

Good reading skills are vital for academic studies. The IELTS exam tests your ability to use a variety of reading skills. You have one hour to answer questions on three reading passages, so it is important to identify which skills are being tested in each question and to apply them appropriately.

The main reading skills tested in IELTS are:

- ▶ scanning
- ▶ skimming
- ▶ understanding main ideas
- ▶ reading for detail
- ▶ understanding opinions

Developing reading skills 1

Skimming and scanning

▶ What is skimming?

Skimming means **reading very quickly**. It involves selective reading of the most important parts of the text in order to:

- find out how the text is organised – that is, the way it is divided into sections or paragraphs
- get a general idea of what the text is about.

The way in which a text is organised gives us a clue as to what is the most important part to read.

Exercise 1 ▶ Tick what you should read to get a quick overview of a text. The first one is done for you.

- a) the title and sub-heading
- b) the introduction
- c) every part of the text
- d) the first and last sentences of each paragraph in the main body
- e) the conclusion
- f) the middle of each paragraph

▶ What is scanning?

When you scan a text, you move your eyes over it very quickly in order to find something specific and easily recognisable. When scanning you are looking for particular information (e.g. names, places, dates, specific phrases).

Exercise 2 ▶ Which of these types of text would you scan? Which would you skim? Tick the appropriate box:

	Skim	Scan
a phone book	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a newspaper article you are interested in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
the film review page when looking for a particular film	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a letter from the bank	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a list of results for an exam you've taken	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

► **How are skimming and scanning useful for IELTS?**

Skimming and scanning are 'enabling skills'. This means that they help you tackle most questions in the exam more effectively, including for example:

- multiple choice questions
- completing a table
- matching opinions and phrases
- labelling a diagram.

Exercise 3 ► a *The text below has been edited to highlight the areas that you might read when skimming or scanning a text. Read through it quickly and answer the following multiple-choice questions.*

Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire

In the first of a new series, Alan Watts tackles the science of thunder and lightning

A Despite our modern sophistication and advanced warning systems, the thunderstorm still provokes a primitive dread in most people. It is not only our helplessness in the face of nature's wrath that produces fear, but also the eerie listlessness that settles over animals, birds and people in the build-up to a storm. Yet the kind of storm with a sultry calm before its arrival is just one of many kinds of thunderstorm associated with a particular kind of weather.

B The kinds of intense storms that develop on hot sultry days are a mass of individual storm cells.
'cell-theory' of storms 'multicell'
..... 'supercell' multicell
..... daughter-cells

C Then in spring, when the sun is warming the earth but the air is still cool, great towering *cumulonimbus* clouds often develop and these can become thundery.
..... 'air-mass' thunderstorms
France English Channel

D If you've lived in the coastal regions of southern Britain, then you'll be acquainted with a special kind of storm that comes up from France a couple of times a year.

.....
Spanish plume storms sierras of Spain
'sheet-lightning'

E Whatever the cause of a storm, there has to be lightning
pressure waveselectric charge
raindropspositively charged
.....slivers of ice

F It is estimated that there are some 1,800 storms going on at any one time somewhere in the world—mainly in the tropics—and that the electric current induced by the lightning from these compensates for the more-or-less continuous drift of positive ions from the ionosphere to the earth, so balancing the atmosphere's electric current.

- 1 What is the article about?
 - A fire
 - B weather
 - C science

- 2 Which of the following areas do you think the writer will discuss?
 - A animals and their environment
 - B modern danger warnings
 - C types of storm
 - D what to do in bad weather

- b *Selective reading will also help you to orient yourself within a text. Look at the text on page 14. Which paragraphs will you need to read more carefully if you need to find out more about:*
- 1 the causes of lightning?
 - 2 spring storms?
 - 3 storms in particular regions of Europe?
 - 4 storm cells?

Exercise 4 ▷ *The following questions form an IELTS task for the text on thunderstorms. The task is matching descriptions. For matching questions, the first step is to read the list of options and to locate the part of the text with the answer. In order to do this effectively, skimming and scanning are vital.*

Read the task and underline the words which you could scan the text for.

Exam Tip

Before you begin any set of questions always check to see whether you can use your skimming or scanning skills to help you locate the answer. Often you need to use both.

Look at the descriptions of thunderstorms below. Which type of storm (A–C) does each feature 1–6 refer to?

- A Supercell or multicell storms
- B Air-mass storms
- C Spanish Plume storms

- 3 Which type of thunderstorm
 - 1 can occur throughout the year?
 - 2 is connected with certain physical land features?
 - 3 features clouds at high and low altitudes?
 - 4 is perpetuated by cyclical air currents?
 - 5 is the most typical?
 - 6 is intensified by the meeting of hot and cold air?

▶▶ Now go to Test 1, Questions 9–13, on page 39 and try a matching task.

Main ideas and details

▶ **How are texts organised?**

Texts are divided into paragraphs to make them easier to read. Usually a text is organised in the following way:

Introduction (para 1):	statement of theme
Paragraph 2:	supporting point details
Paragraph 3:	supporting point details
Etc.	
Conclusion:	summary and re-statement of main idea.

In the introduction the writer will outline what he or she will write about and the main issues he or she intends to raise.

Each paragraph goes on to deal with **one** key issue. The writer may state the issue in a topic sentence or sentences and may summarise it in the last sentence. The writer will use supporting details to explain and develop the point the paragraph is making. Sometimes the point has to be inferred from the details.

