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IELTS ACADEMIC

IELTS Reading Tips and Tricks PDF (Academic)

A 60-minute plan, six core skills, a step-by-step strategy and worked example for all 11 Academic Reading question types, True/False/Not Given rules, 30 paraphrase pairs and IELTS on Computer tips.

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SECTION 1

The test and a 60-minute plan

Academic Reading has three passages, 40 questions and 60 minutes, with no extra time to transfer answers. Each question is one mark, and exact marks for each band vary slightly between test versions.

Minutes	What to do
0 to 2	Skim Passage 1: read the title, the first sentence of every paragraph and the last sentence of the passage. Glance at the question types so you know whether you will be matching, completing gaps or judging statements.
2 to 16	Answer the Passage 1 questions. This is normally the easiest passage, so aim to finish it in about 14 minutes with every answer typed in. If a question is taking more than a minute, type a best guess, flag it for review and move on.
16 to 35	Passage 2: spend 2 minutes skimming, then about 17 minutes answering. Watch for question sets that follow passage order (most do) and use the previous answer's location to narrow where the next answer sits.
35 to 56	Passage 3: skim for 2 to 3 minutes, then answer. This passage usually carries the detailed logical argument, so track the writer's position paragraph by paragraph. Give it the largest share of time because its questions reward careful reading.
56 to 58	Return to every question you flagged. Re-read only the sentence that holds the evidence, decide, and do not change an answer unless you can point to the exact words that prove it wrong.
58 to 60	Final check: every question has an answer, no gap-fill answer exceeds the word limit, spelling matches the passage, and letters or numerals are in the correct box. Never leave a blank.

Target band	Marks needed	Where to focus
6	about 23 of 40	Secure Passage 1 and most of Passage 2. Master skimming, scanning and the word-limit rule, and make sure every question is answered. Most of your lost marks should come from Passage 3, not from careless errors.
6.5	about 26 to 27 of 40	Add consistency in True/False/Not Given and Matching headings, which are the two types most students lose marks on. Build a personal paraphrase list and finish Passages 1 and 2 with time to spare for Passage 3.
7	about 30 of 40	Score near full marks on Passages 1 and 2 and at least half of Passage 3. Work on speed so that Passage 3 gets a full 20 minutes, and learn to follow a writer's argument for Yes/No/Not Given.

Target band	Marks needed	Where to focus
8	about 35 of 40	Lose no more than five marks across the whole test. Train on dense argumentative passages, read widely outside IELTS material every day, and review every error until you can name the exact trap that caught you.

SECTION 2

Six core skills

Every question type uses the same handful of skills. Build these first, then apply them type by type.

Skimming

Skimming means reading fast for the overall idea, not for detail. Read the title, the first line of each paragraph and any final sentence that sums up, then give each paragraph a two or three word label in your head or in the notes panel. This builds a map of the passage so that later you know roughly where every answer lives.

Drill: Take any 800 word article, set a timer for 90 seconds, then close it and write one line per paragraph from memory.

Scanning

Scanning means hunting for one specific item, such as a name, a number, a date word or a technical term, without reading everything around it. Let your eyes sweep each line for the shape of the word you want, stop when you hit it, then read the full sentence slowly. Scan for the rarest word in the question first, because common words appear everywhere.

Drill: Pick five numbers or capitalised names from a passage, then time how long it takes to find each one again without reading.

Paraphrase spotting

The question almost never repeats the passage word for word. The passage says fall, the question says decline; the passage says children, the question says young people. Train yourself to expect a synonym, a changed word form or a reversed sentence structure, and to match meaning rather than letters. An option that shares exact words with the passage is often the distractor.

Drill: After every practice set, write the question phrase and the passage phrase that matched it side by side, and keep the list.

Keyword mapping

Before scanning, underline or note two keywords in each question: one that is unlikely to be paraphrased (a name, number or place) and one that carries the meaning (a verb or idea word). Use the first to find the location and the second to confirm the answer. Keep an eye on quantifiers such as some, most, only and all, because they change the meaning of a statement.

Drill: Cover the passage, read ten questions and mark exactly two keywords in each before you look at the text.

