can spread throughout the body. The disease can last for up to 14 days and can occur in both children and adults, though the young are particularly vulnerable. Individuals infected with chickenpox can expect to

experience a high but tolerable level of discomfort and a fever as the disease works its way through the system. The ailment was once considered to be a "rite of passage" by parents in the U.S. and thought to provide children with greater and improved immunity to other forms of sickness later in life. This view, however, was altered after additional research by scientists demonstrated unexpected dangers associated with the virus. Over time, the fruits of this research have transformed attitudes toward the disease and the utility of seeking preemptive measures against it.

A vaccine against chickenpox was originally invented by Michiaki Takahashi, a Japanese doctor and research scientist, in the mid-1960s. Dr. Takahashi began his work to isolate and grow the virus in 1965 and in 1972 began clinical trials with a live but weakened form of the virus that caused the human body to create antibodies. Japan and several other countries began widespread chickenpox vaccination programs in 1974. However, it took over 20 years for the chickenpox vaccine to be approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA), finally earning the U.S. government's seal of approval for widespread use in 1995. Yet even though the chickenpox vaccine was available and recommended by the FDA, parents did not immediately choose to vaccinate their children against this disease. Mothers and fathers typically cited the notion that chickenpox did not constitute a serious enough disease against which a person needed to be vaccinated.

Strong belief in that view eroded when scientists discovered the link between Varicella zoster, the virus that causes chickenpox, and shingles, a far more serious, harmful, and longer-lasting disease in older adults that impacts the nervous system. They reached the conclusion that Varicella zoster remains dormant inside the body, making it significantly more likely for someone to develop shingles. As a result, the medical community in the U.S. encouraged the development, adoption, and use of a vaccine against chickenpox to the public. Although the appearance of chickenpox and shingles within one person can be many years apart—generally many decades—the increased risk in developing shingles as a younger adult (30-40 years old rather than 60-70 years old) proved to be enough to convince the medical community that immunization should be preferred to the traditional alternative.

Another reason that the chickenpox vaccine was not immediately accepted and used by parents in the U.S. centered on observations made by scientists that the vaccine simply did not last long enough and did not confer a lifetime of immunity. In other words, scientists considered the benefits of the vaccine to be temporary when given to young children. They also feared that it increased the odds that a person could become infected with chickenpox later as a young adult, when the rash is more painful and prevalent and can last up to three or four weeks. Hence, allowing young children to

develop chickenpox rather than take a vaccine against it was believed to be the "lesser of two evils." This idea changed over time as booster shots of the vaccine elongated immunity and countered the perceived limits on the strength of the vaccine itself.

Today, use of the chickenpox vaccine is common throughout the world. Pediatricians suggest an initial vaccination shot after a child turns one year old, with booster shots recommended after the child turns eight. The vaccine is estimated to be up to 90% effective and has reduced worldwide cases of chickenpox infection to 400,000 cases per year from over 4,000,000 cases before vaccination became widespread. In light of such statistics, most doctors insist that the potential risks of developing shingles outweigh the benefits of avoiding rare complications associated with inoculations. Of course, many parents continue to think of the disease as an innocuous ailment, refusing to take preemptive steps against it. As increasing numbers of students are vaccinated and the virus becomes increasingly rarer, however, even this trend among parents has failed to halt the decline of chickenpox among the most vulnerable populations.

Directions: *Complete the table below by indicating which statements describe chickenpox and which describe shingles. Two answer choices will NOT be used. This question is worth* ***THREE*** *points.*

Chickenpox
.
.

Shingles
.
.
.

(A) Public vaccination campaigns against it began in the 1970s.
(B) It was considered an irksome but relatively harmless ailment.
(C) It primarily afflicts adults.
(D) It is a serious, lingering illness.
(E) It negatively affects the nervous system.
(F) Infection primarily occurs as a result of close contact with infected rashes.
(G) There is confusion as to exactly what virus causes it.

(A) is about chickenpox, and is a correct answer. We can find evidence for it in the second paragraph. That tells us that "Japan and several other countries began widespread chickenpox vaccination programs in 1974."

(B) is about chickenpox, too, and is correct. The first and second paragraphs give us some evidence: "Individuals infected with chickenpox can expect to experience a high but tolerable level of discomfort and a fever as the disease works its way through the system" and "mothers and fathers typically cited the notion that chickenpox did not constitute a serious enough disease."

(C), *(D)* and *(E)* are all about shingles. They can all be found in this sentence: Strong belief in that view eroded when scientists discovered the link between Varicella zoster, the virus that causes chickenpox, and shingles, a far more serious, harmful, and longer-lasting disease in older adults that impacts the nervous system.

(F) is not in the passage. We know that chickenpox is very contagious, but we don't know how it is transmitted. Also, we don't say that rashes are infected—that would be redundant because all rashes are infected. A person becomes infected, not a rash.

(G) is not true of either shingles or chickenpox. This sentence tells us that one virus causes both: "...scientists discovered the link between Varicella zoster, the virus that causes chickenpox, and shingles…"

Common Reading Difficulties

Time Management

For each reading passage, you have exactly 20 minutes, which for a lot of people is just barely enough to finish the test and maybe check their answers. For other people, fifteen minutes might be enough. If you're in the latter group, be sure not to cheat yourself and use that extra time to double- and triple-check your answers. My #1 advice for people who have trouble with time management is to do lots and lots of timed reading practice before test day. Finishing a section in the right amount of time is a learned skill, so practice it. Try to spend no more than 16-17 minutes reading each passage and answering its questions so that you have time to go back over your answers before when you're near the end.

If you're great at reading and your only flaw in it is time management, you may want to try looking at the questions before you read the text. That means reading the first question, then starting to read the passage, stopping when you know the answer to the question. Then, you'll read the second question, and continue through the text, looking for that answer. Sometimes this can save you time, but only do it if you're very confident that you can navigate the text successfully in this way. Don't try this tactic for the first time on the actual test! Practice it multiple times to be sure that it's a useful strategy for you personally.

Missing Key Words

As you go through the test, you may start to rush and make unnecessary mistakes. For instance, on every practice test I give, someone gets a negative factual question but overlooks the word "NOT" or "EXCEPT" and answers it as if it were a detail question. Similarly, people overlook the transition words that are essential to correctly answering a

sentence insertion or purpose question. Read carefully, and always reread the question before choosing your final answer.

Unfamiliar Vocabulary

You'll almost definitely see unfamiliar words on the test. When you do, there are a few steps you can take:

1. Check to see if it is underlined and defined (you can click on some words if they're very rare).
2. Read the sentence to check if you can make a reasonable guess.
3. Look at the surrounding paragraph for context. Even if you can't guess the meaning of the specific word, you may be able to guess the meaning of the whole sentence based on its surroundings. This strategy is **very** important. Do not get stuck on a single word or phrase—use what you do know to infer the total meaning if possible!

Getting Caught Up in Details

Just like getting stuck on the meaning of a single word, many students get stuck looking at small details: a particular phrase the author chose, or a specific fact from the article. Don't get so focused on these details that you forget the main idea of the passage. If you're doing OK on time, take a minute after reading the passage to summarize it to yourself. If you ever start to mark an answer that contradicts the main idea of the passage or paragraph, look again—it's probably not the correct answer

Finding Evidence and Using Keywords

If you've done any of the practice reading tests that come with answer guides, you may have noticed something: most answer guides give not only the answer to the question, but also an explanation of why it's the correct answer. In other words, they provide

evidence to support their answers. Although the TOEFL doesn't test your ability to find evidence, it's an essential skill for doing well on the reading section. After reading every question, you should be able locate and point to exactly where the answer is. That means, in many cases, reading the question, going back to the passage, and *then* looking at the answer choices to find the one that matches.

That's a very important step, and students who get confused by wrong answers often skip it. It's much easier to find the correct answer if you know exactly what you're looking for. That way, you can compare the structures of sentences, the relationships between the pieces within each sentence, and the main ideas of each sentence. Being able to compare the text directly to the answer choices is a great help.

Finding evidence can mean finding the correct answer in a sentence, clearly stated. But if it's not that simple, that doesn't mean that you can't find evidence. Sometimes an answer will be implied or suggested by the use of a particular transition or by a statement about a related topic. Let's look at an example taken partly from The Official Guide to the TOEFL.

This is an excerpt from a lecture about United States history. Yes, we're using a listening sample for this activity—the same skill applies.

"Because the United States is such a large country, it took time for a common national culture to emerge. One hundred years ago there was very little communication among the different regions of the United States. One result of this lack of communication was that people around the United States had very little in common with one another. People in different parts of the country spoke differently, dressed differently, and behaved differently. But connections among Americans began to increase thanks to two technological innovations: the automobile and the radio."

What does the speaker imply about modern-day Americans?

(A) They share a single culture propagated by radio entertainment.

(B) The majority of individuals within the population own cars.
(C) They are more similar to each other today than they used to be.
(D) There is no nationalist culture within the United States.

The correct answer is C. Evidence: “Because the United States is such a large country, it took time for a common national culture to emerge.” This sentence implies that a common national culture *did* eventually emerge.

Finding evidence can be very slow at first since you have to go back to the text before answering each question, but you will gain speed with practice. You can get even faster by working on recognizing the topic sentences of paragraphs, which will help you identify which part of a text is likely to contain the evidence you need. With this method, it will become much easier to choose correct answers on the first try, saving you valuable seconds.

Identifying the Main Ideas

A lot of reading well—especially for the TOEFL—is recognizing the most important ideas and distinguishing them from less important ideas. Here are some tips to help you recognize main ideas in reading passages.

Look at the Beginning and/or End

When you write an essay, you necessarily repeat yourself. Some people say that you should say what you’re going to say, then say it, then say what you said—that is, the introduction contains hints of the information that will be in the body, the body explains that information, and then the conclusion repeats it and draws it all together. Fortunately, this means that usually the main idea of a passage can be found at the beginning and/or at the end. Everything in between is usually supporting detail. Just by reading the first

and last paragraph of an essay or the first and last sentence of a paragraph, you can usually get a pretty good idea of what the piece is about.

There are many exceptions to this, though, and if you haven't already read the text, it can be very confusing to only read single sentences from each paragraph, so this is generally not a good idea if you haven't read the passage at all yet. If, however, you have to identify the main ideas (when answering a summary question, for example), then it helps to look at the beginnings and endings of paragraphs and whole passages.

Cross Out Supporting Details

What if the beginning and end aren't telling you what you need to know? One strategy is to work backwards by eliminating all information that you know *isn't* necessary. This may include examples, details, and explanations.

Mark Sentences from Least to Most Important

Crossing out the supporting details is a quick way to eliminate some nonessential information, but it isn't perfect. Here's a related strategy that builds on your outlining skills: mark each sentence, either with numbers or by arranging them on a page, according to its importance. Any sentence that has only very small details gets, let's say, a 3. A sentence that's a little broader gets a 2, and the sentence that is most general or broad gets a 1. You may have multiple sentences marked 2 and 3, but there should only be one marked 1. If you were to put these numbered sentences into an outline, 1 would be at the top. All of the #2 sentences would fit under it conceptually, and some of the #3 sentences would go under each #2. This is a good way to break down the excerpt and conceptualize its format visually.

Of course, you can't really do this while *taking* your actual TOEFL iBT. Instead, this is just an exercise to practice finding the big ideas. But if you do it many times before your test, the habit of finding #1 sentences will be very useful.

Understanding New Vocabulary and Difficult Sentences

It's stressful to encounter unknown material on a test, but it's pretty likely to happen. Fortunately, you can learn to work around the unknowns with these tactics, which can help you to simplify sentences and use context clues to reach the correct answer.

Replace Unknown Words with Likely Synonyms

If you encounter an unknown word, you may be able to understand the sentence anyway by covering the word up, reading the surrounding sentences, and guessing what word would fit in the blank. With practice (don't forget to check yourself in a dictionary!), this can become one of the most valuable skills in your test-taking toolbox.

Study Roots

I've written before about studying etymology, or the origins and roots of words. I love learning and teaching roots not because of the roots themselves, but because learning to recognize and interpret them in context hones skills for general critical reading. Learning to think creatively and infer meanings and etymologies can help you with unfamiliar words, even if they don't contain any roots that you've studied.

A book such as Norman Lewis's *Word Power Made Easy* can help you learn the most common roots in English words as well as their histories and grammatical functions. This book is a must-have for all of my advanced English students, since it's the only one I've found that lives up to its promise to make the material seem easy.

What About Crazy, Complicated Sentences?

We have a couple of tactics for dealing with unknown words, but let's face it—covering up a whole sentence and guessing its meaning probably isn't the best idea. Instead, when you're grappling with a complicated sentence that doesn't seem to make any

sense, try to reduce the sentence to its most essential elements. How do you do this? Start by marking out all modifying phrases (don't worry—we'll come back to them in a minute). Then see if there are any words or phrases that can be simplified. Then, if possible, break the remaining sentence into two or three simple sentences. You may have to remove some conjunctions in order to do this.

Let's try this out with an example from our GRE product, which has some extremely difficult sentences in the practice questions. I've changed the vocabulary a bit to be more TOEFL-friendly:

Yet another creation in line with the tedious melodramas that the director is so well known for, his latest effort is likely to have a similar effect: a tiny subset of the population will praise the deliberate pacing, while the majority will dismiss the film as boring nonsense.

1. Removing modifiers: *His latest effort is likely to have a similar effect: a subset of the population will praise the pacing, while the majority will dismiss the film.*

2. Simplifying words: *The director's new film probably will have a similar effect: some people will enjoy the pacing, but most people will dislike the film.*

3. Breaking the sentence up, looking at subjects and verbs: *The director's new film probably will have a similar effect. Some people will enjoy the pacing of the movie. But most people will dislike the film.*

Now we can look back at our original sentence and consider the information we had removed:

***Yet another creation in line with the tedious melodramas that the director is so well known for**, his latest effort is likely to have a similar effect: a **tiny subset** of the population will praise the **deliberate** pacing, while the majority will dismiss the film as **boring nonsense**.*

Is there anything there that gives us more information? Yes, there is: the first part tells us that the director *usually* makes boring movies. Let's put that back in our simplified sentence.

4. Put back the extra information: *The director is well known for boring movies. His new film probably will have a similar effect. Some people will enjoy the pacing of the movie. But most people will dislike the film.*

You won't always be able to make such a neat simplification, but following these basic steps can help to locate the main parts of a sentence.

Types of Wrong Answers

Process of Elimination

Sometimes you may have to answer a question by process of elimination—that is, by finding the incorrect answers and getting rid of them, then choosing among the remaining answers. Even if you eliminate just one answer choice, you dramatically increase the probability that you will guess the correct answer. In this post we'll look at two common types of wrong answers.

Not-in-the-text Answers

Many questions contain an answer choice that simply makes no sense based on the text. These answers are the easiest to recognize and eliminate. Take, for example, this excerpt from our reading passage on chickenpox:

Chickenpox is a highly contagious infectious disease caused by the Varicella zoster virus; sufferers develop a fleeting itchy rash that can spread throughout the body. The disease can last for up to 14 days and can occur in both children and adults, though the young are particularly vulnerable. Individuals infected with chickenpox can expect to experience a high but tolerable level of discomfort and a fever as the disease works its way through the system. The ailment was once considered to be a "rite of passage" by parents in the U.S. and thought to provide children with greater and improved immunity to other forms of sickness later in life. This view, however, was altered after additional research by scientists demonstrated unexpected dangers associated with the virus. Over time, the fruits of this research have transformed attitudes toward the disease and the utility of seeking preemptive measures against it.

