

FREE IELTS BOOKS

The Minimum-Effort Path to 7.0

Where to stop polishing and start practising — a stopping rule for each skill, an honest readiness check before you book, and a rule for where the freed-up hours go.

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The Minimum-Effort Path to 7.0

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What this book is

The title sounds like a shortcut. It is not one.

Minimum effort here does not mean less practice. It means **no wasted practice** — no more hours spent polishing a skill that has already cleared the band you need, and no more weeks of study after the point where studying has stopped changing the result.

That is a narrow claim, and this book keeps to it. Every part answers one question: *given what you already know about the test, where do you stop spending time?* The answers are stopping rules — specific, checkable conditions that tell you a skill is done, or that you are ready to book.

What this book is not

It does not teach Listening, Reading, Writing or Speaking. It does not explain how the overall band is calculated — *The Band 7.0 Blueprint*, also free on this site, does that in its Part 1, and this book leans on that arithmetic by name rather than repeating it. It does not argue about which band you should be aiming for — *Why Band 7.0 Is Called the Golden Score* does that.

This book assumes you already know your target number and roughly how the scoring works, and picks up from there.

Who this is for

Anyone who is already preparing, already putting in hours, and is no longer sure the hours are going to the right place. If you are studying every skill equally because that feels safest, or if you keep postponing a booking until everything feels ready, this book is aimed at you.

If you have not started preparing yet, this is the wrong book to start with. Come back once you have practice scores to look at — most of what follows needs them.

How to use it

Part 1 explains the idea. Part 2 is the core of the book: a self-test per skill that tells you whether that skill is done. Part 3 is the inverse check — whether *you* are ready to book the test. Part 4 is where the freed-up time goes. Part 5 is a one-page worksheet that pulls Parts 2 and 3 into a single page you can keep. Part 6 covers what is changing in the test during 2026 and the one change that affects Part 3's arithmetic directly.

You can read Part 2 one skill at a time, as each becomes relevant. Nothing later depends on having read all four.

One honest note

Nothing here is a promise of a score, and nothing here is a timeline. This book will not tell you that a skill takes six weeks, or that you will reach your band by a particular date. Those numbers depend on where you are starting and how you study, and any book that gives you one is guessing.

The self-tests in this book are a way of checking your own progress. They are not the real exam, and self-marking your own Writing is the weakest

link in the whole method — Part 2 says so plainly where it matters. Only an official test result tells you your actual band.

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Part 1 — Stopping rules, not shortcuts



1.1 Why more practice on a cleared skill doesn't raise your score

Your overall band is the average of your four skill scores, rounded. *The Band 7.0 Blueprint* sets out the rounding in its Part 1, with worked examples; the short version is that an average ending in .25 rounds up to the next half band and one ending in .75 rounds up to the next whole band, so the overall number turns on quarter bands.

That has a consequence most candidates never act on.

Because the four scores are averaged, the skill holding your overall band down is the lowest one. Moving it up moves the average. Moving your best skill up moves the average by the same amount on paper — but your best skill has the least room left, and the mistakes still holding it back are the small, stubborn ones. The Blueprint's Part 1.3 makes this argument in full.

Now push it one step further, which is where this book starts.

If a skill has already reached the band you need, more work on it does not just move the average less. Often it does not move your result at all. Take a target of 7.0 overall. A candidate sitting at Listening 8.0, Reading 7.5, Writing 6.0, Speaking 7.5 has an average of 7.25, which rounds up to 7.5 — they are already past it. Another month spent on Listening, pushing 8.0 toward 8.5, changes the average to 7.375, which still rounds to 7.5. The month bought nothing.

The same month spent on Writing, moving 6.0 to 6.5, takes the average to 7.375 as well. That also rounds to 7.5. So on this profile neither month changes the overall band — but only one of them protects it. Writing at 6.0 is the score most likely to slip below on test day, and it is the one a per-skill requirement will catch.

That last point matters more than the averaging. Many of the systems in *Why Band 7.0 Is Called the Golden Score* — its Part 1 lists them — do not read your overall band at all. They require a minimum in *each* of the four skills. On those, a 6.0 in Writing fails the whole application no matter how high the other three are, and no amount of Listening practice fixes it.