Reading the question first

For most question types it is faster to read the questions before the passage, because you then read with a purpose and ignore the paragraphs that no question refers to. The exception is Matching headings, where a quick skim of the passage first makes the headings easier to place. Reading the instructions line carefully also tells you the word limit and whether you need one letter or more.

Drill: Do one timed passage where you read all questions first and one where you do not, and compare both your score and your time.

Guessing unknown words

You will meet words you do not know in every passage, and you rarely need an exact definition. Use the sentence around the word: a signal such as however or in contrast tells you the idea is being reversed, while such as or for example tells you an illustration follows. Decide only whether the word is positive or negative and whether it is a thing, an action or a quality, then keep reading.

Drill: Read a paragraph with three words blanked out and write a plausible replacement for each before checking the original.



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SECTION 3

Strategy for all 11 question types

For each type: what it is, a step-by-step strategy, the common trap, and a worked example with the answer explained.

Multiple choice

You choose the correct option from four (one answer), five (two answers) or six (three answers). Questions test main ideas, specific details and the writer's view.

Strategy

1. Read the stem and decide whether it asks for a detail, a reason or the main idea; underline the rarest keyword.
2. Scan the passage for that keyword or its synonym and read the whole sentence plus the one after it.
3. Cross out options that use extreme words (all, never, only) or that reverse the passage.
4. Check the remaining option against the full meaning of the evidence, not just shared words.

The trap

An option that repeats words from the passage but attaches them to a different idea, or one that is only partly true.

Worked example

For many years scientists assumed that the loud dawn calls of howler monkeys were simply a way of frightening rivals. Recent field studies suggest a different purpose. Groups that call at dawn appear to be announcing their position to neighbouring groups, which then avoid the same feeding trees for the rest of the day. In this way the calls reduce direct conflict, because two groups rarely meet at a contested fruit tree. The calls do carry a cost, since a calling group uses energy and may attract predators, but the researchers concluded that the saving in time and injuries from avoided fights outweighs these risks.

Question: Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D. According to recent studies, the main function of the dawn calls is to A frighten predators away from the group. B challenge other groups to a fight. C let neighbouring groups know where the callers are. D attract other monkeys to a feeding tree.

Answer: C. The passage says the groups are announcing their position to neighbouring groups, which is a paraphrase of C. A and B describe the old assumption or a reversal, and D is never stated.

Identifying information (True/False/Not Given)

You decide whether each statement agrees with the facts in the passage (TRUE), contradicts them (FALSE) or is not covered at all (NOT GIVEN).

Strategy

1. Underline the keywords in the statement, including any quantifier, name or number.
2. Scan for the matching part of the passage and read that sentence slowly.
3. Ask: does the passage say the same thing (TRUE), the opposite (FALSE), or something that does not settle it (NOT GIVEN)?
4. If you cannot find any sentence about the idea after a focused search, choose NOT GIVEN and move on.

The trap

Using your own knowledge or logic to decide; the answer must come only from the passage.

Worked example

The town's first public library opened in a converted grain store beside the river. Entry was free, but borrowing a book required a deposit equal to its purchase price, which placed the service beyond the reach of most working families. Within a decade the council abolished the deposit and replaced it with a small annual subscription. Membership rose sharply, and the library was soon lending more books in a month than it had previously lent in a year. The grain store eventually became too small, and a purpose-built library replaced it on the same site.

Question: Do the following statements agree with the information given in the passage? Write TRUE if the statement agrees with the information, FALSE if the statement contradicts the information, NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this. 1 Borrowing a book was free of charge when the library first opened.

Answer: FALSE. Entry was free, but borrowing required a deposit, so the statement contradicts the passage. Students who match only the word free often wrongly choose TRUE.

Identifying writer's views (Yes/No/Not Given)

You decide whether each statement agrees with the writer's opinions or claims (YES), disagrees with them (NO) or whether the writer gives no view on it (NOT GIVEN). This type appears in argumentative passages.

Strategy

1. Read the statement and ask what the writer would have to believe for it to be YES.
2. Find the part of the passage on that topic and separate the writer's own view from views the writer is reporting.
3. Look for opinion signals such as I believe, it is clear that, critics argue, or some claim.
4. Choose NO only when the writer clearly rejects the idea; choose NOT GIVEN when the writer never takes a position.