According to the paragraph 1, which of the following is true of the chickenpox virus?
(A) It leads to a potentially deadly disease in adults.
(B) It is associated with a possibly permanent rash.
(C) It is easily transmittable by an infected individual.
(D) It has been virtually eradicated in the modern world.

There are a couple of answers here that are simply not in the relevant paragraph. A couple of them relate to details from other points in the text, but they're still not in the **right** part of the text. The most notable one is (A). Where, in our text, do we see anything about how "deadly" the disease is? Nowhere, and there are no related words (e.g. "fatal," "death," "kill"), either. The text never talks about the disease taking life, so (A) must definitely be wrong—we can eliminate it first.

False Friends

One of the nastier tricks test-writers use when coming up with answer choices is to choose answer choices that use keywords from the text to confuse you. Here's an example from a passage from the Official Guide.

Before 1815 manufacturing in the United States had been done in homes or shops by skilled artisans. As master craft workers, they imparted the knowledge of their trades to apprentices and journeymen. In addition, women often worked in their homes part-time, making finished articles from raw material supplied by merchant capitalists. After 1815 this older form of manufacturing began to give way to factories with machinery tended by unskilled or semiskilled laborers. Cheap transportation networks, the rise of cities, and the availability of capital and credit all stimulated the shift to factory production.

Which of the following can be inferred from the passage about articles manufactured before 1815?

(A) They were generally produced by women.
(B) They were generally produced in shops rather than in homes.
(C) They were produced with more concern for quality than for speed of production.
(D) They were produced mostly in large cities with extensive transportation networks.

False friends mean you should be extra careful when you see answer choices that seem to have been stated in the passage. The hurried reader might see "in shops rather than in homes" and remember that this phrase is very close to a phrase from the passage. But when we look at the passage, it says that manufacturing was done in "shops" **or** "homes," not "**rather than**" in homes. When we compare those tempting keywords to the text, we find the problem.

The same is true of (D). The passage does indeed talk about large cities and transportation networks, but not in reference to life before 1815. In fact, the shift was *toward* large cities and transportation networks, so before 1815 the opposite must have

been true. You can eliminate both B and D by this method, and now your odds of guessing the correct answer with no further effort are 50%.

You'll find yourself eliminating wrong answers often on the TOEFL. Any time you are not certain of an answer, it is an important step toward making the best decision you can.

Pacing Strategies

Since the reading section is presented as one 60- or 80-minute block of time, it's up to you to manage your time well to finish every question. Here are some tips to help you out.

Break Your Time Up Systematically

This is a point where it's really helpful to do some practice tests. Some people read very slowly and thoroughly, and then answer questions very quickly. Other people prefer to take their time answering the questions *while* reading the passage. Both of these tactics are fine, but it's important to know which one works for you. That way, you can decide how much time to allot to each task (reading the passage, answering the questions, and checking your answers).

Try a practice reading section with this scheme: 10 minutes to read each passage, 8 minutes to answer the questions, and 2 minutes to review. As you do more practice, you will get a feel for where you need more time or have extra time. Always limit yourself to 20 minutes total per passage, though—you don't want to cheat your future self!

Keep Moving

Don't spend an unreasonable amount of time on one question. If you've been thinking about the same question for more than a minute, take your best guess, mark it for review and move on. You can return to it at the end if there's time.

Since the questions are mostly all worth the same number of points (with the exception of the final question on each passage), remember to answer **all of the easier questions**. If you have to choose between a long, complicated paraphrase question and three vocabulary questions, the vocabulary questions may go by faster and will be worth more points.

A more advanced version of this is to go through the vocabulary questions of the last passage first, before you read the passage at all, and before you answer any other questions. You can then return to the first non-vocabulary question on that final passage, and begin reading until you find the answer. Similarly, guess and skip “except” questions and “paraphrase” questions if you are running out of time, since they often take longer.

Guess

If you’re not going to make it through a whole section, then go ahead and mark your best guess for any questions that are left over. If possible, never mark them randomly—do take the time to read the question and answer choices. Then take a second to think about how you can avoid that problem on the next session, and change your test-taking strategy accordingly.

The Best Reading Practice

There are two ways to train yourself for the reading section of the TOEFL. The first is to find practice TOEFL reading passages with questions, and imitate the reading portion of the test. The second is to do normal English reading, without questions, which will improve your English level in general.

Official TOEFL Reading

Absolutely the best way to get TOEFL reading practice is to use real passages from real tests. Much like TOEFL listening practice, you can find some of this free online at the official ETS site. There are two places to find the reading passages. First, there's one passage in the "TOEFL iBT Test Sample Questions" software. This is really the best example you can possibly find, because the software is the same as what you will see on test day. But there's one very large disappointment: only one reading passage can be found here. Considering you will have 3-5 passages on your real TOEFL, that's not a very helpful amount.

So ETS compensates for it by providing four other free reading passages other than the software. This is nice, but it's still not enough.

The best way to get more practice is with one book: *Official TOEFL IBT Tests***.** That gives you a total of 15 more official TOEFL reading passages. There is no better material, although it doesn't teach strategy or give sufficient explanations.

Unofficial TOEFL Reading Practice

There are many sources for reading passages with questions that look like what you will see on your real exam. Many use structures similar to that on the real test, but few offer really good questions. If the practice is free and looks like the TOEFL, it's probably not actually very good test preparation. The text might be good reading comprehension and vocabulary practice, but it's very rare that free test practices are well made. I don't know of any free TOEFL reading which is especially good for preparing for ETS's test.
There are, of course, many TOEFL preparation books out there which will give better material than the free practice (although not all books are created equal!). We will review the biggest publishers' TOEFL books on this blog in the upcoming months. But if you are looking for a book to buy right now (other than the official ETS books), I'd recommend

Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test. The reading is actually often harder than the real test, and there are some imperfect questions, but it is generally good practice and comes with other great self-study features.

Practicing with Non-TOEFL Articles

What the test really asks from you—what it is testing—is your experience with English. If you have read a lot of academic English in the past, you will do well on the TOEFL. This is just as important as (really more important than) practicing answering test questions.
So what is the best source for TOEFL reading practice? That really depends on your level of English and your target scores. If you're trying to score more than 90 on the TOEFL, you probably want to use some more challenging material. Almost any U.S. news source would be good practice, but the most challenging might be the same sources we recommend for GRE. If you train using those sources, you'll be pretty comfortable for the TOEFL. Again, though, those are the *most* challenging.

The truth is that *any* somewhat academic reading would be good practice. Just find a good source of authentic American English that has the right topics (science, history, and the humanities especially) and if it's the challenging for you, then it's good TOEFL practice! Just make sure you're reading about the right topics: recipes don't help!

The Listening Section

Meet the Listening Section

The listening section is made up of four to six lectures, each accompanied by six questions, and two or three conversations, each accompanied by five questions. Depending on whether you have an experimental section, the entire section will last either 60 or 90 minutes.

The lectures can come from any academic discipline that can show up on the reading section—in short, almost anything a freshman could take a class in, except math or mathematical sciences, like physics. The conversations are either conversations between a student and a professor during office hours, or conversations between a student and some member of support staff/university administration. Often the second kind of conversation deals with topics like course registration, graduation requirements, and financial aid. It helps to become familiar with the language and structure of university administration so you don't get stuck on a listening passage that takes place in a place you're unfamiliar with, such as, say, a registrar's office.

Whereas the reading section features very sterile, academic language, the listening section is designed to mimic natural speech. This means that the speakers will pause, change sentences or topics abruptly, and occasionally say something incorrect or forget what they were talking about. You may be asked questions about these imperfections, so a familiarity with unrehearsed speech is essential to doing well in the listening section.

Unlike in the *Official Guide*, no part of the listening test will ever be transcribed for you. If a question deals with a particular part of the passage, the test will replay this part for you when you reach the appropriate question. It will not do this for every question, however, so you'll need to take notes and listen closely.

Many of the questions on the listening section will look familiar from the reading section, but a few will deal with the unique ability of speech to convey information without words—through intonation and stress, for example.

Types of Listening Recordings on the TOEFL

The listening section will expose you to a variety of content both academic and non-academic. Even before the recording starts, your test will give you some idea of what kind of recording you'll be listening to, which can help you to know what kinds of questions to expect.

Although all listening excerpts are noticeably slower than natural speech, the speakers try to speak as naturally as possible. This means that they use all the "ums," pauses, and sudden redirects that you would encounter in actual language. Not only do you need to be able to navigate these incidental cues, but you also need to be ready to comment on how they function in context, as you will probably have to answer at least one question on your test about the meaning of a bite of incidental language.

Lectures

The first, and in many ways most grueling, type of listening assignment is the lecture. Lectures generally last about five minutes, and can be on a wide variety of topics including natural sciences, history, art, anthropology, and business/economics. Each lecture will begin with a sentence like this: "Listen to the following excerpt from a lecture in an introductory photography class."

There are two basic types of lecture: with students' questions and without students' question. When there are questions, it may be just one quick interruption or it could be a back-and-forth between the professor and multiple students, in a format similar to a

conversation. In either case, the content is the same: they are completely about some academic topic and are set in a classroom.

Every lecture is accompanied by six questions, and they may be of any type. You will usually only see organization questions in lectures so pay extra attention to the organization of any lecture you're given.

Conversations

The conversation samples are shorter than the lectures, and they may contain academic or non-academic content. They generally take place either between a student and a professor or between a student and someone in a support role at a university. Conversations with a professor may include topics like assignment deadlines (non-academic content), clarification of course material (academic content), or upcoming assignments/projects (can be academic or non-academic content). Conversations with people in support roles include topics like registration, housing, and other logistical aspects of college life. Some familiarity with the language and culture of American higher education will be helpful in understanding the conversations.

Conversations usually last between three and five minutes, and are accompanied by five questions. Conversations are less likely than lectures to have organization or detail questions, but you should expect more questions about attitude and function.

Types of Listening Questions

The kinds of questions that the TOEFL listening section asks are very similar to those in the reading section. Here's a quick overview of what you'll find on the Listening section of the test. Later on, we'll cover each question type in more depth.

Purpose Questions

These questions ask you about the purpose of the conversation or lecture, not the content. These questions will usually begin with “Why”: “Why does the professor explain⋯” and “Why does the student speak to the professor?” are two possible questions of this type. The answer to these questions may be inferred, or it may be directly stated by the speaker.

Specific Detail Questions

These questions will require you to remember particular information. You will need to take notes in order to answer these questions. Although they seem straightforward, these questions can occur at any difficulty level; a simpler question may ask, “According to the speaker, what is one thing that is true of X?” A more difficult question may ask you to draw from two or more parts of the recording to determine the correct answer.

Function Questions

Function questions are like miniature purpose questions. They will play a word or short phrase from the passage, and you should explain its meaning or usage. These questions will usually ask “What does ____ mean when he says this?” or “Why does ____ say this?”, followed by a sound bite.

Attitude Questions

This is the first question type that isn’t very similar to anything on the reading section. To answer these, you’ll have to use implied information to decide what the speaker’s thoughts or feelings are at some point in the excerpt. The information you need may not be linguistic—tone of voice is very important to answering these questions correctly.

Organization Questions

These questions ask about how information is arranged and/or prioritized in the excerpt.

Connecting Content Questions

Connecting content questions are designed to test your understanding of how ideas in the excerpt are related. Again, outlining is good preparation for this, as it helps you to reduce a text to the bare minimum, which makes relationships and central ideas more clear. These may be regular multiple-choice questions, or they may ask you to fill in a chart.

Inference Questions

These are very similar to Connecting Content questions; in fact, you could say that inference questions are a subset of questions that can be found in function, connecting content, attitude, and purpose questions. The key word for this question type will likely be either “infer” or “imply”. In both cases, the information you need will not be directly stated in the passage, which can make this one of the harder question types to answer.

Now, let’s look at each question type in more detail.

Question Type: Detail

Detail questions are roughly equivalent to the factual questions from the reading section. They deal with specific facts from the listening, but they are not usually as specific as detail questions in the reading section. Because you don’t have the option of listening to the recording a second time, you will depend on the information that you wrote in your notes. For this reason, detail questions in the listening section rarely deal with very specific information like numbers or name. Instead, they focus on those facts that you would recognize as important as you listened to the recording.

Detail questions are usually in harmony with the main idea of the recording. Before you mark a final answer, revisit the main idea of the recording and make sure that your answer choice makes sense considering the main idea.

As you choose your answer choice, be careful not to fall into the trap that false friends may set for you. False friends are answer choices that use keywords from the passage in a way that appears to be correct, but isn't. They may directly contradict the information in the passage, or they may simply not make sense.

Let's check out an example of a false friend using this excerpt from a listening practice set in the *Official Guide* (page 162). For the sake of simplicity, I've transcribed the relevant part of the recording below rather than attaching a sound file.

"Now, as fibers go, Manila hemp fibers are very long. They can easily be several feet in length, and they're also very strong, very flexible. They have one more characteristic that's very important, and that is that they are exceptionally resistant to salt water. And this combination of characteristics—long, strong, flexible, resistant to salt water—makes Manila hemp a great material for ropes, especially for ropes that are gonna be used on oceangoing ships. In fact, by the early 1940s, even though steel cables were available, most ships in the United States Navy were not moored with steel cables; they were moored with Manila hemp ropes."

According to the lecture, why was Manila hemp rope historically more useful to the US Navy than steel cables?
(A) Manila hemp fibers are stronger than steel.
(B) Steel cables are flexible and resistant to salt water.
(C) Manila hemp was easier to produce.
(D) Steel is too heavy to use on ships.

The false friend in this case is B, which uses key expressions like "flexible" and "resistant to salt water", but applies them incorrectly by using them to describe steel cables rather than Manila hemp.

In general, to answer detail questions correctly, you have to listen very closely. Many students make the mistake of trying to include everything in their notes—they try to write every detail they hear. That is very time-consuming, and so it becomes difficult to pay attention to what is being said. Do not try to write every single detail. Write the main ideas, the general topics, and **listen carefully.** Your memory will be enough if you're paying close attention and understand what the recording said.

Question Type: Attitude

Attitude questions often deal with information that's given not just by *what* the speaker says, but also by *how* they say it. They will ask you about the speaker's attitude--that is, what information the speaker's intonation and word choice give you about the speaker's feelings and relationship toward the subject s/he's discussing. Attitude questions may also ask you about feelings that are directly stated or strongly implied, as in the following example from the *Official Guide* (page 135). In this conversation, an academic advisor and a student are discussing the student's job.

Advisor: *Well, good. So, bookstore isn't working out?*
Student: *Oh, the bookstore's working out fine. I just, I—this pays almost double what the bookstore does.*
Advisor: *Oh, wow!*
Student: *Yeah. Plus credit.*
Advisor: *Plus credit.*
Student: *And it's more hours, which…The bookstore's—I mean, it's a decent job and all. Everybody I work with…that part's great; it's just…I mean I'm shelving books and kind of hanging out and not doing much else…if it weren't for the people, it'd be totally boring.*

What is the student's attitude toward the people he currently works with?

(A) He finds them boring.
(B) He likes them.
(C) He is annoyed by them.
(D) He does not have much in common with them.

The trick in this question is to keep straight how the student feels about his *job* and how he feels about his *coworkers*. Although the job itself is boring, the student describes his coworkers as “great.”

As we see in this example, some attitude questions deal with such simple attitudes as approval/disapproval. Others, however, may deal with more complex relationships like degree of certainty, irony, excitement, and confusion. The best way to practice attitude questions is to listen to as much natural speech as you can and pay attention to how intonation and vocal quality change with the speakers’ moods.

