

# Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

## Computer-Based Test, Paper-Based Test, and Internet-Based Test

Currently the TOEFL exam is offered in three formats: Paper-based (PBT), Computer-based (CBT), and Internet-based (IBT). The format varies by test location. The number of IBT testing sites is increasing and CBT testing is being phased out. PBT is available when neither IBT nor CBT testing can be accommodated. Structure, length, and score ranges vary by format.

### Exam Structure

All three formats consist of four sections. Both the TOEFL PBT and CBT versions include Listening, Structure, Reading, and Writing sections. The IBT includes Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking sections. The IBT exam integrates grammar assessment throughout the exam.

#### **CBT Structure**                      **Total Test Time: Approximately 3 hours**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Topics Tested</b>
Listening	30 to 50 questions; lasting from 40 to 60 minutes	Tests listening skills for both short conversations, and longer academic conversations. May include multiple choice or other questions.
Structure	20 to 25 questions; lasting from 15 to 20 minutes	Tests English Grammar and may include, but isn't limited to, multiple choice and fill in the blank questions.
Reading	44 to 55 questions, lasting from 70 to 90 minutes	Tests reading comprehension skills. Question types include multiple choice and fill in the blank, among others, relating to a given reading passage. Each passage may have 4 to 5 or more reading comprehension questions.
Writing	One essay; 30 minutes	Tests writing skills. Students are presented with an essay question to which to respond.

#### **PBT Structure**                      **Total Test Time: Approximately 3 hours**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Topics Tested</b>
Listening	45 to 75 questions; lasting 30 to 40 minutes	Tests listening skills for both short conversations, and longer academic conversations
Structure	40 questions, lasting 40 minutes	Tests English grammar and may include, but isn't limited to, multiple choice and fill in the blank questions
Reading	50 questions, lasting 55 minutes	Tests reading comprehension skills. Question types include multiple choice and fill in the blank, among others, relating to a given reading passage. Each passage may have 4 to 5 or more reading comprehension questions.
Writing	One essay; 30 minutes	Tests writing skills. Students are presented with an essay question to which to respond.

**IBT Structure** **Total Test Time: Approximately 4 hours**

Section	Description	Topics Tested
Listening	30 to 39 questions	Tests listening skills for both short conversations, and longer academic conversations. Question types may include multiple choice or others.
Reading	30 to 36 questions	Tests reading comprehension skills. Question types include multiple choice and fill in the blank, among others, relating to a given reading passage. Each passage may have 4 to 5 or more reading comprehension questions.
Writing	2 essays	Tests writing skills. Students are presented with two separate essay questions to which to respond.
Speaking	6 speaking questions	Tests speaking skills; test taker's voice is recorded during the exam. Question types include <b>Independent Topics</b> which should be on topics familiar to the student, and <b>Integrated Topics</b> which require a student to read and/or listen to a question prompt and then respond verbally.

**Scoring and Score Validity**

Because English proficiency can change in a short time, TOEFL scores are typically only valid for two years.

Score ranges vary by format.

**PBT** range: from 310 to 677

**CBT** range: from 40 to 300

**IBT** range: from 0 to 120

Select benchmark **score concordance**:

<b>PBT</b>	500	550	580	600	650
<b>CBT</b>	173	213	237	250	280
<b>IBT</b>	61	79-80	92-93	100	114-115

**How the TOEFL is Used by U.S. Universities**

The TOEFL is required of non-native speaking international students by nearly all institutions of higher education in the U.S., including undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs such as law and business. The TOEFL attests to a student's ability to function in an academic environment. Generally, a 500 PBT (173 CBT and 61 IBT) score is the lowest minimum acceptable score for admission at the undergraduate level and a 550 PBT (213 CBT and 79-80 IBT) score is the minimum acceptable score for admission at the graduate level. However, in some fields, such as Linguistics, Law, English or Literature programs and PhD study, the minimum score is much higher.

While it is not generally advisable to take the test too many times, you may be requested to retake the exam in order to meet minimum standards or to be more competitive for particular programs. You cannot take the exam more than once a month.

**Test Taking Tips****Listening**

The *listening section* of the TOEFL features short, long and academic discussions. Paying attention to dialogues is key as you will not be able to repeat them. One of the best ways to prepare for the TOEFL listening section, regardless of which format of the exam you take, is to listen to American English radio and television. U.S. television and radio programs are widely available, especially online. While the TOEFL won't test your favorite U.S. sitcom or show, every bit of exposure you get to American English will help you on the exam. Try to find

educational and scientific broadcasts. The TOEFL is testing your ability to comprehend spoken American English in an academic setting. Try to listen to a radio or television program regularly for your exam. Try to avoid watching the visual cues on television programs, and just focus on the conversations.

After listening to or watching a program, it's a good idea to think about questions that could be asked to test your understanding of the dialogue or conversation on a TOEFL exam. Try to remember the topics covered and the details of what people said. This is one of the most fun ways to study for the TOEFL and to improve your knowledge of American English in general.