The trap

Treating an opinion the writer reports from critics or other people as the writer's own view.

Worked example

Many city councils now ban cars from their historic centres at weekends, and I believe this policy should be extended to every day of the week. Critics argue that shopkeepers lose customers, yet the evidence from towns that have tried it is encouraging: the number of visitors usually rises once people feel safe enough to walk. It is true that deliveries need careful planning, and I accept that some residents with limited mobility will require exemptions. What I cannot accept is the claim that a city centre without traffic is somehow lifeless. In my experience it is precisely the opposite.

Question: Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer? Write YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer, NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer, NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this. 1 Shopkeepers are right to fear that banning cars will reduce their trade.

Answer: NO. The writer reports the critics' fear and then rejects it, pointing to evidence that visitor numbers usually rise. The writer's own position contradicts the statement.

Matching information

You are given a list of pieces of information (a reason, an example, a comparison, a description) and must say which lettered paragraph contains each one. A paragraph may be used more than once or not at all.

Strategy

1. Read all the statements first and underline the type of information each one describes (a reason, a problem, an example).
2. Skim the passage and label each paragraph with its main idea.
3. For each statement, scan the likely paragraphs for a paraphrase of the idea, not the same words.
4. Do the easiest matches first; use any statement left over to re-check the hard ones.

The trap

Choosing a paragraph because it mentions the topic word, when the specific information (the reason or the example) is actually in a different paragraph.

Worked example

A The earliest bicycles had no pedals at all. The rider sat on a wooden beam between two wheels and pushed along the ground with both feet, rather like a child on a balance bike today. B Pedals fixed directly to the front wheel came next. Because one turn of the pedals produced one turn of the wheel, makers enlarged the front wheel to gain speed, producing high-wheeled machines that were fast but dangerous to mount and dismount. C The chain drive solved this. By linking the pedals to the rear wheel through gears, designers could return to two wheels of equal size while keeping the speed.

Question: The passage has three paragraphs, A to C. Which paragraph contains the following information? Write the correct letter, A, B or C. 1 a reason why a change in design made bicycles risky to use

Answer: B. Paragraph B explains that makers enlarged the front wheel to gain speed, which made the machines dangerous to mount and dismount. Paragraph C describes the solution, not the risk.

Matching headings

You match a heading from a list to each lettered paragraph. There are always more headings than paragraphs, and headings express the main idea of a paragraph, not a detail inside it.

Strategy

1. Skim the whole passage first and give each paragraph a short label of your own before reading the headings.
2. Read the headings and cross out any that describe a detail you noticed rather than a whole paragraph.
3. Match the paragraphs you are most sure of first, then deal with the remaining ones.
4. Check that no heading is used twice unless the instructions say that is allowed.



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The trap

Picking a heading because its keyword appears in the paragraph, when that keyword is only a passing detail.

Worked example

A For most of history, salt was far more than a seasoning. Before refrigeration it was the only reliable way to keep meat and fish edible through the winter, and communities without a local supply had to trade for it. Roads were built to carry it, taxes were raised on it and soldiers were sometimes paid in it.
B Today salt is cheap and plentiful, and its old importance is easy to forget. The word salary still records the link with payment, and several towns around the world carry the names of the mines or marshes that once made them wealthy.

Question: Choose the correct heading for paragraph A from the list of headings below. List of Headings: i Modern methods of producing salt, ii Why salt was once essential, iii How salt improves the taste of food, iv Traces of the past in words and place names

Answer: ii. Paragraph A is about preservation, trade, roads, taxes and pay, which together show why salt was essential. Heading iv matches paragraph B, and i and iii describe nothing in the passage.

Matching features

You match a set of statements to a list of features such as people, theories, places or time periods, usually labelled A to D. Some features may be used more than once.

Strategy

1. Scan the passage and highlight every occurrence of each feature in the list (names are easy to spot).
2. Read what the passage says about each feature and summarise it in a few words.
3. Take each statement and match its meaning to one of your summaries.
4. Re-read the evidence for any match where two features seem to say similar things.

The trap

Matching a statement to the person whose name sits closest to it in the passage, when the sentence actually reports a different person's idea.