The stopping rule this produces: work on a skill for as long as raising it changes either your overall band or your compliance with a per-skill minimum. When it stops doing both, that skill is done, and further hours on it are hours the skill below the line is not getting.

1.2 What "minimum effort" actually means here

It would be easy to read Part 1.1 as permission to do less. It is not.

The total effort does not go down. What changes is where it lands. A candidate who follows this book is not studying fewer hours than one who does not — they are studying the same hours, with a larger share of them pointed at the skill that is actually holding the score down.

There is a reason this needs saying. Practising something you are already good at is pleasant. Practising something you are bad at is not. Left alone, most study plans drift toward the pleasant end without anyone deciding that they should. You finish a Listening set feeling competent, and that feeling is a poor guide to whether the hour helped.

So "minimum effort" here is a claim about waste, not about volume. Two candidates study fifteen hours a week. One splits it evenly across four skills. The other has tested each skill, found two of them already clear, and puts eleven of those hours into the two that are not. The second candidate is not working less. They are working with less of the effort thrown away.

This book will not tell you to study less. If your weakest skill is a long way from your target, it will take the time it takes, and no arrangement of the hours changes that. What this book can do is stop you spending those hours in the wrong place.

1.3 The three time-wasters this book fixes

Why Band 7.0 Is Called the Golden Score closes with a short Part 4 naming three ways candidates waste time chasing a threshold. It names them and stops, and points here for the full treatment. This is that treatment. Each of the three gets a diagnostic in the parts that follow.

Over-preparing a skill that already clears the line. Named in that book's 4.1. The fix is a per-skill self-test that tells you whether a skill is done — Part 2 of this book, one section per skill.

Testing before you're ready and losing a sitting. Named in its 4.2. The fix is a concrete readiness checklist rather than a feeling, plus an honest account of what testing too early actually costs now — Part 3.1 and 3.2.

Misreading which threshold applies to you. Named in its 4.3, and the one this book does *not* re-solve. That is a question about which body sets your number, and the Golden Score book answers it properly in its Part 1. If you are not certain your target is the right target, stop here and read that first. Every stopping rule in this book is measured against your target band, so a wrong target makes every rule wrong with it.

One more note on scope. This book's stopping rules are general — they work the same whether you are starting at 5.5 or at 6.5. The particular problem of being stuck at 6.5 and unable to reach 7.0 has its own shape, and *Stuck at 6.5? The Half-Band Wall and How to Break It*, elsewhere on this site, is written for it. If that is your situation, what follows still applies; it is just not written specifically for you.

Part 2 — Is this skill actually done?

This is the part the rest of the book runs on. Four self-tests, one per skill, each answering a single question: **has this skill already reached the band I need?**

Every one follows the same three steps — how to run it, how to score it, and the stopping rule it produces — so you can compare across skills at a glance. All four need only what you already have: official practice tests, a timer, a way to record your voice, and the public band descriptors, which are published free on ielts.org.

Two rules apply to all four.

One good result is not a result. A single strong score can come from an easy paper, a familiar topic, or luck on the questions you guessed. Every stopping rule below asks for two consecutive on-target results on *different* practice tests, and that is the whole reason.

Test at your target, not above it. These self-tests ask whether a skill has cleared the band you actually need. They are not a search for your ceiling.

2.1 Listening

How to run it. One full official Listening practice test, all four sections, forty questions, in one sitting. Play the audio once — no pausing, no rewinding, no second listen. Give yourself the transfer time the real test gives you and no more. Do this in a room where you will not be interrupted, using the audio quality you expect on test day.

How to score it. Count your correct answers out of forty and convert with the band table printed in the practice-test book. Do not adjust the number in your head afterwards for the two you "nearly had" or the section where the audio was unclear. Write down the raw score and the band, and the date, and which test it was.

The stopping rule. Listening is done when you reach your target band on **two consecutive attempts using two different practice tests**, under the timing above. If one attempt hits and the next misses, neither counts — start the pair again.

Listening is the most mechanical of the four to test, which makes it the most trustworthy result in this book. It is usually the first skill to come back "done", and it is where most of the wasted hours in Part 1 quietly go.