For example, the speaker may imply an attitude of irony or disapproval by exaggerating his or her intonation. If the speaker speaks haltingly (pauses frequently), s/he may be confused or unsure of what s/he is saying. We usually show excitement by becoming very animated, a change that will also be noticeable in the sound of the speaker’s voice. With practice, you will learn to recognize these nonverbal cues and combine them with the words that the speaker uses to understand exactly how the speaker feels.

Question Type: Function

Function questions test your understanding of pragmatics, or the implied meaning that we get from context. They often will ask about a very particular part of the passage, even just a single word. The question will replay a segment of the recording that contains the topic of the question, and then will replay just the topic. There will be no transcriptions provided for any part of these questions—all the information will be provided through listening.

Function questions do not deal with the meaning of the words the speaker says, but rather with the information that is implied by *how* the speaker says them. Let's take a look at a (partial) list of the general rhetorical functions you may need to be able to identify.

Sarcasm/Irony

Irony occurs when the speaker says the opposite of what s/he means. You can generally tell when something is meant ironically because the literal meaning of the sentence wouldn't make sense in context. Sarcasm is a particular kind of irony that is most likely to occur in a conversation. Usually when speakers are being sarcastic, they will use exaggerated intonation to show this. For example, you may hear someone say "That's just GREAT," meaning that whatever they're talking about is terrible.

Redirection

A speaker may use redirection to change the topic or the direction of a conversation. Professors may use it in lectures to introduce a new point or to get back on track after getting off topic. Common redirect words include "OK," "so," and "alright."

Correction/Clarification

Sometimes, professors in lecture will make a mistake and then have to correct themselves. Any correction is a likely topic for a function question. A clarification is when the speaker did not make a mistake, but still wants to add more information to make sure the listener understands. The phrases used to introduce corrections and clarifications are sometimes similar, so watch out for these ones, and use context and intonation to help you decide what the speaker means. Sentences that contain corrections and clarifications often begin with phrases like "What I meant was…," "I mean", "That is," and "Or rather."

Implied/Indirect Questions and Requests

An implied or indirect question is when the speaker either asks a question, expecting the listener to answer a slightly different question, or makes a statement, expecting the listener to understand that he is actually asking a question and expects an answer. For example, imagine someone saying "I wonder if you could open the window." The speaker knows you can open the window, and s/he isn't actually asking if you *can* open the window. Instead, he's asking if you are *willing* to. Another example would be a student who tells his professor, "You're probably too busy to meet with me, aren't you?" The student is actually requesting that the professor meet with him/her.

Rhetorical Questions

A rhetorical question is the opposite of the question we just talked about. It occurs when the speaker asks a question, not expecting an answer. Instead, s/he asks the question in order to make a point. Think of a parent who, when angry at their teenage child, asks, "Just who do you think you are?" Of course both people know who the child is, but the parent asks this to make the point that the child is acting inappropriately.

Question Type: Organization

Organization questions occur almost exclusively in lectures and are of three basic types. The first type will deal with the overall organization of the lecture; the second will ask you about the relationship between two (or more) parts of the lecture; and the third is similar to a function question, but deals with a whole sentence.

If you learn to notice how the information is organized automatically as you listen, then answering overall organization questions will be simple. When the overall organization is

in question, these are some of the most likely ways that the lecture may have been organized.

- **Likelihood** – This type of organization is most often used when the lecture deals with different theories or possibilities. The speaker will begin with the least likely and proceed to the most likely (more rarely, s/he may begin with the most likely and move toward the least likely).

- **Complexity** – The speaker may list the ideas in the lecture from simplest to most complex in order to make the more difficult information more accessible.

- **Chronology** – Lectures in history are often (but not always) organized chronologically—that is, beginning with the first event that occurred and moving up to the one that occurred most recently.

- **Comparison** – This scheme of organization groups all the similarities among the items being discussed, then groups all the differences (or the other way around). The professor's thesis statement, or statement of the main idea of the lecture, will likely give you a clue when a comparative organization is going to be used.

- **General to Specific** – Very often, a lecture will start out with the professor talking about a general concept, and then they will start talking about some more specific details about how that idea works and examples of it in real life.

- **Cause and Effect** - Don't expect this to be so simple as "A happens, then B happens." Instead, you might hear about some phenomenon, and then the professor will talk about the three main causes for that phenomenon. Or, conversely, you might hear about one phenomenon and then three different effects it has.

There are others, too, and these structures can also be combined. For example, you might have a comparison structure, but one of the parts in the comparison is more important than others, so it has a general to specific structure *within* the comparison structure. This makes it quite tricky, sometimes, to hear the main organization. Keep in mind that the overall organization should include all parts of the lecture: there may be a cause-and-effect relationship that doesn't relate to the rest of the lecture, for example, and that would not be the main organization.

The second kind of organization question is the one that deals with the relationships between various parts of the lecture. For example, the test may ask you, “How does the professor explain his theory about the causes of the war?” To answer this question, you would need to look back at your notes and find the information that is relevant to that question. These questions are about the smaller relationships, rather than the overall structure.

Finally, we have the function-type organization questions. These will ask you about whole sentences that provide a clue to how the professor is structuring the lecture. For example, the professor will sometimes go off topic, give a personal example to clarify the information, or give information that is redundant. Often, s/he will announce this by saying something like “You don’t need to write this down” or “Let me show you what I mean.” To answer the third type of organization question correctly, you need to pay attention to these cues. In particular, pay attention to any time the professor appears to be digressing (going off topic), as you may be asked about the digression later.

Question Type: Main Idea

Every listening sample will begin in the same way: with a main idea question. These questions ask you to identify the main point of the lecture or conversation. They usually take one of the following forms:

- Why does the professor ask to see the student?
- What problem does the student have?
- What is the main idea of the lecture?
- What subject is the professor mainly discussing?

When you see this kind of question, remember that you should only be concerned with the **main idea** of the recording. Supporting ideas, examples, and counterexamples will not be correct answers. Just because an answer choice is true doesn't mean that it's the correct answer. It must be the most important of all the correct answer choices.

But there's one important exception to make: if the question asks for the main *purpose* of a conversation (like in the first example given above), that might only be talked about in the beginning of the conversation. That's because sometimes conversations change topic, and therefore what was originally the purpose of the conversation changes slightly.

So, for example, a student might go to an administrative office to ask about where they can park their car on campus, but then the conversation might change to the application process for receiving a parking permit. Now, the *purpose* of that conversation is for the student to find a place to park their car on campus, although a lot of the dialogue is about an application process.

In either case—in main idea or main purpose questions—the answer will often be in the very beginning of the recording, although the wording in the answer choice will be slightly different from that in the sample. For example, the wording in the question may be more abstract or general than the wording in the lecture.

Take these examples from the listening practice sets in the *Official Guide*.

Abstract/General	Concrete/Specific
A study on deaf people's problem-solving techniques	Differences between the problem-solving techniques of deaf people and hearing people
An action many people make that they are not aware of	How people's eye movements show what they're thinking about
An important crop in the Philippines	The economic importance of hemp fibers

When answering these questions, consider two things: how did the recording start, and what were the main topics mentioned? The main idea is where those two piece come together.

Question Type: Inference

Inference questions ask you to use context clues and implied information to make educated guesses about the subject matter. Usually, the question will include a word like "imply" or "infer", which should be a hint that the speaker will not directly state the answer.

Inference questions will usually look very similar to one of these examples:

- What can be inferred from the Professor's discussion of X?
- What will the student probably do next?
- What is implied when the speaker says this? (replay a short segment)

Sometimes, the question will replay a sentence from the recording for you; other times, you will need to rely on your notes and memory to answer the question. Unfortunately, your notes may not always be much help, since you can't take notes on information that isn't there. So when you're answering inference questions, keep these pointers in mind.

- Never pick an answer that contradicts a main idea from the passage.
- As you're listening, pay attention to the speaker's tone.
- The correct answer will probably use some keywords not found in the recording.
- The implication is very similar to what's directly said. You do not need to make a large logical jump.

That last point is the most important one. Even though we call these questions "inference" questions, they're very, very similar to detail questions. The information is in the recording—never draw from your own thoughts or experiences if they're not also spoken about in the recording.

Question Type: Categorization

Categorizing questions ask you to sort key items from the lecture according to certain criteria. Some of the answers will usually be stated, whereas others will be implied, and the categories will usually differ from the most obvious ones mentioned in the lecture.

Let's take a look at two examples from the Official Guide in order to see how Categorizing questions work.

Some categorizing questions will be in the format of a chart, as on *Official Guide* page 265. The example is based on an excerpt from a philosophy lecture.

Based on the information in the lecture, indicate whether the statements below about human emotion reflect beliefs held by Plato.

	YES	NO
Emotion is usually controlled by the faculty of desire.		
Emotion ought to be controlled by the faculty of intellect.		
Emotion is what motivates soldiers.		

By looking at this chart by itself, you may assume that the lecture is about Plato's beliefs about human emotion. But the topic of the lecture is actually much broader; emotion is just one of several big ideas that the professor discusses. In other words, the question emphasizes a point that was not the main idea of the lecture. As you practice, you'll find that categorizing questions frequently do this.

There are a few different types of categorization charts you might see. The yes/no chart above is one. Beside that, you might see charts that ask you to do any of the following:

- Link details to broader topics (similar to the yes/no chart, but with topics instead of "yes" and "no")
- Put events in order from first to last
- Connect a few key terms to their definitions

They have slightly different appearances, but you do basically the same thing. To answer these questions correctly, it helps to have a bit of strategy. Read the chart twice: once to see all of the information, and a second time to fill in the answers. When you are going through and filling in the answers, start with the ones you're most confident in. Save the stuff you're unsure of for last. Doing that makes it easier to stay focused on one piece of information at a time and helps to build a bit of confidence.

Hearing the Important Information

There's at least one way in which the TOEFL listening section is actually harder than understanding a college lecture: you can't stop the recording or ask the professor for clarification. So you have to be really good at deciding what information is important and what's not.

Unfortunately, on the TOEFL you won't have the luxury of scanning the questions before the recording begins. So the next best thing is to be aware of the kinds of questions that can be asked, like we mentioned above. You can perfect this skill without adding too much time to your study schedule. As you listen to practice excerpts, predict what questions you will be asked. Then check your predictions against the questions given. If you can make guessing and checking like this a habit, it will be easy for you to single out the most important information on test day.

Be aware of the difference in the questions that will be asked for lectures and for conversations. For instance, general content questions are relatively rare in conversation excerpts, whereas attitude questions are more common in conversations than in lectures. When learning to listen for specific information, I recommend a three-step approach that combines listening and note-taking (since that's what you'll have to do on the test anyway). Vocabulary is pretty straightforward, so let's start with that. Listen to a recording once and just write down any keywords or phrases that are emphasized or defined, even if the words seem fairly technical or you already know them. If you're writing more than 3 vocabulary words per recording, you're probably overdoing it; remember that this is only about *key* words. Then listen again, but focus on main ideas, using your note-taking to help you focus on the big picture. Then, listen once more and fill in your notes between the main ideas with words that will help you remember details from the excerpt.
If you did all of the above and understood enough of the language used, you should be able to answer most of the TOEFL questions you get. But there's still one crucial aspect

missing from your outline. Now that you can outline the *content* of a lecture or conversation with ease, start annotating your outline by adding comments on the speaker's opinions and attitudes as you go. This may be as simple as noting that one of the characters in a conversation says "That's ridiculous" in reaction to something the other character said, or it may require you to notice the tone with which a lecturer makes a point. This will help you to answer attitude-related questions.

Now, of course, you won't have the opportunity to listen to a TOEFL lecture or conversation three to four times: you'll only get one chance. So how does this help for the real test? By practicing your notes with multiple rounds of listening, each time with a different mindset, you have the chance to better learn what kind of mindset gets you to the answers.

Tips for Note-Taking

Taking good notes is one of the most important skills for success on the TOEFL (and for college) that won't be directly tested. It's not a bad idea to take notes on the reading section, but it will be absolutely critical in the listening section and integrated tasks, since many of these contain far more information than anyone could possibly remember in one sitting.

Tip #1: Express Ideas in Few Words

One huge error that people make when taking notes is being too careful. They write every word out completely, include small words like "the," or even include full sentences. There is a clear problem with this approach: you simply don't have enough time. But also, this can make it hard to find information later. Shorter notes are easier to search through. When you refer to them later, you'll have no problem finding the information you need.

Tip #2: Use Your Own Words (Even in Your Own Language)

It's a bad idea in class, but when you're in the middle of a test, no one cares whether you're using exclusively English or not. If you can rephrase what you heard in fewer words in your own language, then do it! I'm not saying you should write entirely in your native language, but if you can express a thought faster, then that's a good thing.

Tip #3: Keep Moving

The speaker is going to be moving faster than you can write. If you think you are falling behind as you rush to write the last point that was made, it's usually best to stop that thought in the middle and move on. It's much easier to remember that partial thought later than to miss a portion of the lecture and have to figure out what the speaker's talking about now and why.

Tip #4: Use Symbols

Never write the word "circle" if you can simply draw a circle. Cause and effect can be shown with arrows. "Decrease," "fall," "short," "cheap," or even "worse" can all be shown with a down arrow. There are many, many other symbols, of course—use whatever you can think of that's shorter than writing words!

Tip #5: Only Note Big Ideas and Key Relationships

Your notes should be *structural*. In other words, you don't want to include every detail that's spoken. You want to hear every detail, of course, but you only have to write the big ideas that help you to remember the small ones. If you try to write everything, you will have trouble keeping pace, and you will not hear some information because you're still writing the previous details. Make note of relationships between ideas like examples, comparisons, contrasts, and cause and effect. Note when the topic changes. But don't write every name, date, and location you hear.

Tip #6: Practice, Practice, Practice!

Note-taking is a skill, and it needs to be practiced. Take notes from whatever media you have: a TV show, a TED talk, the book you're reading, or even a conversation with a friend. Pay particular attention to listening and writing at the same time without getting behind in either.

Balancing Notes and Listening

It's important to strike the right balance of note-taking and listening so that you hear and remember all the important information. You can do this by making your notes an extension of, rather than a distraction from, your listening by learning to listen and take notes actively. These tips may help you find the ideal balance.

Infer a Bit

Part of listening actively is putting in your opinions and reactions along with the information expressed in the lecture. Not only will this make the note-taking process more interesting (and therefore help you maintain concentration), but by connecting personally to the recordings, you'll give your memory a boost when you answer the questions.

Of course, your priority should still be to record the facts. But even putting an emoticon (smiley face or sad face) to mark information that you agree or strongly disagree with can help you to connect with (and therefore remember) the information on a deeper level.

Write Often

While you're listening, your pen should never leave your hand. You will not write every word, or even every sentence, but you will never forget about your notes. Listen to a thought or sentence, figure out what they're saying, and then ask yourself, "Is this important enough for my notes?" Focusing on your notes not only helps you to remember important details, but also helps you focus on the big picture—the structure of a lecture or the main problems and emotions of a conversation.

Write What You Understand, Not What You Hear

Don't try to write out complete sentences. If you try to copy word for word what is said, you will be left behind and then you will miss important information. Test-takers who write too many notes end up confused and frustrated. Instead, listen carefully and try to understand the main messages. When you do understand a concept, note it down **briefly.** Every major idea that you hear about can be noted with just a few words—and many of those words will be abbreviated or represented by symbols.