Worked example

Three researchers studied how young children learn to count. Alvarez observed that children can recite the number words long before they understand that the last word spoken represents the size of the whole group. Okafor tested whether this understanding appears earlier in children who grow up speaking two languages, and found no difference. Lindqvist took a different approach, arguing that counting ability depends less on language than on the chance to handle physical objects, and designed a set of games using beads and blocks to test the idea.

Question: Look at the following statements and the list of researchers below. Match each statement with the correct researcher, A, B or C. 1 Children's counting is shaped more by hands-on experience than by language. List of Researchers: A Alvarez, B Okafor, C Lindqvist

Answer: C. Lindqvist argues that counting depends less on language than on handling physical objects, which is the paraphrase of hands-on experience. Okafor studied language but found no effect.

Matching sentence endings

You are given the first half of several sentences and a list of possible endings. You choose the ending that completes each sentence so that it is grammatically correct and true according to the passage.

Strategy

1. Read the sentence beginning and predict how it might end before looking at the options.
2. Scan the passage for the subject of the sentence beginning and read that section closely.
3. Reject endings that are true in general but do not connect to that particular beginning.
4. Read the complete sentence back to check grammar and meaning.

The trap

Choosing an ending that contains correct information from elsewhere in the passage but does not complete this sentence.

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Worked example

Glass frogs are small tree-dwelling amphibians whose skin is so transparent that their internal organs can be seen from below. For years biologists puzzled over why such transparency was useful, since the frogs are green on top and already well camouflaged among leaves. A recent study offers an answer. When a glass frog sleeps, it withdraws most of its red blood cells into its liver, which is covered by a reflective layer. The frog's body therefore becomes almost colourless, and its outline nearly disappears against the leaf it rests on, hiding it from predators.

Question: Complete each sentence with the correct ending, A, B, C or D. 1 While a glass frog is asleep, it becomes harder to see because A its skin turns green to match the leaves. B its blood is stored out of sight in one organ. C it moves to the underside of a leaf. D its liver produces a reflective liquid.

Answer: B. The passage says the frog withdraws most of its red blood cells into its liver, so the blood is stored in one organ. The liver is covered by a reflective layer; it does not produce a liquid.

Sentence completion

You complete a sentence with words taken directly from the passage, within a stated word limit. The sentence paraphrases the passage, but the answer words must be copied exactly.

Strategy

1. Read the instruction line and note the word limit.
2. Decide what kind of word fits the gap grammatically: a noun, a verb, an adjective or a number.
3. Scan for the paraphrased part of the sentence and copy the exact words from the passage.
4. Count the words and check the spelling letter by letter.

The trap

Writing a correct idea in your own words, or adding an extra article or adjective that breaks the word limit.

Worked example

The lighthouse keeper's job was more varied than the title suggests. Apart from lighting the lamp at dusk and putting it out at dawn, the keeper had to polish the lenses every morning, record the weather three times a day and maintain the fog signal, a compressed air horn that was sounded whenever visibility fell below a certain distance. Supplies arrived by boat once a month, so keepers also grew vegetables and kept a few hens. Many were skilled carpenters as well, because repairs could not wait for a tradesman from the mainland.

Question: Complete the sentences below. Choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer. 1 The keeper sounded the fog signal when the dropped below a set level.

Answer: visibility. The passage says the horn was sounded whenever visibility fell below a certain distance; dropped paraphrases fell and set level paraphrases certain distance. One word is within the limit.

Summary, note, table or flow-chart completion

You fill gaps in a summary, set of notes, table or flow chart that covers part of the passage. Answers come either from the passage itself (with a word limit) or from a box of options.

Strategy

1. Read the whole summary first to understand what section of the passage it covers.
2. For each gap, decide the word type needed and predict a likely meaning.
3. Locate the matching part of the passage, which is usually in the same order as the summary.
4. If a word box is given, check each candidate for both grammar and meaning before choosing.

The trap

Filling a gap with a word that fits grammatically but comes from the wrong sentence of the passage.