2.2 Reading

How to run it. One full official Reading practice test, three passages, forty questions, sixty minutes, including the time to transfer answers. Keep a note beside you as you work: mark the question number whenever you have to stop and search back through the passage for longer than feels comfortable.

How to score it. Convert your raw score to a band exactly as in 2.1 — but for Reading, the aggregate is not the whole answer. Sort your wrong answers by question type: True/False/Not Given, matching headings, multiple choice, sentence completion, and so on. Count the misses in each.

Reading fails in a specific way. A candidate can be comfortably fast on most question types and lose enough time and accuracy on one type to

hold the whole band down. An aggregate score hides that, and the hours after it get spent on general reading practice when the actual problem is twenty minutes wide.

The stopping rule. Reading is done when you reach your target band on **two consecutive attempts using two different practice tests** *and* no single question type is producing a cluster of misses across both. If one type keeps failing, Reading is not done — but what is left to work on is that type, not the skill. Drill it specifically and re-run the pair.

2.3 Writing

How to run it. Both tasks, in one sitting, sixty minutes total — twenty minutes for Task 1 and forty for Task 2, from an official practice prompt you have not seen before.

Run it in the delivery mode you are actually going to sit. Almost every candidate now sits IELTS on a computer, so almost every candidate should be typing this test, under time, without a spell checker. Handwrite it only if you have specifically chosen the Writing on Paper option where it is offered. This is not a small detail — typing speed, on-screen editing and handwriting legibility are different skills, and a practice score earned in the wrong mode is measuring something you will not be doing. Part 6 covers what changed here.

How to score it. Mark yourself against the four public band descriptors for each task. Then — because a self-marked overall score is the least reliable number in this book — check three things that are harder to argue with:

- **Task response.** Did you answer every part of the question that was asked? Not "did you write about the topic" — did you address each element of the prompt, including the one buried in the second sentence?
- **Coherence.** Does each paragraph have one idea, stated in its first sentence? Can a reader follow the argument from the paragraph openings alone?
- **Accuracy.** Count your errors per hundred words. Count every one — article, tense, preposition, spelling — and be strict about what counts. Track this number across attempts.

Be honest about the limit here. You are marking your own work against descriptors written for trained examiners, on the skill where an examiner's judgement matters most. A self-marked Writing score is the weakest evidence in this book. Treat a "done" verdict on Writing as the least certain of the four, and if you can get one piece of feedback from a teacher on any skill, make it this one.

The stopping rule. Writing is done when you meet the descriptors for your target band on **two consecutive attempts on two different prompts**, all parts of both questions are fully answered, and your error count per hundred words has stopped falling. That last condition matters: while the error rate is still dropping, the skill is still moving, and stopping is premature.

2.4 Speaking

How to run it. All three parts, in order, in one sitting: the short personal questions, the long turn with a minute of preparation, and the discussion. Record the whole thing. Use an official practice topic card you

have not seen before. Speak the full two minutes on the long turn, even when it is uncomfortable — especially then.

Then listen back to the recording. This is the part candidates skip, and it is the part that works. It is the fastest way to hear what an examiner hears, and it is the same method the Blueprint recommends for Speaking.

How to score it. Mark yourself against the four public criteria. As with Writing, back that judgement with things you can count from the recording:

- **Hesitation.** How often do you stop mid-sentence to search for a word? Count the pauses that break the sentence, not the natural ones between ideas.
- **Self-correction.** How often do you start a sentence, abandon it, and restart? A few is normal speech. A pattern of them costs fluency marks.
- **Response length.** In Part 1, are you answering in a sentence and stopping, or extending naturally? On the long turn, did you fill the two minutes without running dry?

The stopping rule. Speaking is done when you meet your target band's descriptors on **two consecutive recordings on two different topic cards**, you fill the long turn both times, and your hesitation and self-correction counts are steady rather than still improving.

Speaking self-assessment is more reliable than Writing's — hesitation and length are countable facts about a recording, not judgement calls — but it is still your own ear on your own voice. Treat it as good evidence, not proof.

Part 3 — Are you actually ready to book the test?