Try to Structure

The act of physically putting words on paper is an important skill for doing your best on the TOEFL, but it's not everything. You also want to separate the big ideas from the small ideas. For many test-takers, only the big ideas need to go on the paper at all—memory will help for the small ideas. But that's not for everybody, and there are some "small" ideas that are actually pretty important. Make it clear which parts of your notes feel like larger concepts and which parts are smaller but important details while you listen.

Pacing Strategies

During the Lecture

Ideally, you'll pay attention perfectly for the duration of the test, understand all of the main ideas the first time they're mentioned, and understand the context of every recording. But practically speaking, at some point, your mind will wander or the lecture or conversation will move on before you're ready. When this happens, how do you keep moving forward while minimizing the effect the missed information will have on your score?

If that does happen, just let it go. Don't start panicking, which only compounds the problem. When you notice that you've gotten off track, simply get on track. Don't worry about it—take a quick, deep breath, and start listening again. The only thing worse than breaking concentration once is breaking concentration twice.

Don't over analyze or think back about what you missed. Instead, just focus on what's being said *now*.

During the Questions

There are a couple of ways in which your strategy on the listening section will be different from that of the reading section. First of all, of course, you can't go back to the recording as you answer the questions. That's why notes are so important.
Second, you have a more comfortable amount of time to answer all of the questions; expect 10 minutes to complete the questions (not including listening to the recordings) that are given for each set of three recordings. That's 10 minutes per 17 questions, or about 35 seconds per question. But because you can't go back and listen again, unlike the reading, which allows you to re-read the passage, the listening questions are very

fast to answer. Most students only take 10-20 seconds per question. It is very rare to run out of time on the listening section.

Besides that, once you've submitted an answer, you can't go back to it as you can on the reading section. You need to answer the questions in order. That means there's no strategy of answering some questions before others, so skipping is not very helpful. Answer every question in the order you see it.

The only important thing to note is that you should have at least 6-7 minutes left when the second set of questions starts and 3-4 minutes when the third set of questions starts (after the third recording in each group of three recordings). If you have less time, you will want to think less about wrong answers—just select answer that seems right when you see it, and don't bother reading the other answer choices. Again, that's only if you have little time, though. Most test-takers don't have that problem.

Common Listening Difficulties

Not Knowing the Subject Matter

The TOEFL is designed not to require any prior knowledge of the topics on the test. In other words, hypothetically an artist should find every recording as easy as the engineer next to him does. In spite of this, there's no doubt that if you're already familiar with the subject matter, your score can only go up. On the other hand, if you have no familiarity with the topic, you may be unfamiliar with words that you need to know to fully understand the recording.

Inevitably, you will not be an expert on all of the subjects you'll encounter on the TOEFL. So prepare for the worst by applying the same study practices to listening that you would to reading. When we read, we learn how to pick up on all kinds of *context clues*, or hints

that help us figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. For example, in case you were unfamiliar with the phrase “context clues,” I defined it immediately after saying it for the first time. Professors will frequently do this in lectures, as the words that are central to the new ideas they’re discussing are often unfamiliar to their students.

Even if the speaker doesn’t define a word, you can try to figure it out by looking at what else s/he says: examples, clarifications, and so on. When you encounter an unknown word, don’t let it distract you. Instead, focus your attention on what hints the speaker might be giving as to the word’s meaning.

“Natural” Style

The TOEFL listening section is full of informal language that is designed to sound like real-world speech. It’s also not as slow as some resources for non-native speakers. One great way to deal with this is to practice listening to interviews. The speakers are not reading from scripts, unlike TV characters, so they're generally slower and more broken up, with those pauses and repetition. You can find interviews from American shows and radio online, and many websites include transcripts or offer subtitles which can help you out at first. Be sure not to rely on subtitles forever, however, since you won’t have access to them on the test.

Not Understanding Intent

It’s easy to become too focused on the details of a recording and forget to pay attention to the big picture, but a large portion of the listening section requires you to do just that. You need to know not only the information contained in the lecture, but also the speakers’ attitudes, the situation in which the recording takes place, and what is likely to happen next. You will find these kinds of questions much easier to answer if you allow yourself to visualize the scene as the recording is taking place. If it’s a conversation, where do you think the speakers are? In the cafeteria? In an office? Is the professor behind a desk (as at office hours or a formal meeting), or did the speakers meet casually?

If it’s a lecture, try to imagine what the professor might be doing with his or her body and facial expressions. This can help you tap into unspoken information that may be crucial in understanding attitude and intent.

Getting All the Details

This is by far the most common problem students have with TOEFL speaking. The TOEFL recordings include a lot of information, and you *will* be asked about some specific details. In order to answer those questions you need to be able to remember the specifics. But which details will you need? Remember that you don't need to remember every single word of the lecture or conversation. You just need the most important details. If you hear a number, it's probably not going to be the answer to a question. You don't have to memorize or note little facts. But if you hear two numbers compared, and the message is that one of those numbers is much larger than the other (for example, in comparing the populations of two countries), you should definitely remember which one is bigger. Focus on the speaker's intentions. If you can understand how the details fit into their main points, then you're in a good place.

The Best Listening Practice

Finding good TOEFL listening practice online is about as easy as trying to find a bear in New York City. There are a few, but there’s only one reliable place to find them. In the case of the bears, that’s a zoo. There may be lots and lots of imitations of bears—stuffed animals, paintings of bears, statues, costumes, or whatever—but the only place you’ll find real bears (legally!) is in the zoo. In the case of the TOEFL iBT, the only place you’ll find the real thing is on ETS’s official website.

The official sample TOEFL iBT listening exercises there are a great help and are the best examples of what you will hear on the day of your test. Altogether, there are 8 listening exercises, divided into two places.

TOEFL Listening Samples in the Test Sample Software

First, you can find some listening practice in the "TOEFL iBT Test Sample Questions" software. This software is actually the only place you can find a realistic, free sample of the TOEFL. I don't know of **any** other free sources that give a test-like experience. There's one way that this software is different from the real test, though—it's too short. There's only one lecture and one conversation included. On a real TOEFL, you will get 4 or 6 lectures and 2 or 3 conversations.

Unfortunately, ETS are not Apple friendly, though; unlike the GRE Powerprep, which wasn't available for Mac until very recently, the Test Sample software remains Windows only. But here's the good news for Mac lovers—only two listenings are in that software. The other six are streamable. That is, you can listen to them online without downloading any software.

TOEFL "Quick Prep"

On the "Quick Prep" page, you can find six more practice listenings. These represent an accurate set of TOEFL listenings—there are two groups of three, with 2 lectures and 1 conversation in each set.
There are also another six "listening" samples without mp3s, but they don't provide realistic practice at all. Listening is *very* different from reading.

Unofficial TOEFL Listening Practice

There are plenty of unrealistic, unofficial imitations, of course, but there aren't many practice listenings that accurately reflect the content, style, and level of English that ETS uses on the test. Be very wary of unofficial, free materials. They might be good for

general English listening practice, but you probably won't get realistic questions, and the recordings will almost always be different from what you'll really get on the day of your test.

But that leads to another point: if you want to practice your English listening skills in general, there's no reason to limit yourself to amateur recordings and poorly-written questions that just *look* a little like the TOEFL iBT. Instead, we can practice listening to *anything* academic. I highly recommend the lectures on www.TED.com for practice. American-born speakers are best. The best feature of TED is that if your listening skills are still very low, there are text transcripts of almost every lecture so you can read while you listen.

The lectures on TED are **definitely** more difficult than TOEFL recording, too. That's not a bad thing, though—the best way to train is with difficult material.

Podcasts

If you want to study at an English-speaking university, you will have to listen to lectures in English, of course—what better way to practice for that than to listen to real English lectures from actual professors? Many universities offer podcasts of real lectures. Not all of them are perfect, of course but there is a *lot* of great TOEFL practice there.

Documentaries

So you like watching TV and movies in English? That may be good English practice in general (although very difficult), but it's not always appropriate for the TOEFL. But *documentaries* are **great** practice. I highly recommend BBC's Planet Earth, for one. The science that it discusses is very, very similar to what you would hear in TOEFL lectures about natural sciences, the material is extremely interesting, and the videos are absolutely beautiful. But don't stop there; almost *any* documentary is a good idea.

How to Enhance Your Listening Practice

As you listen, take notes. Listen to each sample several times (at least twice) so you can add in all the important information. Then, give yourself a few minutes after listening to a new recording to make as detailed a summary of it as you can. Alternate between speaking and writing your summary, so you can practice the other sections of the test as well as your listening. Never just listen passively: always be prepared to summarize what you've heard!

The Main Point

If you're looking for sample TOEFL listening material, head to the official site first. Unofficial, free samples are only really useful for general listening practice. If you're practicing that, then don't limit yourself to suspicious imitations: consume *anything* you can that's academic and challenging.

The Speaking Section

Meet the Speaking Section

The Speaking Section is the shortest of the four sections on the TOEFL, totaling about 20 minutes in length. All in all, you'll answer six questions on various topics; the first ones will be opinion-based. For these questions, you will hear the question and then have 15 seconds to collect your thoughts and form an opinion. Then you will speak for 45 seconds. These questions are totally based on your opinions and experiences, so there is no right or wrong answer. Your communication is what's important, not your ideas.

The speaking section also contains "integrated" questions. For these, you'll have to incorporate outside information from a short reading passage and a short lecture excerpt or conversation into your answer. Integrated questions will give you slightly longer to collect your thoughts (20 or 30 seconds instead of 15—woo-hoo!) and 60 seconds to give your answer. We'll go into more detail about these questions later.

What You'll Be Graded On...

Your score, which will be determined by two graders, will be dependent on your performance in three categories: delivery, language use, and topic development. Delivery is basically your fluency—how well you maintained a reasonable speed, whether your pronunciation was clear, and whether your answer was hard to understand because of unnatural rhythms or intonation. To score your language use, the graders will be paying attention to the breadth and appropriateness of your vocabulary, the variety of your sentence structure, and the grammar of your response. In the official rubric, which you can find on the ETS website or in the Official Guide page 188-89, you'll see the word "automaticity" used as a characteristic of a high-level response. This means that your speech needs to sound natural—like you're not working very hard to come up with the correct words and form good sentences. Topic development is the last category, but it's just as important as delivery and language use. For this category, the raters will be

listening for the organization of your response, how well you support your opinion, and how clear your examples and explanations are.

The Topics You'll Speak About

The TOEFL speaking section tests your ability to express yourself in a few general situations: talking about personal experience, giving an opinion, summarizing, and contrasting two sources of information are the most important skills.

Personal Experience and Opinion

Personal experience questions are short and will ask you to reflect on some broad topic: a person you know, a place you've been, or an experience that many people have had. These questions are always very general, as they have to be equally relevant to all test-takers. To prepare for these kinds of questions, be able to talk about likes, dislikes, personal characteristics, and descriptive vocabulary.

Defending an Opinion

Like personal experience questions, the opinion question is designed to be very general and accessible to everyone. Often, it will require you to compare or choose the better of two options, so brush up on your comparison-related vocabulary. Like an experience question, it's very important that you use specific examples and personal experience to support your position.

Conversational Integrated

There are two speaking questions that ask about conversations you'll hear. One of the two questions, the 3rd speaking task, will also include a short reading. In both cases, the topics will be related to practical, everyday issues that students might have. One will ask you to contrast university news with a student's opinion on the news. The other will ask

you to summarize a student's problem and state what you think the best solution would be. In either case, you will have to use a lot of reported speech (for example, "The man complained that...").

Academic Integrated

The two academic integrated questions are based on lectures. One of the two also includes a text. In these questions, the topics are similar to what you read about in the reading section and heard in the listening section. The topics will be things that you probably know little or nothing about, but that you can understand with no background knowledge. In both tasks, you will have to summarize what you heard. The task that includes a reading is slightly more complicated—you have to explain how the lecture relates to the text—but not much. Summary and, again, reported speech are the major skills.

Independent Speaking Tasks

Task 1: Describe a Personal Experience

This task will ask you to speak from personal experience. You may need to talk about a place you've been, a person you know, or an important event that has happened in your life. You will have 15 seconds to prepare your response and 45 seconds to speak. You can take notes during this time, but try not to write out an entire response. You won't have anywhere near enough time to finish it, and in the unlikely event that you did write a whole response, reading a prepared response will earn you no points.

Instead, use your 15 seconds of preparation to come up with the main topic of your response and then think of some supporting details. Forty-five seconds isn't very long, so you won't have time for much more. Let's look at an example.

Example

Describe a teacher who has influenced you and why. Be sure to include specific details and examples in your response.

Sample response:
"My high school literature teacher has had a positive impact on me. No one in his class could ever be bored, no matter what kind of literature you liked. He was respectful of his students and always interested in our opinions and thoughts. His classes were creative, and we did much more than just read. We acted out plays, went on field trips to places related to the books we were reading, and wrote interesting papers. Because of this class, I have decided to study literature at college so that I can teach, too."

Note:

Note that your response doesn't have to be grammatically perfect in order to get a high score. Fluency—sounding comfortable speaking English—is more important than grammar, and content and structure are also important. A successful answer generally has three parts: an introductory statement (where you basically restate the question and give your answer), supporting details (a good guideline is to give two or three details, each taking no more than one or two sentences), and then a concluding statement that draws your details back into the main idea.

More Examples

Here are some examples of questions you may encounter in the first speaking task:

- Describe a person whom you admire and explain why. Be sure to include specific details and examples in your answer.
- Talk about a book or other reading source that is important to you. Describe the text, and explain why it is important. Include specific details in your response.
- Talk about an event that has changed your life for the better and explain how it affected you. Be sure to include specific details in your response.

Task 2: Give Your Opinion

The first independent speaking task asked you to describe a personal experience. The second one, on the other hand, will ask your opinion on an issue. Usually it will present two opposing opinions, and you will need to choose the one that you think is most justified and explain why.

As before, you'll have 15 seconds to think and 45 seconds to speak. Generally speaking, the structure of your response should be similar to the structure of the first speaking task: briefly state your opinion, give two reasons why you think the way you do, then offer a conclusion of some kind. If you choose to, you can use the conclusion to acknowledge another side of the issue or an opposing opinion. That's a good way to use up extra time if you get through your examples with 10 or 15 seconds left. If you do this, however, be sure that you will have time to return to your original opinion and make your preference clear (and give a brief explanation).

Let's look at an example question from the Official Guide, followed by an example of a good answer.

Question

Some students study for classes individually. Others study in groups. Which method of studying do you think is better for students, and why?

Sample Response

"Personally, I prefer to study alone rather than in a group. When I'm with my friends, I have trouble concentrating, and I get less finished in more time than if I had studied alone. Also, I like to be free to do what I want when I study--to move to a new place or get something to eat if I want to, to listen to music or not, and to move on to a new subject when I want to. If I'm with friends, we have to compromise so that everyone can get work done. I'm a visual learner, so talking about the material with classmates doesn't help me as much as reading and writing about it by myself does.

Although a study group can help to hold you accountable for getting your work done and doing it well, for me the costs of studying in a group outweigh the benefits, so I usually study alone."

Explanation

This general format is a great one to use on the test: "I prefer/believe that...", then some examples, then an "although statement," followed by a concluding remark. Remember that any well-developed answer is correct, and any poorly-developed answer is wrong. You will not lose points for picking an opinion that the graders don't agree with.
If you want more practice than you can find for this kind of speaking question, check out independent writing tasks. The prompts are remarkably similar, and in addition to the wealth of materials you'll find on the Internet, the Official Guide has a long list of independent writing tasks beginning on page 216.