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Worked example

Vertical farms grow crops in stacked trays inside buildings, using artificial light instead of sunlight. Because the environment is sealed, the plants need no pesticides and use roughly a tenth of the water required by a field of the same output. Harvests are possible all year, and the farms can sit inside cities, so lettuce or herbs may reach a shop within hours of being picked. The main drawback is electricity. Lighting and climate control consume so much of it that, unless the supply comes from renewable sources, the environmental benefit is largely cancelled out.

Question: Complete the summary below. Choose ONE WORD ONLY from the passage for each answer. Vertical farms raise plants on trays under artificial light. The crops are free of 1 and the system needs far less 2 than an ordinary field. However, the large amount of 3 consumed is a serious disadvantage.

Answer: 1 pesticides, 2 water, 3 electricity. Each gap paraphrases one sentence of the passage in order: need no pesticides, a tenth of the water, and the main drawback is electricity. Each answer is a single word copied exactly.

Diagram label completion

You label parts of a diagram of an object, device or process using words from the passage within a word limit. The diagram relates to a descriptive section of the text.

Strategy

1. Study the diagram and work out what each numbered label is pointing to.
2. Find the paragraph that describes the object or process; it is often the one with the most technical nouns.
3. Follow the description step by step and match each stage or part to a label.
4. Copy the exact noun or noun phrase from the passage and check the word limit.

The trap

Labelling with a word that appears near the right place in the passage but names a different part of the object.

Worked example

A simple solar still turns salty or dirty water into drinking water. A shallow basin is filled with the untreated water and covered with a sheet of clear glass set at a slight angle. Sunlight passes through the glass and heats the water, which evaporates and rises as vapour. When the vapour touches the cooler underside of the glass it condenses into droplets. Because the glass is tilted, the droplets run down to the lower edge, where a narrow collection channel carries the clean water into a container outside the still. The salt and dirt remain in the basin.

Question: Label the diagram below. Choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer. 1 : sloping cover on which the vapour condenses. 2 : carries the clean water out to the container.

Answer: 1 (clear) glass, 2 collection channel. The vapour condenses on the underside of the tilted glass, and the collection channel carries the clean water to the container. Both answers are copied from the passage and stay within two words.

Short-answer questions

You answer questions about factual details in the passage using words taken from the text, within a stated word limit. Numbers can usually be written as figures or words.

Strategy

1. Note the word limit and the question word (how long, what, where, which) to know what kind of answer is needed.
2. Underline the rarest keyword in the question and scan for it or its synonym.
3. Read the sentence around the keyword and lift the exact words that answer the question.
4. Count the words, keep the passage spelling and do not add words that are not required.

The trap

Writing a full sentence or an explanation instead of the short factual phrase the question asks for.



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Worked example

Before the arrival of the railway, the fishing village depended almost entirely on herring. Boats went out at night and returned at dawn, and the catch was salted in barrels and sold inland by cart, a journey of two days to the nearest market town. The railway cut this journey to three hours, and fresh fish could be sold at a far better price than salted fish. Within a generation the village had tripled in size, and a cannery was built to process the summer surplus.

Question: Answer the questions below. Choose NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER from the passage for each answer. 1 How long did the journey to the market town take by cart? 2 What was built to deal with the extra fish caught in summer?

Answer: 1 two days, 2 a cannery. The passage states the cart journey was two days and that a cannery was built to process the summer surplus; surplus is paraphrased as extra fish. Both answers are within the limit.

SECTION 4

True, False or Not Given

The rules that decide most lost marks in this question type.

Rule	Example
TRUE or YES means the statement matches the passage in every part, even if the wording is different.	Passage: The bridge was completed ahead of schedule. Statement: The bridge was finished earlier than planned. Answer: TRUE.
FALSE or NO means the passage says the opposite, or gives a different fact that makes the statement impossible.	Passage: The museum is closed on Mondays. Statement: The museum opens every day of the week. Answer: FALSE.
NOT GIVEN means the passage does not say whether the statement is true or false, even if it seems likely from general knowledge.	Passage: The festival attracts visitors from across the country. Statement: The festival is the largest in the country. Answer: NOT GIVEN, because size is never mentioned.
Check quantifiers and frequency words: some, most, all, always, never and only can turn a TRUE statement into a FALSE one.	Passage: Most of the species studied were nocturnal. Statement: All the species studied were nocturnal. Answer: FALSE.
A statement about the same topic is not automatically TRUE; it must match the specific claim, including who did it, when and why.	Passage: The company tested the drug on volunteers for two years. Statement: The drug was tested on volunteers for two years because the company was short of funds. Answer: NOT GIVEN, because no reason is stated.