### **Structure**

The *structure section* of the CBT and PBT TOEFL is often difficult for non-native English speakers as it tests American English grammar. It's important to review English grammar for this section. Try to get a book or use the internet. It's not necessary to get into extremely complicated linguistics, but even a general review of grammar will help you with this section.

You may find the following websites helpful:

- [http://esl.about.com/library/lessons/blgr\\_beginner\\_review1.htm](http://esl.about.com/library/lessons/blgr_beginner_review1.htm)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_grammar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_grammar)

The IBT does not contain a separate section for grammar questions. Grammar is tested throughout the exam. It's still important to understand English grammar to score your best on the exam even though structure isn't tested directly.

### **Reading Comprehension**

For the *reading comprehension section*, it's important to get accustomed to reading on a computer screen for the CBT exam. You cannot take notes on text when it's on a computer screen, and it may be distracting to scroll up and down at first. Get used to reading things thoroughly on computer screens. This is different than casually surfing the internet. Try to read a few articles in English every day to get comfortable reading on the computer screen. This type of practice does make a difference.

### **Writing**

When *writing essays*, you don't need to try to impress the readers by using words or sentence structures that you find difficult. Try to write in a style with which you're comfortable. Answer the question as clearly as possible. Don't worry too much about spelling. English words are often very difficult to spell, as words in English are not typically written exactly the way they sound. Nonetheless, try to use familiar words. You don't need to use big, confusing words to do well on the TOEFL essay. A good way to structure your essay is to introduce your point in the first paragraph, state your point, and give examples in the middle paragraphs, and then summarize your point in the last paragraph.

Also, try to use your experiences when answering questions. If you can relate an unfamiliar topic to something you're familiar with, you can write a stronger essay. Remember to stay on topic, though. Try to save the last 5 to 10 minutes of your essay time to review it. The best essays will be clear and answer the question effectively.

### **Speaking**

The *speaking section* is a completely new section of the TOEFL and is only on the IBT. It consists of 6 questions. The first two questions involve topics with which the test taker should be familiar or can form an opinion (independent topics). The remaining four questions involve listening to questions, and sometimes reading questions as well, and then responding verbally (integrated topics).

The best way to prepare for this part of the exam is simply to practice speaking. You may want to have a native or fluent English speaker help you, or if not, you may want to try to imitate the speech of U.S. newscasters.

Don't worry too much if you have a foreign sounding accent when you speak English. Just speak as clearly as you can. Don't try to impress with long vocabulary words. Use words with which you're comfortable.

**Tip on the CBT exam:** The CBT exam is **computer adaptive**. What this means is that the exam adapts itself to your performance. If you answer a question correctly, the next question you receive will usually be more difficult. The way to obtain a high score on the CBT is to answer difficult questions correctly, especially at the beginning of each section. Unlike the paper-based exam, on the computer-based exam you cannot skip a question and return to it later. On the CBT exam you are not able to skip questions since the result of the performance on a question determines the next question received, questions must be answered in the order presented. Don't spend too much time on any one question. Try to do your best on the questions in each section. If you get stuck on a question, try to disregard any obviously wrong choices, make your best guess, and move on.

### **Structuring your Study**

Towards the beginning of your studies, try to review topics broadly. This is the time to refresh your knowledge of English grammar and also brush up on vocabulary. The TOEFL doesn't directly test vocabulary, but the more English words you know, the better. If you can get a hold of some practice questions, start out just trying to answer the questions, and try to apply the information from your review. Don't worry about timing at first. When you've answered a few questions, review the answer choices, and try to understand why certain answer choices are correct, and why certain answer choices are incorrect. This will help you eliminate choices when you come across similar questions later.

As your studies progress, try practicing with groups of questions. Start to time yourself and pay attention to the kinds of questions and topics that are difficult for you. Review any content material with which you have trouble.

Closer to your test date, you'll want to try take at least one timed, practice TOEFL exam. It's also possible to find practice exams in paper format from bookstores, and sometimes online. Try to take the paper exams first and then progress to the computer exams. This will best prepare you for the CBT and IBT exams. A wealth of practice material is available at [www.toefl.org](http://www.toefl.org). There are free materials as well as materials that can be purchased.

### **Registering for the Exam**

Registration options will vary by test.

IBT test-takers must register online at [www.toefl.org](http://www.toefl.org).

For PBT and CBT exams generally applicants can register by phone, fax or on the internet. However, for sponsored students receiving payment *vouchers*, registration must be done by fax or mail using the form in the center of the TOEFL Registration Bulletin. For online registration go to [www.toefl.org](http://www.toefl.org).

For students working with IIE on university placement, it is very important that you identify IIE as a score recipient at the time of registration. **IIE's code is 2326.**

### **When to take the Exam**

Ideally, students seeking admission for the term beginning in August or September should sit for the TOEFL exam in May or June of the preceding year. You will then have an assessment of your English language ability and will have time to prepare further and retake the exam in October or November if necessary. At the graduate level, many programs have December application deadline for the following academic year.

### **Sources**

[www.toefl.org](http://www.toefl.org)