Part 2 asked whether a skill is done. This part asks the other question, and it is the one candidates get wrong in both directions: booking too early and losing a sitting, or waiting so long that the waiting itself becomes the waste.

3.1 The honest pre-test checklist

"Do I feel ready" is not a usable question. Nerves answer it for you, and they answer it wrong in both directions on different days. Use conditions you can check instead.

Work through these. Each is a yes or a no.

1. **At least three of your four skills have passed Part 2's stopping rule** at your target band — two consecutive on-target results each, on different practice tests.

2. **The fourth skill is within half a band of its target** on its most recent two attempts. Not one good attempt. Two.
3. **You have finished a full test inside the time limit**, every section, without running over, on at least two separate occasions.
4. **You have sat at least one full practice test in one sitting** — all four skills, in order, in the same session, the way the real day works. A skill that holds up in isolation can fall apart in the fourth hour.
5. **You have practised in your actual delivery mode**. For nearly everyone that now means on a computer, typing the Writing tasks. See Part 6.
6. **If your target requires a minimum in every skill** — many do; the Golden Score book's Part 1 lists which — then every skill, not the average, has met that minimum on its last two attempts.

If all six are yes, book the test.

If five are yes and the sixth is close, book the test. Waiting for a perfect row of yeses is the failure mode Part 3.3 is about.

If three or more are no, you are not ready, and booking now is likely to cost you the fee and the weeks before the next sitting. Go back to Part 4 and put the time where it is short.

3.2 The real cost of testing too early

This is why 3.1 has to be concrete rather than a feeling. Sitting the test before you are ready is not a free trial run.

It costs the fee. IELTS is not cheap anywhere, and the amount varies by country and test centre. Check the current price for your own centre — it is the smaller cost here, but it is real.

It costs the calendar. This is usually the bigger one. Depending on where you are, the next available sitting can be weeks out, and the results take time on top of that. If something is waiting on your score — a visa application with a deadline, a course intake, a registration cutoff — those weeks may be the ones you did not have. Losing a sitting is rarely just losing a test.

But the cost is lower than it used to be, and you should know why. There is now an official option called **One Skill Retake**. If you sat a computer-delivered test and one skill went badly while the others were fine, you can retake **that single skill** rather than sitting all four again. The retake must happen within **60 days** of the original test, and you can use it **once per original test**.

That genuinely changes this calculation. Under the old arithmetic, one weak skill on the day meant starting over completely, and the safe move was always to wait. Now, if three skills are solid and one is marginal, a bad result on the marginal one is a recoverable single retake, not a lost test.

Two honest limits before you lean on it. **It is not available everywhere** — availability depends on your test centre, so check that yours offers it *before* you build a plan around it. And **not every organisation accepts a One Skill Retake result**; universities, employers and immigration bodies set their own policies. Confirm with whoever is going to read your score that they will accept it. If they will

not, your arithmetic is the old one and Part 3.1's checklist should be met in full.

3.3 The opposite failure: waiting too long after you're ready

Everything so far argues for care before booking. Read alone, it would push you toward delay, and delay has its own cost that nobody warns candidates about.

The honesty constraint in this book cuts both ways. Over-preparing a skill that has already cleared its line is waste — that is Part 1. Delaying a booking past the point where more waiting adds nothing is the same waste wearing a more responsible-looking coat.

Here is how it shows up. Your practice scores stop moving. Three or four weeks pass and the numbers sit where they sat, but booking still feels premature, so you keep studying. The hours are no longer buying score. They are buying the feeling of not having risked anything yet.

The signal is flat practice scores. If your self-test results have been steady for several weeks — not rising, just steady — and Part 3.1's checklist is substantially met, more study is not the thing standing between you and the result. Book the test.

There is a second cost to waiting that is easy to miss. Skills slip. A Listening score you earned two months ago and have not re-tested since is not evidence about today. Part 4.3 deals with this directly: the longer the gap between "done" and the test itself, the more of Part 2 you have to run again.

And there is a plainer point. Whatever the score is for — the visa, the course, the registration — the test is not the goal. It is the gate in front of the goal. Time spent standing in front of a gate you could already walk through is time taken from what is on the other side.