Integrated Speaking Tasks

Task 3: Summarize a Text and Conversation

The third speaking task is the first of the integrated tasks and will be based on a topic related to campus life. First you will read a short passage, which frequently takes the form of an announcement or clip from a newsletter. This passage is very short, usually about 100 words, and you have 45-50 seconds to read it. Then you will listen to a conversation in which two people offer their opinions about the announcement. The conversation will also be very short, rarely more than 90 seconds or so. Usually the speakers will disagree with each other, so your answer should fully demonstrate the conflicting opinions and should justify each side.

Although the topics are designed to be accessible to those with no experience in American universities, the more familiar you are with campus life, the easier it will be for you to understand the content of the materials. Topics include changes to buildings on the campus, to transportation, to university policy, to course structures and requirements, and other university news.

The question will then ask you to synthesize the information from the two sources by summarizing one of the speakers' opinions on the changes. Note that your answer will focus on the dialogue; the reading passage is provided mainly for background information. So when you read the passage, pay attention to two things: first, what sort of change is being announced, and second, what two reasons are given for the change. That way, when you listen to the conversation, you will know what to expect, because the speaker will talk about those same exact topics.

Remember that the goal in question 3 is not to give your opinion, but to summarize the opinions of the speakers. Regardless of your opinion, you should present the opinions represented in the dialogue fully. That is, you will explain exactly why the speaker feels the way they do based on what you heard—what you think about the news or expect the student to feel should not be in your answer.

Task 4: Summarize a Task and Lecture

The second integrated speaking task is based on a lecture. Almost any subject that can appear in the listening section lectures (or in the reading section) may also be used for speaking task 4, including literature, business, psychology, meteorology, and biology. You won't need any prior knowledge of these subjects in order to do well on this task.

The reading passage for speaking task 4 will be the same length as the passage for task 3; you will have about 45 seconds to read it. It will introduce a topic, often by defining a key term or idea with general descriptions. You can (and should) take notes as you read. Write down the key concept of the passage, and then touch on the main points that the passage makes. Generally speaking, this information will only be necessary to provide background; lecture-based integrated speaking questions do not ask you to discuss the reading passage in detail, because there is much more information in the lecture.
The speaker in the recording for speaking task 4 will always be a professor. S/he will elaborate on the topic found in the reading passage, by adding more details and giving specific examples that illustrate the information found in the passage.

Then you will need to talk in detail about how the lecture explains the ideas described in the text. Good, detailed notes will be crucial to answering this kind of question fully. You *cannot* rely on the reading to give you your answer; you need to remember the specific details that were given in the lecture. Basically, you will summarize first the general idea in the reading, then the details in the lecture.

You will have thirty seconds to prepare your response, time that you should use to jot down the major points you want to make and to draw any necessary connections between the reading and the passage. Then you will speak for sixty seconds. Answer the question in enough detail and in such a way that someone who had not read the passage or heard the lecture could make sense of your response.

Task 5: Summarize and React to a Conversation

By now, you're familiar with the basic structure of the integrated questions. But the fifth question changes it up a little: instead of having a reading passage and a lecture to listen to and synthesize, you will have only a conversation. The question will be about a

problem that might arise in a student's life. Scheduling is a common problem, but it may be anything that's related to classes, clubs, living on campus, or other school-related parts of life. The two speakers, who are often (but not always) students, will then discuss possible solutions to the problem. The question will ask you to identify the problem discussed in the lecture and describe the two solutions that are proposed. Then you should decide which one of the solutions you prefer and explain why. As in other opinion-based speaking questions, there is no right or wrong answer; any answer that is supported by specific examples can earn full points.

Because you're only given one source to think about, you do not have as much time to prepare for the fifth question as you have for previous questions. You will have 20 seconds to prepare (beginning immediately after the conversation ends) and 60 seconds to speak.

Your answer should follow a fairly standard pattern. First, you should always start by summarizing what you heard. Do this in enough detail that someone who had never heard the recording could understand what the problem was. Then, mention the two solutions that are proposed in the conversation. Neither solution will be perfect, but you don't have to fully explain the advantages and benefits of both solutions when you do this. You just have to identify the options. Finally, BRIEFLY state which option is better; there's no need to spend more than a sentence or two on this, as the other parts are much more important. The last bit—and this is key—is to explain why you chose the solution you did. This could be 1/3 or even 1/2 of your answer. You should mention the reasons explained in the conversation for this, and then, ideally, add any other thoughts of your own.

On academic integrated speaking tasks, avoid talking about personal experiences. In this task, however, a personal experience that is relevant to the topic is a perfectly good

argument. Just be sure that you're going to have time to answer the question completely--sixty seconds is not as long as it may feel like at first.

Let's look at an example from ETS QuickPrep 4. Listen to the conversation, then read the sample response below.

"The male student is worried about his course schedule. He has two required classes, but he can't take both because they meet at the same time. Because of this conflict, he's anxious about the beginning of the semester. The student's professor has given him several good suggestions, but I think the best one is to take the class as an independent study. That way, the student will cover the exact material he's supposed to, which might not be the case if he took the class at another university. Plus, the one-on-one conversations with the professor are a great opportunity to learn more about the material, as long as the student is prepared for each meeting. The student is worried about being able to motivate himself, so I think he should set a certain time and place every week to do his work for the independent study. If he treats the independent study course work just like a class, he shouldn't have a problem with getting everything done."

Task 6: Summarize a Lecture

Like the fifth TOEFL Speaking Task, Task 6 requires you to respond to just one audio source. In Speaking Task 6, you listen to a short portion of an academic lecture. The lecture has the instructor's speech only, without classroom discussion from students. The audio track will be about 2 minutes long.

The language in the Task 6 lecture is appropriate for a first year American university classroom. The course topics usually focus on the humanities, and "soft sciences" such as psychology. Occasionally the topics will focus more on "hard science" subjects such as biology. However, even when the topics are more scientific, the information you must understand is very general.

In this task, you won't need to be an expert on any one academic subject. However, you will need to be able to understand the key points in an introductory academic lecture. You'll also need to do more than *just* understand what you hear. Test takers are asked to paraphrase what the lecture says and summarize it in their own spoken words.
As you listen, remember that spoken lectures have a structure very similar to written paragraphs. Learn to recognize topic sentences and verbal transitions. Take notes on the main ideas and supporting facts while the lecturer speaks.

After the lecturer is finished speaking, you will be asked the sixth question. This question may require you to repeat definitions of key terms. You may also need to summarize the lecture's main ideas using the instructor's examples. You will not be asked to provide any new information or opinions of your own.

You have just 20 seconds to review the information from your notes and structure your answer. Your notes should already contain the basic info you'll need to paraphrase the instructor's words. During these 20 seconds, focus less on what the lecturer said and more on what you'll say. In what order will you restate the information? Where will you make transitions? What key ideas will you paraphrase? What examples will you use?

Because you will introduce no new ideas of your own, try to use at least one or two reporting verbs when you speak. Use phrases such as "the teacher states," or "according to the data." Use of these words will help you focus on the lecturer's ideas and the basic facts you are restating.

Your spoken answer will be limited to 60 seconds. This means you need to shorten what was said, summarizing only the most important information. Remember that your speech is half as long as the lecture itself. Be mindful of timing and pacing. You should be ready to skip certain ideas or explain them more briefly if time is running out. Avoid speeding

up your speech to stay in your time limit. Faster speech can be harder to understand and this can hurt your score for the task.

To give you an idea of what a good answer to this question might be like, listen to a Task 6 lecture and question from ETS Quick Prep. Then look at a transcript of the question and a sample answer below:

Question: *Using points and examples from the lecture, explain the two major factors of product quality, and how their role in consumer decision making has changed.*

If two different versions of a product cost the same, buyers will look at quality. Quality helps them decide which brand to buy. When consumers try to figure out an item's quality, they look at reliability and features. A reliable product does what it is expected to do and does not break quickly. Features are extra things in a product that make it more fun or easier to use.

According to the teacher, buyers used to look at reliability as the main factor for buying decisions. However in modern times, tough government rules make all products reliable. The teacher gives cars as an example. Car makers all have to meet the same standards. So instead, buyers focus on features. In cars, the teacher points out common features like air conditioning or sunroofs. These things influence buyers the most nowadays. So these days, sellers give their products lots of extra features."

Planning Your Answer

In the speaking section, you only have 15-30 seconds to plan each response. Here are some tips to help you use that time effectively.

Don't Over-Plan

It's tempting to invent beautifully crafted language to impress the raters and ensure a good score. Unfortunately (and fortunately), there's really not time to do this in the TOEFL speaking section; that's one of the main reasons why the planning time is so short! First, remember that graders are trained to recognize memorized or read responses, and that such responses will receive low scores. Second, trying to write out exactly what you want to say will cause you to know one part of your response very well, while not having a clue what you want to say the rest of the time. It's not a great plan to rush through the first few sentences of your response and then sit in silence, trying to think of something else to say while the clock counts down. Avoid this by using the planning time to sketch an outline of your response rather than going in-depth into any one part of it.

Create an Outline

This brings me to part two of planning a great speaking response: what should you actually spend your planning time on? The first task, if it applies to your question, is to choose the topic you'll speak about. That's only true of independent tasks. In an integrated response, you may begin by defining a key concept from the listening or reading. Make a note of that, then identify the two important details from the recording (for example, the two reasons for the student's opinion, two solutions to the student's problem, two examples of a concept explained in a lecture, etc). If it's an independent question, think of the two most specific personal examples you can. Jot down a few key words for each of these, then move on. Once you've done this for two examples, you'll probably be out of time and ready to talk.

Keep It Short

As I said, you only have time for a few key words. In fact, for an independent task, you may write as few as three words, and they might be abbreviated, too! Try to write no more than ten letters—five for each of your key details. There's no point in writing the

main idea. And for the integrated tasks, you might even write nothing at all: try simply underlining or circling the key parts of your notes so you have something to focus on while speaking.

Don't Get Stuck

This is especially true of the independent tasks: it can be very hard to think of two supporting details in only 15 seconds! In the integrated tasks, you can select from your notes, but in tasks one and two, you have to use your own brain alone. If you are having trouble thinking of a good example, then lie. It doesn't have to be true. Just quickly choose a reason or detail that you can talk about most easily, whether it's true or not. Then move on to think of another!

Structuring Your Response

The speaking section moves fast. The 45 or 60 seconds that you have to give your answer will fly by, and you need to be sure you can fit all of your thoughts into that time. Generally, this means that simplicity is key. The speaking section isn't a good time to improvise a complicated set of contrasting ideas and show your logical abilities. Instead, try structuring your response around a set formula that you can practice and that you know will fit the time frame you're given.

One good way to structure your response is in three parts. First, give a general statement about the main topic. For example, in the opinion task (speaking question 2), that's your personal choice. Similarly, in the lecture summary task (question 6), that's the main subject of the lecture.

Then, lay out the more specific details. Be as concrete as possible during this part. For example, don't say "some animals" when you mean to say "tigers." Concrete things are almost always easier to understand than generalities or abstractions. This part of your

response—the details—is by far the most important part, and it is also the most varied from question to question. In the first task, the details might be the reasons why you chose a specific person who you admire, while in the third task, the details will be the reasons that you heard a student give for disliking some piece of university news. In either case, there are very often *reasons* and *examples.* That is, in this middle part of your response you will explain and illustrate.

Finally, you will give a quick sentence to conclude. In that conclusion, you'll briefly restate the same reasons or details you already gave, using different wording and with less specifics. This should not be more than a few seconds—just one sentence. Because the concluding statement is so short, you can watch the clock and use this last sentence to fill time once you get close enough to the end that you can't start another example. It's much better to spend that time concluding than to give an inadequate, halfway-thought-out or halfway-expressed example that confuses the listener. But, at the same time, it's better to talk until the end of the clock than it is to stop ten seconds early. So it's helpful to finish with that unimportant conclusion, which just repeats the same ideas in different words.

It's also a great idea to have some transitional or introductory phrases in your vocabulary so you can make it clear to the listener how each sentence fits into the whole response. Begin with a phrase like "I think that..." or "In my opinion...". In between your examples, try using expressions like "Also", "In addition," and "On that note..." to show the listener that what follows will be similar to what came before. To redirect them, you can use a phrase like "On the other hand," or "In contrast to that." That way the speaker will be prepared for you to change topics or directions. Transitions and linking words are key!

Staying Focused When Speaking

Are you worried that your mind will wander while the clock is running? Below are some tips to help you stay on track throughout the speaking exam.

Don't Get Stuck When You Don't Know the Right Word

It's awful when you want a specific word, but you can't think of it. Nevertheless, it happens to all of us, and it may very well happen to you on the speaking section. If it does, try not to sit there blankly, waiting for the word to come to you. Change your example to include words you *can* remember, describe the word you can't think of, or, if all else fails, simply move on to your next point.

Say Something

If you don't know what to say, don't sit and watch the clock run down in silence. If you simply cannot get yourself on track, then say so. Oftentimes, just speaking will get your mind back on the task at hand. For example, I might say something like "I don't know what to say because _____" or "This is a difficult question because _____." Oftentimes, whatever follows the "because" will address the prompt, acting as a back door that eases you back into your answer so you can continue.

Stick to the Main Ideas

There's no time on the TOEFL for talking at length about little details, no matter how interesting or relevant they may seem. If you're going to answer the question fully, you probably can allot no more than two or three sentences to each example or major point you want to make, so your examples will need to only include a few specifics. Remember that the most important part is communicating the main ideas, not explaining the tiny details that you, personally, find interesting. If you get stuck trying to explain

something that's causing you trouble, move on to the next topic as naturally as you can. Transition words can really help in that case.

Answering the Whole Question

Part of your score in the speaking section will come from how well you answered all parts of the question. Even if your language is very advanced, if you don't answer the question fully, will probably get a lower score than you deserve. Read on to be sure that you're answering the whole question every time.

There's Never Just One Answer

You'll never get a TOEFL question that only has one component; every speaking question is complex in some way. For independent questions, the first component will be your choice, and the second component will be an explanation for your choice (or possibly two separate reasons). The integrated questions, on the other hand, will ask you to summarize the recording (and text, sometimes), and that always includes at least two different main points. You need to include all of the major parts in your answer in order to get a top score.

Use Bullet Points

During your thinking time, make a note of each part of the question, and write a keyword or phrase that will help you remember how you want to answer that part. For example, let's take the question "Can pets be part of a family? Use specific reasons or examples to support your answer." In my thinking time, I might write this:

- emotional support
- share home

I didn't write much (and really, on the test I wouldn't even write this much—abbreviations and short words are better), but even those few lines help me to break my answer into manageable chunks that correspond to the question.

Manage Your Time

If I got the question discussed above on the test and spend 40 seconds talking about how pets can provide emotional support and trying to define what emotional support means, then I'd be in trouble because I wouldn't have enough time to give an example or move on to another reason. Avoid falling into this trap by limiting the time you spend on each part of your plan. That way you have a general idea of how many seconds you have to express a particular idea or give an example. Don't fixate on just one part of your answer unless you have two or three different, helpful details and examples all around that one reason.

Be Sure You Understand Every Part of the Question

Take extra care when you're reading and listening to the question so that you know everything that's expected of you. Since the questions are fairly predictable, you can get a good idea of what you'll need to do by reading about the different speaking tasks in this eBook.

Pacing Strategies

Watching the clock tick down while you're speaking is one of the most stressful parts of the entire TOEFL, but it's very difficult to ignore it and still give a high-scoring response. With practice, you will be able to see the clock as a helpful tool rather than an added stressor.