Exercise 5 ▶ *Read the following paragraph. Choose the main idea **A**, **B** or **C**. If there is a topic sentence, underline it.*

When philosophers debate what it is that makes humans unique among animals, they often point to language. Other animals can communicate, of course. But despite the best efforts of biologists working with beasts as diverse as chimpanzees, dolphins and parrots, no other species has yet shown the subtleties of syntax that give human languages their power. There is, however, another sonic medium that might be thought uniquely human and that is music. Other species can sing (indeed, many birds do so better than a lot of people) but birdsong and the song of animals such as whales, has a limited repertoire – and no other animal is known to have developed a musical instrument.

- A** the differences between animals and humans
- B** the characteristics of language and music
- C** the importance of language to humans

▶ **How is your understanding of main ideas tested in IELTS?**

In the IELTS exam you will need to show your understanding of main ideas by matching headings to paragraphs in a text.

Exercise 6 ▶ *Read the following instructions for a paragraph heading task.*

Reading Passage 2 has seven paragraphs (A–G).

From the list of headings below choose the most suitable heading for each paragraph.

Write the appropriate numbers i–x in boxes 14–20 on your answer sheet.

Exam Tip

A summary completion task may also test your understanding of main ideas. This happens if the summary covers the whole text or a large part of the text.

- b Now complete the short summary below using words from the paragraph on the causes of storms.

Whatever the cause of a storm, there has to be lightning. You cannot have thunder without lightning because thunder is the sound of outspreading pressure waves from the sudden heating of the air along a lightning flash. How storms develop such immense amounts of electric charge is still not fully understood, but the most likely way is by raindrops carried skywards in updraughts in the clouds. As they are lifted into the higher, colder, regions they freeze on the outside. The shell of ice compresses the water inside it to the point at which it eventually bursts out and instantly freezes into positively charged slivers of ice.

Scientists are still unsure how the ... 1 ... is produced during storms but they suspect that it is the result of ... 2 ... reaching the lower clouds and then ... 3 ... as it travels further upwards.

- ▶▶ Now try a summary completion task in Test 1, Questions 1–8, on page 38.

- Exercise 9** ▷ Unlike the paragraph headings task which focuses on main ideas, the paragraph matching task requires you to identify specific information within paragraphs. Each question paraphrases the information.

Read the instructions for a paragraph matching task.

Reading Passage 2 has seven paragraphs A–G.
Which paragraph mentions the following (Questions 14–21)?
Write the appropriate letters (A–G) in boxes 14–21 on your answer sheet.
NB Some of the paragraphs will be used more than once.

In what order will you follow these steps in order to do the paragraph matching task?

- a) select the questions that have key words that are easy to scan for
- b) read the whole passage quickly
- c) attempt the more difficult questions
- d) skim the passage for an idea that is similar to the idea presented in the question
- e) note any key words or main ideas within the paragraphs
- f) read through the questions and underline the key words

- ▶▶ Now try a paragraph matching task in Test 2, Questions 14–21, on page 64.

Understanding opinions

▶ How do opinions differ from facts?

An opinion is someone's 'belief' or 'view'. Opinions differ from facts in that they are open to debate and cannot be proved to be true. They may also change over time.

Exercise 10 ▶ *Which of the following statements are opinions?*

- Computers have had a negative impact on children's reading habits.
- Equatorial regions of the Earth have warm climates.
- Medical treatment has improved over the past century.

▶ How is your understanding of opinion tested in the IELTS Reading Module?

As IELTS passages are academic texts, they usually contain arguments and opinions. Sometimes a passage presents the writer's opinions on a subject; sometimes a passage presents the views of the writer and other experts.

A number of different questions may test how well you can identify opinions including, for example:

- matching questions
- multiple choice questions
- YES, NO, NOT GIVEN questions.

Exercise 11 ▶ *Read the instructions for a YES, NO, NOT GIVEN task:*

Do the following statements agree with the views of the writer in Reading Passage 3?

In boxes 32–37 on your answer sheet write

YES *if the statement agrees with the writer*

NO *if the statement contradicts the writer*

NOT GIVEN *if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this*

The statements are a list of opinions. You will need to use a variety of reading skills to locate the area of the passage that the question focuses on. You will then need to decide whether the answer is:

YES = the writer holds the same opinion

NO = the writer holds the opposite opinion

NOT GIVEN = the writer does not say anything about this

Write YES, NO or NOT GIVEN next to the views of the writer, which are based on the paragraphs below.

Music is clearly different from language. People can, nevertheless, use it to communicate things – especially their emotions – and when allied with speech in a song, it is one of the most powerful means of communication that humans have. But what, biologically speaking, is it? If music is truly distinct from speech, then it ought to have a distinct processing mechanism in the brain – one that keeps it separate from the interpretation of other sounds, including language. The evidence suggests that such a separate mechanism does, indeed, exist.

Scientific curiosity about the auditory system dates back to the mid-19th century. In 1861 Paul Broca, a French surgeon, observed that speech was impaired by damage to a particular part of the brain, now known as Broca's area. In 1874 Carl Wernicke, a German neurologist, made a similar observation about another brain area and was similarly immortalised. The location of different language-processing tasks in Broca's areas (found in the brain's left temporal lobe, above the ear) was one of the first pieces of evidence that different bits of the brain are specialised to do different jobs.

- a) Music needs words in order to become a truly effective means of communication.
 - b) Scientists are still looking for a way to show that the brain processes music and language separately.
 - c) Paul Broca attempted to distinguish the processing mechanisms of music and language.
 - d) The work of Broca and Wernicke marked the beginning of research into the brain and its role in the production of language.
- ▶▶ Follow the guidelines in the Tip Strip on page 42 when you do YES, NO, NOT GIVEN questions.