Part 4 — Reallocating the time you just freed up

Part 2 told you which skills are done. That frees hours. This part decides where they go, and the decision is made by arithmetic, not by preference.

4.1 Rank what's left by the arithmetic, not by preference

Once a skill has passed its stopping rule, the hours it was getting are available. The question is which of the remaining skills gets them.

The rule: freed time goes to whichever remaining skill is furthest from its own target.

Not the one you enjoy. Not the one where progress feels fastest. Not the one you have materials for. The furthest from its target, for the reason set out in Part 1.1 and in the Blueprint's Part 1.3 — the lowest score has the most room to move, its mistakes are the biggest and most fixable, and it is the one dragging the average.

Work out the gap for each remaining skill. Current band from your last Part 2 self-test, target band, and the difference. Rank by the difference, largest first. That ranking is your priority order, and it is allowed to be uncomfortable.

One thing overrides the ranking. If your target requires a minimum in every skill — check the Golden Score book's Part 1 if you are not sure whether yours does — then any skill sitting below that per-skill minimum comes first regardless of gap size. A skill that fails a hard requirement does not lose you quarter bands. It loses you the application.

Re-rank whenever a self-test result changes. This is not a plan you make once.

4.2 A weekly reallocation template

An example, to show the shape. Do not copy the numbers.

A candidate targeting 7.0 overall studies twelve hours a week, three per skill. They run Part 2 and get: Listening 7.5, done. Speaking 7.0, done. Reading 6.5, not done. Writing 6.0, not done.

Six hours are now free. The gaps are Writing 1.0 and Reading 0.5, so Writing ranks first. A starting split:

Skill	Before	After	Why
Listening	3 h	1 h	Done — enough to keep it warm, no more
Speaking	3 h	1 h	Done — same
Reading	3 h	4 h	Gap of half a band
Writing	3 h	6 h	Largest gap; per-skill minimum also at risk

Note that the done skills do not drop to zero. An hour each keeps them from slipping, which Part 4.3 is about. Everything else moves to the two that are short, weighted toward the bigger gap.

This is a starting split, not a formula. Adjust it as results come in. If Writing moves and Reading does not after a few weeks, the ratio should change. If a skill you marked done comes back under target on a re-test, it stops being a one-hour skill.

The template is the reasoning, not the numbers. Yours will look different because your gaps are different.

4.3 Re-testing on a schedule, not on a feeling

"Done" is a verdict about a particular week. It is not permanent, and treating it as permanent is how candidates arrive on test day surprised.

Skills slip without practice. Listening in particular goes quietly — the ear loses the habit of following at speed, and nothing warns you, because you are not listening to anything difficult. A score you earned six weeks ago and have not re-tested is not evidence about today. It is history.

Re-run Part 2's self-test for every skill marked done every three to four weeks, and always within a fortnight of the test date. That is the whole rule. Put the dates in a calendar now, while you are thinking about it, rather than deciding each week whether it feels necessary — the weeks it feels unnecessary are exactly the weeks it is.

If a re-test comes back under target, that skill is not done any more. It re-enters the ranking in 4.1 with its new gap, and the hours move again.

The maintenance hour in 4.2's table exists for this. It is not wasted effort on a cleared skill — it is what keeps a cleared skill cleared, and it is deliberately an hour rather than three.

Part 5 — Building your stop/go plan



This is the page you keep. Everything before it was reasoning; this is the form.

Copy these three tables onto one sheet of paper, or into one note on your phone. Fill them in, date them, and redo them at each re-test.

5.1 Per-skill status

One row per skill. Fill it from your two most recent Part 2 self-tests.

Skill	Target band	Last two results	Done?	Date tested	Next test due
Listening					
Reading					
Writing					
Speaking					

Done means both results reached the target, on different practice tests, under the conditions in Part 2. Two results, not one. If either misses, the answer is no.

Next test due is three to four weeks from the date tested, per Part 4.3. Fill it in now, not later.

For any skill where the answer is no, write the gap — target minus current — in the margin. That number is what Part 4.1 ranks on.

5.2 Readiness-to-test check

Part 3.1's six conditions. Yes or no, no maybes.