Do Timed Practice

I've heard musicians say that performing is only scary the first 100 times, and the same is true of timed test-taking. The more practice you have, the less intimidating the test itself will be. Anytime you are practicing speaking, go ahead and set a timer. You don't necessarily have to stop speaking the second the buzzer goes off, but at least it will help you get a feel for how long 45 or 60 seconds is. You can also do this backwards—set a stopwatch (so it counts up instead of down), and give your answer, stopping whenever you feel like you've answered the question successfully. Then check the stopwatch to see how long you talked. If you do lots of timed practice, you should develop a sense for how much material you can cover in a given time frame.

Don't Overdo It

The speaking section isn't a great time to try to develop complex ideas and introduce conflicting viewpoints in-depth. Given the time constraints, answers that try to cover too much material will usually come out sounding unfocused. Instead, try to break your response down into sections that will take no more than a few sentences each to explain fully.

Speak at a Natural Pace

The graders want you to speak fluently, but don't forget that they can't grade what they can't understand. Speaking too quickly to cram all of your (probably brilliant) ideas into the time allotment is just asking for trouble and may result in a very low score if the graders find your response completely unintelligible. The reverse side of this problem—that is, speaking too slowly—may not interfere with graders' understanding of your answer, but they will perceive you to be less fluent, and you won't have adequate time to develop all of your ideas. Try to maintain a steady, natural pace to ensure that you cover all the ground you need to, and that every word is easy to understand.

Have a Plan

I know I've said this a lot, but it bears repeating: use the thinking time to make a few quick notes and to plan your response. Not only will this prevent you from running out of time at the end of the response, as I described above, but it will also help prevent awkward pauses that may give the graders the impression of a lack of fluency.

Improving Your Pronunciation

Speaking perfectly doesn't need to be the focus of your studying. If your answers are easy to understand, then a slight accent won't affect your score. But if the scorers can't understand you, they won't repeat and repeat your answers until it's clear. So even if you don't need to speak exactly like a native, you should still spend some time working on the parts of your accent that make it hardest for native speakers to understand you—after all, the easier you make your test graders' lives, the better your life will be.

But it can be hard to decide how much work your accent needs. There are a couple of ways you can find this out. The best way is to ask a native speaker. It's difficult to get an honest answer that way, though, unless you're speaking to a teacher who knows the value of honesty. Many native speakers might say they understand and that your accent is great even if that's not true, because it's a slightly sensitive topic—they don't want to insult their friends, of course.

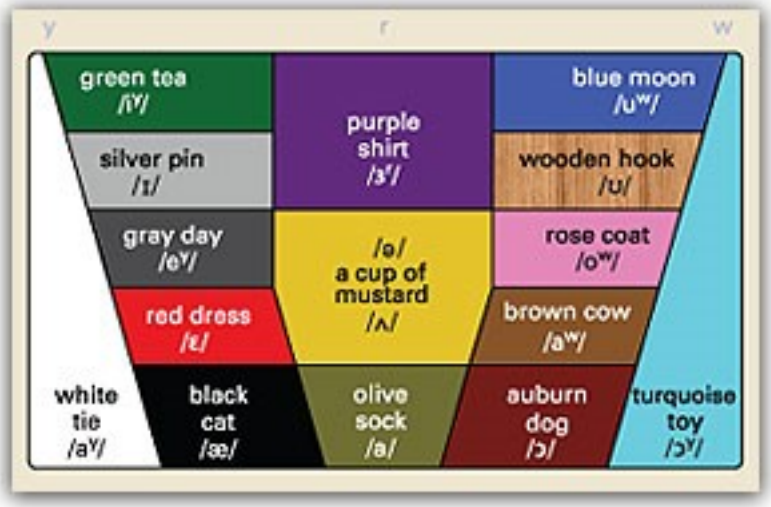
The other way isn't as effective, but there's no danger of dishonesty: compare yourself to a native speaker. That is, you will get a recording of a native speaker, then you will record yourself saying the exact same thing. What's different between them? How do you sound in comparison to the native speaker?

Identify the Specific Problems

Notice that above I said to work on the *parts* of your accent that are problematic. American English has about 40 unique sounds, all of which you can practice individually. A lot of people with strong accents only need to improve their pronunciation of a few sounds to dramatically improve their accents. You may need to ask someone to help you figure out what sounds are hardest for you, but once you do, you can try isolating those sounds and practicing them in different ways. This tool from the University of Iowa can help you figure out exactly how each sound is pronounced.

Use Colors to Practice Vowels

Vowels (a, e, i, o, u) are usually harder to get exactly right than consonants (f, b, x, and so on). I recently learned of an interesting system to help people with this problem. The system involves connecting the vowel sounds in American English with a color whose name uses that sound. For example, the “ay” in “gray” sounds the same as the “a” in "same," or the “ei” in “weight.” By practicing these colors along with words that use the same vowel sounds, you help not only your pronunciation, but also your memory of the pronunciation of new words. Check out the chart below, and click here to check out the site it came from.



Look at the Bigger Picture

Once you've worked on individual sounds, you need to take a step back and look at whole phrases and sentences. Even though I said there are only 40 sounds in English, a lot of meaning comes not from these sounds, but from intonation, or changes in pitch. For example, in English class, you probably learned that declarative sentences go down at the end, and questions go up. This is basically true, but there are smaller changes throughout the sentence that give extra meaning. If we didn't have these little changes, and your declarative sentences just went steadily downward, by the end of the sentence I wouldn't be able to hear you. And if your questions went up continuously over the course of the sentence, you would probably scare people, and they wouldn't want to talk to you.

Practicing Intonation

The easiest way to learn intonation is to imitate native speakers. One way that I like to do this is by taking clips from the media—from a language self-study course, if you can find it—and doing a variation on what one prominent polyglot (speaker of many languages), Alexander Arguelles, calls "shadowing." If you're using complicated material (not intended for language learners), listen to it a few times first so you know what it's saying. Look up any words you don't understand. Then listen all the way through, repeating everything the speaker says as soon as he or she says it. Pay special attention to replicating the speaker's intonation. This variation on shadowing requires a huge amount of concentration, which you may not have every day. For those days, just pick a sentence or two to imitate, and say them to yourself as many times as you can over the course of the day. By listening and repeating and listening again, you will adopt the natural speech patterns of the native speaker.

Common Speaking Difficulties

Sentence Variety

Because there isn't time to fully plan the response, many people fall into a trap of repetitive sentence structure: "I think that _____. I think that _____. I think this is because _____." One fairly extreme way to avoid this is to practice by drawing cards, each with a different kind of structure written on it; have a simple sentence on one card, a compound sentence on another, a sentence with an introductory subordinate clause on another, and so on. To practice, pick a practice question/topic. Then draw one card. Your introductory sentence must use the structure on that card. Then draw another card, and form a second sentence based on it. When you're practicing this way, don't time yourself; slow is okay. The focus in this activity is on getting creative with your sentence structure and becoming flexible.

Not Understanding Enough of the Information

This one is tough. What do you do if you finish listening to the materials in an integrated task, and you really want nothing more than to listen again? What if you have no idea what to say? It's a terrible feeling that I hope you don't experience on test day, but if it does happen, don't panic. Use your preparation time to draw whatever connections you can. If you can, still begin by stating the main idea/problem. If you have a reading sample (i.e. in questions #3 and #4), maybe spend a little more time than usual summarizing it. Include whatever information you did get, and focus on your language rather than the information. Half of your grade will come from language, not content, so if you have to, take advantage of this fact to show just how beautiful your English can be. Most of all, if this happens to you, don't let it affect the rest of your test. Rather than dwelling on mistakes you've made, focus on doing your absolute best on all of the *other* questions.

Not Speaking Clearly

My middle school band teacher used to praise students who messed up loudly--who played a note at full volume when everyone else in the band was silent, or made other obvious (and hilarious) errors. He said that everyone makes mistakes, but he wanted us to make them with confidence. That may seem backwards, but it's actually not a bad theory. First of all, people are more likely to respect you and have faith in your abilities if you appear to be convinced of your own ability. Even if you have to fake it, try to convey confidence in your spoken answers. Second of all, the graders can't grade what they can't hear. If you mutter or mumble, you're not doing yourself any favors. Finally, part of your grade will come from "Delivery," which is how well you pronounce your words and how clearly you speak. So speak at an audible volume (but not loudly enough to disturb other test-takers), enunciate, and believe in yourself!

How to Practice Speaking Alone

When asked about good ways to practice speaking, many people's default answer is to find a language partner—someone you can meet with, whether online, on the phone, or in person, to practice English conversation and test questions with. It's true that language partners can be a great resource as you study, but for a lot of people it's not a practical arrangement—particularly if you live in a non-English-speaking country. Practicing speaking by yourself can be tricky, but with some creativity you'll find that there are tons of great ways to do it. The tips below will help you approach the speaking section with confidence.

Translate Reading Material

You can exercise your grammar and vocabulary by translating reading passages—orally, of course—from your native language into English. Try to translate each sentence as

accurately as you can without using a dictionary. If you're not sure how to translate a particular phrase or structure, write it down so you can look it up or ask someone later. As you do this exercise, avoid using a dictionary; if there's a word you don't know, try to describe it or give the closest synonym you can think of. Replacing words you don't know with ones you do is a skill that will give you a huge boost on the exam (and in life).

Retell Common Stories

If you translate something as you read it, you're going to be pretty confined in terms of your phrasing, since you're trying to match the text as closely as possible. For some more creative practice, try translating a fairy tale, movie you just saw, or a well-known story. This method gives you a lot more control over the difficulty of the material you're translating.

Record Yourself

Nobody likes doing this, but it's still solid advice: record yourself speaking so you can listen and critique later. This will let you pick up on mistakes you're making that you may not even know about, plus you can compare your answers to sample TOEFL answers more easily. It also will get you used to the stress of being recorded so that it's not quite so strange to be speaking to a computer screen on test day.

TOEFL Speaking Practice with "Lightning Questions"

There's an activity that I use in many of my English classes to help my students practice speaking fluently without thinking. I call it "lightning questions." Here's how it works: everyone finds a partner; I give each partner a slip of paper, face down, that has five questions written on it. On the count of three, we turn over the papers, and one student asks the other a question from it. The other student must begin immediately to answer the question; the goal is to speak **continuously** for whatever time limit I have set, usually between 45 seconds and 1 minute.

I always tell my students not to stop for any reason (except a fire)—if you can't think of something to say, say that you don't know what to say, and then try to explain why. It doesn't matter--just keep talking. Then the other partner answers the same question. This is not a conversation, and the goal is not to come up with interesting thoughts or beautiful turns of phrase. When time is up, you stop talking, even if you're mid-sentence, and there's no need to respond to anything your partner says (although it's always good to go back and critique each other at the end). Even though you're not in a class and don't have a partner, you can still use lightning questions for TOEFL speaking practice.

If you're practicing speaking by yourself, it's best to use a voice recorder of some kind so you can go back over your answers. Not only does this help you track your progress, but it also makes it easier to identify and correct the errors that you're repeating over and over.

Below are some lighting question topics to get you started. If you practice speaking a little every day, you'll be a lot better prepared for the test than if you do all of these prompts at once, only once. These questions aren't specifically TOEFL speaking practice questions, although I did write them with the TOEFL in mind. Fluent speaking is a skill, and the topic you use isn't all that important to developing it. Feel free to come up with your own prompts or topics.

Lightning Question Topics

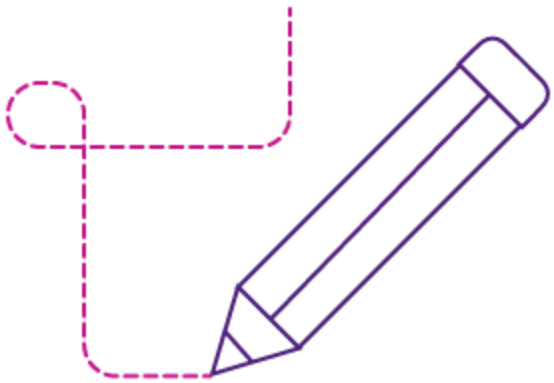
These aren't exactly the same as TOEFL speaking prompts, but they're great for sparking ideas.

- What would you do if you won a million dollars in the lottery today?
- Describe your favorite teacher.
- What is/was your favorite subject at school, and why?
- Apologize to a professor for being late to class.

- Your friend wants you to go out this weekend, but you don't want to. Come up with as many excuses as you can, being careful not to hurt your friend's feelings.
- Give directions to a freshman who has gotten lost.
- What materials do you always have with you at school?
- Describe your favorite book without naming the title or author.
- What is the most important characteristic you look for in a friend?
- What did you want to grow up to be as a child?

On the TOEFL speaking section, you will always have at least 15 seconds to gather your thoughts before recording your answer. But if you practice speaking totally unprepared, the test itself will be that much easier for you, and you'll have less trouble not just answering the questions, but answering them well.

The Writing Section



Writing Section Breakdown

The TOEFL writing section includes an integrated task and an independent task, which work together to test your ability to communicate through writing in an academic environment. This is the last section of the test, and it will take about an hour to complete.

The integrated writing task will require you to read a passage, listen to a lecture, and then write an essay that uses information from both of these sources. The independent task will be on a topic similar to the topics in speaking task #2—that is, it will ask you to use personal experience to explain an opinion that you have.

Scoring

The writing section is scored by two trained graders. Each will give your essays a score on a scale of 1-5. If they give you very different scores, a third grader will review the essay to decide your final score. A high-scoring essay will be well-organized, will give clear arguments and examples to support those arguments, and will include all of the important information from the given sources (on the integrated task, of course). To get a high score, you need to have a clear main point, and everything in your essay should contribute in some way to that point. As in the speaking section, a few minor language errors are not a major problem—this section is about communicating fully, so if your errors don't interfere with communication and are not very many, then you probably don't have much to worry about.

The Scope of Your Essays

Many people try to include too much in their essays. Although it's tempting to explore gray areas and expand on the (admittedly, pretty boring) prompt, most essays are only 200 – 400 words, and there's just not time for that kind of development. Later, I'll write in

more detail about how you can structure your essays, but for now, it's just important to know that the best use of your time and space is to choose one position and to focus on it the whole time.

The Topics You'll Write About

The writing section will include one opinion question and one integrated question on an academic lecture and a reading passage. Both of the topics will be designed to be appropriate for a variety of people. The independent task will require no cultural knowledge and will only assume experience that almost everyone has, with a tendency to choose topics appropriate to students. It will ask you to indicate a preference or choose which of two options you support.

The Official Guide includes a fifteen-page list of topics from old TOEFL tests, so if you can get your hands on a copy of that book, that's the best way to ensure that you're familiar with the topics you may write about in the independent section. In case you can't, here are a few examples:

- Neighbors are the people who live near us. In your opinion, what are the qualities of a good neighbor? Use specific details and examples in your answer.
- Should governments spend more money on improving roads and highways, or should governments spend more money on improving public transportation (buses, trains, subways)? Why? Use specific reasons and details to develop your essay.
- In general, people are living longer now. Discuss the causes of this phenomenon. Use specific reasons and details to develop your essay.
- Learning about the past has no value for those of us living in the present. Do you agree or disagree? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.

The integrated task may be on a wide variety of topics, including business, fine arts, history, anthropology, and so on—as in the reading section, almost everything that could be taught in an entry-level course is fair game, although you won't encounter the hard sciences, math, and so on, since these would be unnecessarily difficult to write about. Reading about a variety of topics in your free time will help prepare you to write about whatever topic the integrated task may throw at you.