Rule	Example
In Yes/No/Not Given the question is about the writer's own view, so an opinion that the writer only reports from others does not count.	Passage: Critics say the plan is wasteful, but in my view it is the most sensible option available. Statement: The writer thinks the plan is wasteful. Answer: NO.

Paraphrase pairs to recognise

Question says	Passage says	Question says	Passage says
decline	fall, drop, decrease	common	widespread, frequent, typical
increase	rise, grow, expand	rare	unusual, uncommon, scarce
young people	children, adolescents, the young	ancient	early, old, prehistoric
cause	lead to, result in, bring about	nowadays	currently, today, at present
result	outcome, consequence, effect	in the past	formerly, previously, once
important	significant, essential, crucial	benefit	advantage, gain, positive effect
difficult	challenging, demanding, hard	drawback	disadvantage, limitation, problem
cheap	inexpensive, affordable, low-cost	disagree	dispute, challenge, question, reject
expensive	costly, high-priced	believe	think, argue, claim, maintain
method	approach, technique, procedure	a lot of	numerous, a great many, plenty of
study	research, investigation, survey	a few	several, a handful of, some
discover	find, identify, uncover	people	residents, inhabitants, the population
develop	create, design, build	job	occupation, employment, role
prevent	stop, avoid, block	place	location, site, region, area
reduce	cut, lower, lessen, limit	effect on the environment	environmental impact

SECTION 5

IELTS on Computer tips and common mistakes

Reading on screen rewards a few habits that paper never needed.

- The passage sits on the left of the screen and the questions on the right, and you can scroll each side separately. Keep the question visible while you scan the passage so you do not lose the keyword you are hunting.
- Use the highlight tool to mark the sentence that proves each answer. When you come back to a flagged question in the final minutes, the evidence is already marked and you do not need to search again.
- Use the notes feature to write a two or three word label for each paragraph as you skim. This replaces the margin notes you would make on paper and makes Matching headings and Matching information much faster.
- The navigation bar at the bottom shows every question number and marks the ones you have answered. Use it to jump straight to a flagged question instead of scrolling, and glance at it before the end to make sure no number is blank.
- Type gap-fill answers carefully and check them against the passage, because there is no spell check and a misspelt word scores zero. Copy the passage spelling exactly, including British forms such as colour or centre if the passage uses them.
- Watch the on-screen timer and set your own checkpoints (Passage 1 done by 16 minutes, Passage 2 by 35). The timer is your only warning, so do not wait for someone to tell you that time is nearly up.

Mistake	Fix
Going over the word limit in gap-fill answers, for example writing the clear glass when the limit is two words.	Read the instruction line before every set, count your words, and drop articles or adjectives that are not needed.
Spending four or five minutes on one hard question and then rushing the last passage.	Every question is worth 1 mark, so give each one about a minute, type a best guess, flag it and move on.
Reading the whole passage slowly from start to finish before looking at the questions.	Skim for two minutes to build a map, read the questions, then scan only the paragraphs the questions point to.
Choosing an option because it contains exact words from the passage.	Treat word matches as a signal to read more carefully, not as proof; check the full meaning of the sentence.
Using your own knowledge or logic to decide True/False/Not Given.	Answer only from what the passage says; if the passage does not settle the statement, it is NOT GIVEN.
Misspelling an answer that was correctly identified.	Copy the spelling directly from the passage and re-read each typed answer once before moving on.

Mistake	Fix
Leaving questions blank when time runs out.	Keep two minutes at the end to fill every gap; a guess can score, a blank never can.
Changing a correct answer during the final review without new evidence.	Only change an answer when you can point to the exact sentence that proves the first answer wrong.
Ignoring connecting words such as however, although, unlike and in contrast.	Treat these words as signposts; they often mark the exact sentence where the answer sits or where the meaning reverses.
Doing practice only on your favourite question type and avoiding the ones you find hard.	Track your score by question type after each mock test and spend the next session on the two weakest types.



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