#	Condition	Yes / No
1	Three of four skills have passed their stopping rule	
2	The fourth is within half a band, on its last two attempts	
3	Finished a full test inside the time limit, twice	
4	Sat all four skills in one sitting at least once	
5	Practised in my actual delivery mode (usually: on a computer)	
6	If my target needs a per-skill minimum: every skill meets it	

Six yes, or five yes with the sixth close: book the test. Three or more no: not yet — go to 5.3 and put the time where it is short.

If you have been at "five yes" for several weeks and your practice scores have stopped moving, read Part 3.3 again and then book the test.

5.3 The one-page plan

The two tables above, turned into decisions. This is the part you act on this week.

Skills that are done (from 5.1):

These drop to maintenance — about an hour a week each, per Part 4.2.
Not zero.

Skills still short, ranked by gap, largest first (from 5.1's margins, with any skill below a per-skill minimum moved to the top regardless of gap):

- 1. gap:
- 2. gap:
- 3. gap:

My weekly hours:

Skill	Hours before	Hours now
Listening		
Reading		
Writing		
Speaking		

Booking decision (from 5.2): book now / not yet — review on

Next self-test date:

Three things to check before you put this away.

Every skill marked done has a next-test date written down. Every skill still short has an hours figure larger than it had before. And if 5.2 came out at six yes, you have either booked the test or written down the day you will.

Part 6 — What's changing in 2026

6.1 The delivery changes, and the one that changes this book's own numbers

None of the scoring arithmetic this book leans on is changing. What is changing is how and where you sit the test, and two of those changes touch this book's rules directly.

The Band 7.0 Blueprint covers the delivery picture in full in its §1.4 — read that for the whole story. In short: from mid-2026 IELTS stops offering a paper-based test and moves to computer delivery, with exact timelines varying by market; in selected markets a Writing on Paper option lets you handwrite the Writing section while sitting the rest on a computer; and the Secure English Language Test for UK Visas and Immigration is digital only.

Two effects on this book.

One Skill Retake changes Part 3.2's arithmetic. If your full test was taken on a computer, you can retake a single skill instead of sitting all four again. The retake must be within **60 days** of the original test, and it can be used **once per original test**. That is a real, official reduction in the cost of testing while one skill is still marginal — which is why Part 3.2 names it rather than leaving you to discover it afterwards.

The limits matter as much as the option. Availability depends on your test centre, so confirm yours offers it. And the organisation that will read your score — university, employer, immigration authority — sets its own policy on whether it accepts a One Skill Retake result. Check both before

you plan around it. If either answer is no, use the full checklist in Part 3.1 without the allowance.

Delivery mode changes how you self-test Writing. Because nearly every candidate now sits on a computer, Part 2.3's self-test should be typed, under time, with no spell checker. Handwrite it only if you have specifically chosen Writing on Paper where it is available. Typing and handwriting are different skills under time pressure, and a Writing self-test run in the mode you will not sit is measuring the wrong thing.

Check ielts.org before you rely on any of this. Delivery details move market by market, and this page will not always be the newest word on it. The official pages are **ielts.org/news-and-insights/updates-to-ielts-test-delivery** and, for the retake, **ielts.org/take-a-test/booking-your-test/one-skill-retake**. Your test centre is the authority on what is actually available where you are sitting.

The end

You started this book preparing for a test. You finish it with a way to tell which of that preparation is still doing something.

That is the whole of it: a stopping rule per skill, a readiness check that is a list rather than a feeling, and a rule for where the freed hours go. None of it makes the work smaller. It stops the work going where it cannot help.

About the self-tests. The self-tests in this book are a way to check your own progress, not the real IELTS exam. They can tell you whether you are likely ready. They cannot guarantee a result, and they are not marked by an examiner. Self-marking your own Writing is the least reliable of the four, as Part 2.3 says at the point where it matters. Only an official test result determines your actual band.

About the 2026 changes. The delivery details and the One Skill Retake conditions in Part 6 were checked against ielts.org shortly before publication, and they are exactly the kind of thing that moves market by market. Confirm current rules with ielts.org and with your own test centre before you rely on them.

Good luck with the test, and with whatever it is a step toward.

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