Essay 1: The Integrated Writing Task

Since you'll still be wearing headphones after the Speaking section, the writing section begins with the integrated task, for which you'll need to keep your headphones on. The materials you'll be using to answer the question are a reading passage and a lecture excerpt. Both of these will be longer than the ones you encountered in the integrated speaking questions—the reading passage will give you three minutes to read, and it will go into more detail than the one in the speaking section did. Whereas other integrated reading samples have served mainly to define a key concept, the one in the writing section will describe a process or defend a position. The lecture will then expand on this information by offering examples, explaining in greater detail, or, most likely, describing conflicting viewpoints on the topic introduced in the reading passage.

The question will follow one of several formulas. The question you answer will probably be almost identical to one of these:

- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they cast doubt on specific points made in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they challenge specific claims/arguments made in the reading passage.

- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they answer the problems raised in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they support the explanations in the reading passage.
- Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to specifically explain how they strengthen points made in the reading passage.

The first two are by far the most common; usually, you will hear a lecture that contrasts with the reading.

Altogether you will have 20 minutes to plan and write your integrated essay. The essay will not be long—most responses are between 150 and 225 words—but there's still no time to waste. Remember that your organization and content are just as important as your language. Your essay needs to have a clear structure with separate points that transition smoothly. Most of all, it's very important to draw from both the written and the spoken sources. If you only reference the written passage, the very best score your essay can get is a 1. In many ways, the integrated essay is a summary of the lecture that you heard, but be sure to mention *both* sources.

You can take notes as you read and listen. With enough practice you will be able to identify the important points in the reading passage that will most likely be discussed in the lecture, and your notes should reflect that. Then, when you listen, it will be easy to take notes that relate to the ones that are already on your paper. Make as many connections between the two as possible while listening. If you have trouble with this, it's okay—you can take a minute to connect information before you start writing, after the lecture is finished.

How to Structure Your Integrated Essay

Even though the twenty minutes you have to write the integrated essay will fly by, it's still worth taking a minute or two to write an outline of your own prior to beginning your response (the test proctor will provide as much scratch paper as you need). Even jotting just a few lines that connect parts of your notes and circle the main examples you want to cover will give you the guidance you need to stay on task when writing your response. Below I've written an outline that demonstrates an effective structure to use on the exam. I highly recommend that you practice writing with this outline as your guide, at least at first. Once you've gotten some feedback and have some good practice under your belt, you can deviate from it. At first, though, it's good to know the rules before you break them, and to have a structure you can rely on when test day comes.

I. I. Introduction
    A. General statement about the relationship between the resources you heard and read.
    B. Short description of the structure of the lecture
II. Body
    A. Paragraph on first point
        1. Paraphrase the professor's point
        2. Contrast/compare with the reading
        3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*
    B. Paragraph on second point
        1. Paraphrase the professor's point
        2. Contrast/compare with the reading
        3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*
    C. Paragraph on third point
        1. Paraphrase the professor's point

2. Contrast/compare with the reading
3. *Give extra detail on the professor's point (optional)*

III. Conclusion

A. Restate the relationship between the two sources (optional)

Quoting and Paraphrasing

Plagiarism and copying mean different things in different countries and education systems. What may be an entirely respectable way to draw from outside sources in your native culture may be considered immoral in the USA, or vice versa. Since US universities tend to have very strict policies about copying (most universities will at least fail an assignment that has plagiarized material; the most extreme universities will expel students if they plagiarize even once), it's important to get used to the American perspective on this issue before you start doing coursework.

On the TOEFL, fortunately, the matter is a little bit simpler, because you don't need to incorporate outside sources into your essays, and you don't need to use in-text citations beyond making it clear which information came from the lecture, and which information came from the reading sample on integrated tasks. But you will have a text, and it may be tempting to copy directly from that text. But that is **a bad idea.** You do not need to copy the exact words of **anything** on the TOEFL. Instead, you'll want to learn how to paraphrase. Here are some tips to help you stay on the right side of the border between using sources appropriately and copying them.

Work from Your Notes

I've written over and over again about how important it is to take notes. As you do this, though, try to avoid writing exactly what was said. Use shorthand and your own words for the thoughts in the lecture or text. If you don't copy the materials word-for-word into your notes, it's very unlikely that you'll accidentally copy something inappropriately.
If you do put a direct quote into your notes or response, put quotation marks around it so that it's clear to you and to the graders that you did not come up with that phrase yourself. Do not do this with long sentences, though—quotes should be just a couple of words, maximum, and only in special situations. If you're not sure about including a quote, then don't.

Change Direct Quotes to Indirect Quotes

By turning direct speech into indirect speech, you dramatically improve your ability to paraphrase the content of conversations. In case you have no idea what I'm talking about, here's an example:

John said, "I think the university's new policy is a bad idea." = Direct speech
John said that the university's new policy was a bad idea. = Indirect speech

But go one step further: change some of the wording, too!

John said that the changes the university made to their policy seemed like a mistake. = Paraphrasing

Essay 2: The Independent Writing Task

After you've finished the integrated essay, you'll move immediately on to the independent essay. For this essay, you'll be asked a question about your opinion on a given issue or topic. Your essay should explain your position on that issue. Usually, the independent essay is a little longer than the integrated one, since you'll have more time to write it (30 minutes as opposed to 20).

There's No Right or Wrong Answer

Essay graders are told to accept any viewpoint, so it's not possible to answer the question incorrectly. The most important thing is to support your argument and write as clearly as possible. Sometimes, this may even mean defending the opposite of the opinion that you actually have. If your true opinion is based on emotional arguments or abstractions rather than concrete facts or personal experiences, it may be better to choose the side that is easier to support. Usually, your actual opinion will be easier to support (there's a reason you believe it, after all!), but it's never a bad idea to practice defending positions that you don't believe in your practice essays, as this will help you learn to defend arguments well.

Focus on the Answer

Most independent essays are about 300 words long; the best are significantly longer. But bear in mind that every sentence you write should be related to your thesis. Another side of this is that you shouldn't go overboard in your examples. Pick one or two that demonstrate your point really well, and spend a short paragraph explaining how each of them fits into the topic. You won't have time to provide much background information about your examples, and you probably won't want to pick more than two or maybe three. It's definitely better to deal with a small number of topics in-depth than to list a

bunch of different examples without explaining them. Making the relationship between an example and your main idea clear is absolutely key.

Structure Your Essay Well

For now, there are three main points I want to make. First of all, start and end your essay by stating your opinion so it's very clear to the reader where you're going. Second of all, take a few minutes at the beginning to jot down your ideas and make a short outline to keep you on track through the writing process. Although this may seem like a waste of time, it will probably save you valuable minutes in the long run, since you'll spend less time thinking about what you want to say or reorganizing your sentences when you realize that something doesn't make sense. Finally, don't forget to use transitions to make the essay flow better.

How to Structure Your Independent Essay

The structure of your independent essay is going to be at least a little different from that of the integrated essay you will have just finished. While your task in the integrated essay was to highlight similarities and contrasts, your task in this essay will be simply to defend your opinion. Because of this difference, you'll probably find it hard to write an independent essay in the same way that you write your integrated essay.

Introduction and Conclusion

I've mentioned before that you should start and end by stating your opinion. That's the easiest way of saying that it's important to have a clear introduction and conclusion. Without these, the reader may be confused, as your argument will lack context, and your essay will be awkward to read.

Checking Your Work

You'll want to have an idea of the structure of your essay even before you start writing, so take a minute or two at the beginning of the writing period to jot down an outline. Then you can jump straight into writing. If possible, though, try to have all your thoughts on the screen at about the 27-minute mark. Use the last three minutes to read through your essay again in its entirety and be sure that it flows well. Since your mind will probably jump around a bit as you're writing, it's really important that you leave yourself this time at the end to smooth everything out. This is also a good opportunity to check for spelling/grammar errors and typos.

Here's a brief outline you can model your essays on. This isn't something that you absolutely must follow every time to get a high score. It's just a learning tool and something to fall back on if you don't know how to tackle your topic on test day.

I. Introduction
    A. Very general statement about the world
    B. Specify the topic
    C. Optional: show the other side
    D. Give your opinion
II. Body
    A. State your first reason
        1. Explain the reason if needed
        2. Give a concrete example or detail
        3. Optional: Second example or detail
        4. Explain why the example supports your opinion
    B. State your second reason
        1. Explain the reason if needed
        2. Give a concrete example or detail

3. *Optional second example or detail*
4. Explain why the example supports your opinion

III. Conclusion

A. Restate main idea

B. Optional: Reference reasons or opposite opinion

C. Real-world result of your argument

Using Examples

You may have noticed by now that the strength of your essay, particularly in the independent task, comes partly from the quality of your examples. The type of example that's best suited to your essay will depend on the topic. Let's talk about some common sources of examples you can use to support your essay thesis.

Personal Experience

Probably 80% of independent essay arguments come from personal experience, because it's your own experiences that typically shape your opinions. You can draw on your friends' stories and your family, in addition to those things you've personally done or seen. Personal experience arguments are particularly useful in questions that deal with education, raising children, and general lifestyle like questions like these:

- You have been told that the dormitory rooms at your university must be shared by two students. Would you rather have the university assign a roommate to share a room with you, or would you rather choose your own roommate? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.
- Some people prefer to live in places that have the same weather or climate all year long. Others like to live in areas where the weather changes several times a

year. Which do you prefer? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

Famous Person or Event

You can also draw examples from well-known stories and personalities, whether they be historical or fictional. If you choose for a fictional or literary example, make it clear that although it's fictional, it demonstrates something that is applicable to real life. This is a great tactic for questions of national interest and for ones like these:

- If you were asked to send one thing representing your country to an international exhibition, what would you choose? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.
- If you could go back to some time and place in the past, when and where would you go? Why? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.

Knowledge of the Subject

You don't need to have any prior knowledge to answer your TOEFL essay questions, but if you do know something about the topic you're given, you may want to draw on that knowledge. This is likely to be a more successful tactic than personal experiences or famous events when your question deals with a social or political issue like one of these:

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Technology has made the world a better place to live. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.
- A gift (such as a camera, a soccer ball, or an animal) can contribute to a child's development. What gift would you give to help a child develop? Why? Use reasons and specific examples to support your choice.

Using Examples Well

Simply having a good example isn't enough. You have to use it well in your writing. That means connecting the concrete example to the more abstract ideas—your opinion or the reasons for that opinion. Say, for instance, I answer the question above about technology.

Here's my main idea:

Technology has improved our lives.

And then I give you a reason why I think that:

It has made long-distance communication better.

Now, I can easily bring up a specific example to support that reason:

For instance, I live many hundreds of miles away from my parents, but I talk to them by video chat every month.

All of that is great, but I need to make the connections between the parts. The most important thing I need to do is explain my example. Here are a couple of sentences that would help:

The technology behind the video chat is very new. Twenty years ago, before we had that technology, I wouldn't have been able to see my parents' faces so often. That change in technology has allowed me to communicate better with people I love even though I'm far away.

Notice how this makes a clear connection between the specific example of video chat and the general idea of technological changes improving my life.

And of course, transition words (such as "for example," and "for instance") and referencing your previous sentences (such as "That change in technology") are very, *very* important for writing smoothly. Be sure to link your thoughts together!

Common Writing Difficulties

Let's look at some of the problems I see frequently in student essays. I hope that you'll be able to look out for these pitfalls in your own essays so you don't make the same mistakes!

Basic Punctuation Rules

The basics can cause trouble if they're not correct. Names and the first words in sentences begin with a capital letter; very few other words do. Don't capitalize words that aren't names. "I" has to be capitalized, of course, but other pronouns do not. All sentences end with either a question mark, a period, or an exclamation point. Although these are some of the first facts we learn when we study writing, it's easy to forget about them when working on a high-stakes essay. And while it's true that a few small typos aren't likely to affect your score, consistently ignoring basic rules of mechanics can. So take extra care when proofreading your essay to be sure that you're following all the little rules.

Slow Typing

You could write three practice essays every day for a month (disclaimer: writing three essays every day is probably not the best use of your study time) and still have trouble on the TOEFL writing section if you're not comfortable with a QWERTY keyboard. It

seems sensible to spend all of your study time improving your English, but all the English knowledge in the world won't help you if you can't get your essay typed and edited within the time limit. So if you already know how to touch-type in your native language, then start practicing with an English keyboard. If you don't type well in any language, find a self-study program and start practicing regularly, without looking at the keyboard. Just practicing for 5 or 10 minutes a day will put you in a much better position on test day.

Using Incomplete Sentences

I've written about how to make a sentence and how not to make a sentence (part 1 and part 2) before. Writing sentence fragments and run-on sentences are some of the most common problems in TOEFL practice essays. Using ungrammatical sentences confuses the reader, slows him/her down, and makes it much harder to understand your argument. If what makes a complete sentence is different in English than in your native language, it's a great idea to do a lot of reading to become more used to how sentences in English really work. Grammar books are a great aid, of course, but nothing is a better teacher than real world experience. Keep reading!

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an essential part of the essay planning process. It can help you pick a topic to write about, choose which side to support in a persuasive essay, and come up with supporting details for that side. You may think of brainstorming as a group of people, such as TV script writers, sitting around a table, bouncing ideas around. And while brainstorming in a group is a great way to open all the doors and possibilities you have, brainstorming on paper by yourself can also get your creativity flowing.

There are a couple of rules to remember when brainstorming. First and most importantly, there are no bad ideas. You should at least consider everything that pops into your head,

even if it doesn't support the side you plan to take or doesn't seem like a strong example. If it seems like something you could write a paragraph about, write it down, because it keeps your mind moving forward rather than stagnating. Second, keep your brainstorming topic broad. Don't choose your opinion at this point; consider every angle and possible argument. You can choose your side later, when you start to actually plan your essay. For now, you just want to generate as many ideas as possible, putting the most interesting ones on paper.

Practicing Brainstorming

I recommend that you practice brainstorming in what I call an ideal-conditions essay. Instead of sticking to the 20-30 minute time limit of the TOEFL, give yourself as much time as you need. Spend two or three minutes brainstorming, then five or ten minutes planning, then write for half an hour or so, then reread, edit, and refine until the essay is as good as you think it can get. Although timed practice is essential, writing in ideal conditions will help cement proper grammar and mechanics and will help you see what you're really capable of. Below I've written about a couple of brainstorming techniques you may find useful. I recommend you try all of them at least once so that you can see which one works best for you. It may be that different brainstorming styles work best for certain types of essays, and this is a great thing to know as you practice. So grab a stack of blank paper, and get started!

Mind Map

If you're a visual learner, mind mapping will probably be a great brainstorming technique for you. Draw a circle in the middle of your paper and write your prompt in it. Then draw lines coming out of the circle, like a sun. At the end of each line, write a statement or argument that relates to the central prompt. Draw lines coming off of each of these statements, and write supporting details and examples on those lines. Continue doing this until you've exhausted all the possibilities you can think of for the topic.

Free-writing

Free-writing is a great technique if you draw a blank—that is, if you have no idea what to write about. Even in the middle of writing practice essays, a mini-free-writing session can help you recover from writer's block. To free-write, write your prompt or central question in a document, then start writing whatever you think about. Keep typing at all times—if you don't know what to write, then write about how you don't know what to write. If your mind wanders, then write that your mind has wandered, then try to get back on track. It will probably feel stupid and unproductive at first, but there's a reason that some teachers call free-writing "writing the mind alive": after a few minutes of free-writing, you'll find that your ideas are much clearer, it's easier for you to focus on the topic, and you'll have at least a couple of solid arguments and examples written down, which, for the TOEFL, is all you need.

In Your Head

On your actual TOEFL essays, you won't want to spend time brainstorming *then* planning as two separate stages. Instead, it's better to combine them. There are two ways to do that. First, you might simply spend ~30 seconds or a minute thinking about the topic before you write down a plan. Imagine this like a free-writing exercise without the writing: you want to think as freely and as randomly as possible.

The other way to do this is to start writing immediately as you brainstorm, then cross off (or erase) the ideas that you aren't going to use. In that method, the crossing off is the "planning" step.

Planning Your Essay

Assuming you spend the first few moments brainstorming mentally, you'll need to spend some time writing a plan for what content you actually want to include. The goal of planning is to narrow down your focus, choose the strongest arguments, and decide how to structure your essay so that once you start writing, the words and ideas will flow naturally.

On the TOEFL, you'll probably use about two minutes to plan your essay. That's not much time, so it's a good idea to practice both untimed and timed essay planning. The former will refine your skills (like the ideal-condition brainstorming) so that good essay planning will become an automatic process; the latter will help you learn how much you really need to plan in order to create an effective essay so you don't waste time.

Essay Structure

Most essays have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Typically, there is one paragraph each for the introduction and conclusion, and a minimum of three paragraphs in the body. On the TOEFL, however, you probably won't have time for a five-paragraph essay unless you have superhuman writing skills. We highly recommend using two body paragraphs for the independent essay (for a total of four paragraphs) and one or two body paragraphs for the integrated essay, possibly skipping the conclusion, too (for a total of two or three paragraphs).

The Planning Stage

Now that you've decided on the basic structure of your essay, let's talk about planning what you're actually going to write. First, pick the best ideas from your brainstorm. You'll want two: one for each body paragraph. They will both relate to the same main idea (which you'll write about in the introduction paragraph). On the computer—not on your

note paper—write your thesis and arguments quickly. They don't have to be full, perfect sentences; just write the ideas as quickly as you can. Include any background information and details that you can think of at the same time.

After you have two main ideas and a some small details or thoughts, you should have enough of a framework to start writing! Above the notes, start your actual writing, using full sentences and careful grammar.

Using Transitions and Structure

Even a well thought out essay with great arguments and support can score low if it lacks "flow." You need to connect your ideas in a way that guides the reader through your essay. In addition to making your argument seem stronger to the reader, good use of transitions and structure will just make your essay more pleasant to read. Let's talk about how you can use structure and transitions to make your essay as convincing as possible.

Structure

Your essay should begin by engaging the reader (making them care about what you have to say) and stating your thesis. After that, you need to support your thesis with specific examples, details, and information intended to inform and/or convince the reader. Finally, you need to restate your thesis and tell the reader why it matters. On the paragraph level, transitions can be used to smooth your writing out and make the jump from one paragraph to the next less jarring.

Transitions

To decide what transition to use in a given situation, first look at your essay as a whole. How is it organized? If you present arguments that build on each other, use transitions

listed under “Similarity” below. Or maybe you present one idea and then the opposite opinion. If so, you will find that transition words of contrast help. And if you list your examples, transition words of sequence will make this relationship clear.

Common Transitions

SIMILARITY: similarly, like, as, likewise, in the same way, in addition, plus
CONTRAST: nevertheless, yet, still, on the other hand, despite, although
TIME/LISTING: First, second, etc…; next, then; at first; after that; currently; simultaneously
EMPHASIS: actually, even, indeed, especially, in fact
CONCLUSION: In conclusion, finally, therefore, thus

Different Grammatical Structures

Although two words/phrases from any one category above might have similar meanings, they are not all the same grammatically. You must learn *how* each word or phrase is used. A good dictionary with example sentences will help.

Practice

You can practice some of these words by combining each pair of sentences below; you can change the order of the sentences or rephrase them slightly if you want. How many different transitions can you use for each pair? How does the choice of transition affect the meaning of the sentence?

- My family has always lived in the same house. We travel often.
- Most people who have pets prefer either dogs or cats. I have a pet elephant.
- I study anthropology. My sister is interested in anthropology.
- We built a raft. We went on an adventure.

Varying Sentence Types

All sentences are made up of clauses. In fact, a **clause** might be an entire sentence by itself. There are two types of clauses: dependent and independent. The difference is simple: independent clauses have a subject and a verb, and they express a complete thought. Dependent clauses don't express a complete thought. Often, dependent clauses begin with a subordinating conjunction, which is a word that makes the sentence not a complete thought. Let's look at some examples.

Here are some independent clauses:

- The dog chased the elephant.
- Nothing could be better than this!

And here are some dependent clauses:

- If the dog catches the elephant
- Because I heard this exciting news

As you can see, the dependent clauses are incomplete; they cannot stand alone as sentences, whereas independent clauses can.

Why Do Clauses Matter?

English sentences come in four basic structures. We categorize them based on how they use dependent and independent clauses. In order to understand the structures, we must understand the pieces. Clauses are the most important pieces.

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is exactly one independent clause. So the sentences I wrote as examples of independent clauses are also perfect examples of simple sentences:

- The dog chased the elephant.
- Nothing could be better than this!

Compound Sentences

A compound sentence combines two independent clauses, so it will have at least two subjects and two verbs. The two clauses must be joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions include “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” and “so.”

Examples:

- The elephant was minding its own business, **and** the dog decided to chase it.

(The elephant was minding its own business. The dog decided to chase it.)

- The elephant was much larger, **but** it ran away.

(The elephant was much larger. It ran away.)

- The dog knew that the elephant was weak, **so** he decided to see how far the elephant could run.

(The dog knew that the elephant was weak. He decided to see how far the elephant could run.)

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence is created by combining an independent clause with a dependent clause. You can do this using a subordinating conjunction (*after, although, because, while, when, if, until, whether*, etc.). In the following examples, I’ve marked the dependent clause with (DC) and the independent clause with (IC).

- **As** the elephant grew tired (DC), the dog became more excited (IC).
- I went outside to investigate (IC) **after** I heard terrible noises in the yard (DC).

Compound-Complex sentences

Compound-complex sentences, as you might have guessed, contain at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause.

- Imagine my surprise (IC) **when** I stepped outside (DC) and I saw my beloved pet elephant acting scared of a tiny dog (IC)!

(Note that the second independent clause is actually a PART of the dependent starting with "when." It is compound, but acts as one dependent clause.)

- **Although** I thought it was a bit funny (DC), I wanted to help the elephant (IC), but **when** my dog bit me (DC), I gave up and went back inside (IC).
- *(In this case, the second independent clause that starts with "but" also contains a dependent clause that starts with "when." Meanwhile, the first independent clause starting with “I wanted” has a dependent clause attached to it, starting with “although.” Similar to how a dependent clause can contain an independent clause, the reverse is also possible: an independent clause can contain a dependent clause.)*

Why This Matters

Part of your score on the TOEFL will be based on your use of a variety of language. Not only will varying your sentences demonstrate your command of advanced grammar, but it will also make your essay much more interesting to read. So practice breaking complicated sentences into simple ones and combining simple sentences into complex, compound, and compound-complex sentences. Once you’ve mastered the mechanics of how each sentence type is formed, you can use them to give your essays a boost.

Pacing Strategies

Free Your Mind Up

It can be tricky to think of something to write about when you're under a lot of pressure. But on the TOEFL, you really do need to think fast. Generally, the most important part is to decide on an answer quickly, and then consider every thought you have. Even if an idea seems ridiculous at first, don't reject it. At least, don't reject it immediately. A ridiculous idea can often turn into a very good one if given a little bit of time and thought. Welcome any idea, and brainstorm as freely as possible. Don't get stuck on one path, looking for one idea or reason that you can't find. Explore all paths.

This can seem time consuming at first, but if you brainstorm well in the beginning you'll have a better basis to write your essay on, and that will save you time in total.

Have a Formula Prepared

The essays on the TOEFL are pretty predictable. Although it's not a good idea to use exactly the same format with no regard to the natural flow of your argument, it's very possible to slightly adapt the essay format to suit your question. So during your practice sessions, spend some time learning a few essay formats and practice manipulating them. When you get to the test, you'll be so experienced at writing short essays in this way that you won't have to stop and think about what to say next.

Study Synonyms and Multiple Ways of Expressing the Same Idea

You can lose a lot of time trying to think of the exact word or phrase that you want. It's a terrible feeling to need "the perfect word" and not be able to remember it, but it's important to keep moving. Avoid falling into this trap by learning new vocabulary through synonyms and equivalent expressions. You'll remember synonyms most easily if you

collect them gradually, as you encounter them in life, but sometimes there isn't time for this. In that case, you can check out a thesaurus to get more ideas for words to learn. Be aware, though, that thesauruses are easy to abuse. Don't copy and learn every single word in a list, since some of them will carry specific meanings that you don't intend or will be for very different contexts. Instead, when writing, use the thesaurus to find words that you recognize but couldn't remember. If you decide to learn totally new words from a thesaurus, be sure that you look them up to get exact definitions and example sentences.

Stick to Your Guidelines

Break your essay down into several parts and give each part a time limit. For instance, you may spend 2 minutes planning your independent essay, 24 minutes writing it, and 4 minutes revising it. Of course, you don't have to follow these guidelines precisely—if you finish planning early or need 30 extra seconds to complete your last thought, then feel free to do so. Just be sure that the advantage you gain is worth the time it takes. Don't sacrifice all of your editing time for a third body paragraph that you don't need, for example.

How to Improve Your Writing Skills

For a lot of people, writing is the least rewarding skill to study. Unlike reading and listening, it's not easy to track your progress, and the way that we practice writing tends to be pretty dry and boring. I'm going to try to correct this by offering some ways on how to practice writing for the TOEFL, and how to make this practice more rewarding, and hopefully even enjoyable.

Read Other People's Essays

You're probably already reading a lot of non-fiction to prepare for the reading section of the test. Unfortunately, the material you're probably reading for that may not be the most helpful material from which to study writing. After all, if you can already write like a professional, why are you even reading this post? You can get a better feel for what the TOEFL requires—and also get inside the test scorers' heads—by reading other student work. The ETS Official Guide is a great resource: it not only includes sample essays, but also grades them and and tells you why each essay received the grade that it did.

Learn to Pre-write

You won't have time to create a full-fledged outline during the test itself, but it's definitely a good idea to spend a few minutes sketching out the structure of your essay before you start writing. I suggest that you practice outlining in two ways: first of all, find a writing topic and outline it *instead of* writing a full essay. This is a skill you can perfect through repetition. Don't write the essay—just move on and plan the next prompt! You can also take existing essays or articles and use them to create an outline. Then you can look at how the author structured their work, and decide what you like or dislike about it.

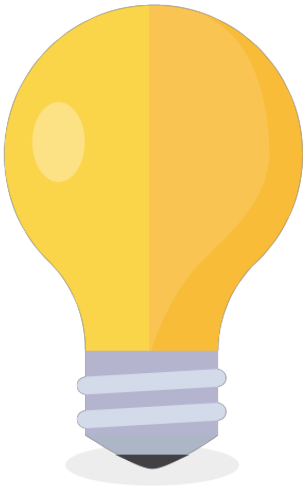
Summarize Everything

Okay, so maybe you won't actually summarize *everything* that you hear or read, but you should do this as often as possible. In order to improve your reading and listening skills, you should be reading in English and listening to native speakers (in lectures, podcasts, documentaries, etc.) regularly. If you're at home or by a computer, take about ten minutes afterward to summarize what you read or heard. If you wrote an outline, too, that's even better—you're practicing several different TOEFL skills all in one exercise.

No tutor? No problem!

One of the major barriers to practicing writing is that you can't really assess your own writing. Some people solve this problem by hiring a private tutor, but there are other solutions if that's not your style. Do you have friends who are studying your native language? If so, see if they're interested in a language swap. Not only will this allow you both to get help from a native speaker (and one that you like talking to!), but also you can help each other stay on track by encouraging each other to write a set number of essays each week. If you don't have that kind of resource, try using a website like lang-8.com, which provides a network for language learners and native speakers to correct each other's writing.

Additional Resources



Study Plans

Whether you're planning to study for a long time, or you've waited until the last minute, it helps to add some structure to your TOEFL study plan to keep you organized and on track. Planning out a study schedule is the key first step in scoring well on the TOEFL.

To help take the guesswork out of all of this, we've created some schedules to help you get started.

- Two-Week Study Schedule
- One Month Study Schedule
- Preparing for the TOEFL in 20-30 Minutes per Day

Pro-tip: Before getting started with your study plan, we recommend reading our top tips for making the most of your TOEFL study schedule.

Vocabulary Resources

Learning vocabulary helps with every aspect of the exam - speaking, reading, listening, and writing! So, you should make some time in your schedule to work on your vocabulary. Here are some resources to help!

Free Vocabulary Flashcards

Use these free flashcards to master the 200 most important words on the exam.

[eBook] TOEFL Vocabulary Comics

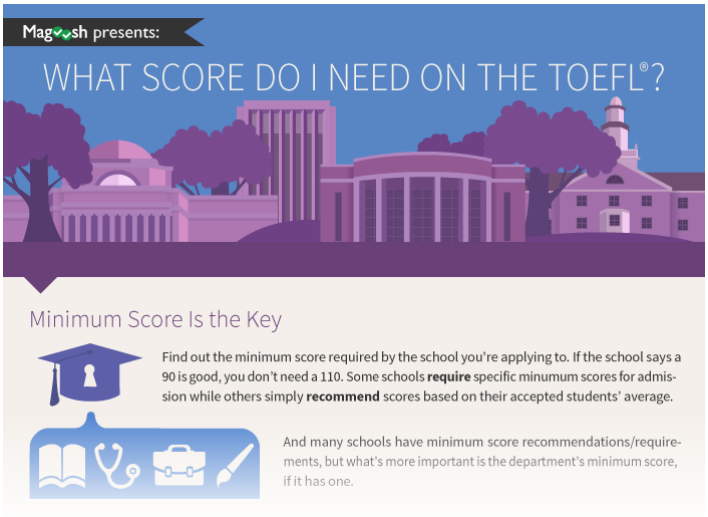
In this eBook, we help you memorize and review vocabulary words with the help of mnemonic devices. To make these words more fun and memorable, these mnemonics are illustrated with entertaining comics, like this one:

Infographics

Here at Magoosh, we *love* to make infographics -- they're both fun and educational! Here are our two TOEFL infographics:

TOEFL Scores for Top Universities

What score do you need on the exam? In this graphic, we provide the required scores for many of the top universities in the US. See the entire infographic here.



TOEFL Speaking

If you need more help figuring out the speaking section, be sure to check this one out!

Book Reviews

There are many TOEFL review books on the market that promise to give you “the key” to acing the TOEFL. That’s a big promise!

And while it’s true that many of these books provide excellent strategies and tips for TOEFL success, the real “key” to acing the TOEFL is experience with English learned through repeated practice.

So, which books provide the best resources, the best strategies, and the best practice? Check out our book reviews and find the books that are right for you.

To make your life a little bit easier, we’ve organized our reviews in order from most to least highly recommended. Click on each link for more detailed reviews!

Recommended

- The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test (4th Edition)
- Official TOEFL iBT Tests
- The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test
- Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test

Okay

- Barron’s TOEFL iBT
- Delta’s Key to the TOEFL iBT Advanced Skill Practice
- Oxford TOEFL

Not Recommended

- Kaplan TOEFL iBT Premier 2014
- The Princeton Review’s Cracking the TOEFL iBT (2014)

And that's the end!

If you liked this eBook, sign up for Magoosh TOEFL. Prep smart, go far. Enjoy the ride.

Happy studying!