

Sunday, May 03, 2015

IELTS Grammar: 'to' with 'ing'

Many students have learnt that 'to' can't be followed by a word ending in 'ing'. But did you notice the following phrase in the question in Wednesday's lesson?

"strict punishments for driving offences are **the key to reducing** traffic accidents"

This phrase is completely correct, so it must mean that the "rule" was wrong! You can put 'to' with 'ing' in many situations. Here are some examples:

- The key to being more productive is...
- I look forward to seeing you.
- He admitted to taking the money.
- Scientists are closer to being able to...
- Seven steps to reaching your goals!

Can you find any more examples?

Tip: try searching on Google for "to being", "to having", "to doing" etc.

Saturday, May 09, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: review and practice

If I asked you to list the 10 best phrases from yesterday's speaking lesson and Wednesday's writing lesson, which would you choose? Could you then use those 10 phrases in your own sentences?

Saturday, May 23, 2015

IELTS Speaking / Grammar: improved sentences

Here are my suggestions for improved versions of the sentences in yesterday's lesson. Compare both versions carefully to learn from the changes that I made.

- In my opinion, people are afraid to give presentations when they think that members of the audience might know more than they do.
- My mind often goes blank when starting a new slide.
- I believe that using visual aids can help to engage the audience.
- Of course, giving a presentation can make people feel anxious, regardless of how confident they normally are.

I think that adequate preparation is the key to giving a good presentation.

Sunday, May 24, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: collocations and phrases

There were some good collocations and phrases in the 'improved sentences' that I wrote for yesterday's lesson. Did you write them in your notebook?

- give a presentation
 - members of the audience
 - my mind goes blank
 - use visual aids
 - engage the audience
 - feel anxious
 - regardless of how (+ adjective) something is
 - adequate preparation
- the key to doing something

Saturday, June 06, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: lists of 3

For my first answer in yesterday's lesson I wrote: "I like reading, learning from others, and trying to understand difficult concepts." As you can see, I gave a list of 3 things that I like about studying.

Here are some more "lists of 3" that I could have used in my answers:

- I prefer to study alone so that I can concentrate, think deeply, and stay focused on the task.
- I like studying in the library because of its peaceful, studious and contemplative atmosphere.
- When someone disturbs me I feel frustrated, annoyed and impatient.

Making "lists of 3" is a good way to practise adding variety to the language that you use. Try it yourself!

Saturday, June 13, 2015

IELTS Grammar: correct the mistakes

Can you correct the small mistake(s) in each of the following sentences, or change the sentences to make them more natural?

- Global filmmaking companies have more budget for action, special effects and spectacular locations.
- Governments should support local film industries by financially support the film makers.
- If governments help local movie industry, it would create employment opportunities.
- There are several reasons why locally made films lose popularity to foreign films.
- The following essay will discuss in details about the issue.

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Saturday, June 20, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: weekly review

This week's lessons contained some good vocabulary. Here are some of the words and phrases that you could put in your notebook:

- cartography
 - symptoms manifested
 - fundamental things
 - balance, symmetry and repetition
 - soul-destroying
 - rigid, bleak, relentless, harsh
 - established film industries
 - huge budgets, big-budget films
 - shoot scenes in spectacular locations
 - Hollywood blockbusters
 - global appeal
 - they star the most famous actors
 - made by the most accomplished producers
 - suffers in comparison
 - in theory, in practice
 - made a mess of (informal)
 - the core of
 - the point at which
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Sunday, July 05, 2015

IELTS Speaking: verb tenses and vocabulary

In yesterday's lesson I asked you to find examples of verb tenses and good vocabulary in my sample answer about a film that I would like to see.

Here are examples of different verb tenses that I used:

- Future with 'going to': it's going to be called Spectre
- Future with 'will': I don't know exactly what it will be about
- Present simple for the future: when it comes out later this year
- Present simple: I think Spectre refers to...
- Present perfect (active): I've seen the official trailer
- Present perfect (passive): hasn't been released yet
- Past simple: I saw in the news
- Past continuous: when I was watching the news

Here are some examples of 'band 7-9' vocabulary:

- when it comes out (meaning: when it is released)
- refers to the name of

- the imaginary criminal organisation
- hasn't been released yet
- on a mission to save the world
- an arch-criminal
- a plot line involving lots of twists and turns
- to defeat his nemesis
- the official trailer
- cast to play supporting roles
- James Bond films are always big news
- action scenes and special effects
- take place in spectacular locations
- unrealistic, you could even say ridiculous
- like a roller-coaster ride

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Saturday, July 18, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: from this week

Here are some good words and phrases from this week's blog lessons:

- an exact replica
- a mock-up
- to gauge
- painstaking work
- hands-on experience
- priceless
- outdated
- a career for life
- fixed roles of men and women
- take pride in your work
- the Hollywood formula
- a popular subject for film-makers
- share the experience
- replicate that cinema atmosphere

Did you notice that the noun 'replica' and the verb 'replicate' both appeared in this week's lessons, and in very different contexts?

Saturday, July 25, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: investigate!

Whenever you see a new word or phrase, it's a good idea to investigate. By this I mean that you should search for the word or phrase online, and see how it is used in a variety of sentences.

For example, take this phrase from yesterday's lesson: ***"I'm not one for..."***. If you search for this phrase on Google, you'll see examples like:

- I'm not one for complaining, but...
- I'm not one for writing reviews, but...
- I'm not one for settling for mediocrity.
- I'm not one for love songs.
- I'm not one for celeb news.
- I'm not one for too much structure.

I think you need to see five or more examples of a new phrase before you start to really see how you could use it yourself. Can you see any 'rules' for the phrase "I'm not one for"? Can you explain what it means? Can you use it in your own sentences?

Saturday, August 15, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: from yesterday's lesson

Here's some of the good vocabulary that I used in yesterday's speaking lesson. Would you be able to use these phrases in your own sentences? If you're not sure, look the phrases up in a dictionary, or use Google to search for examples of their use.

- local neighbourhood
 - pedestrianisation
 - traffic diverted
 - clogs up the main street
 - congestion, noise and pollution
 - pressure from local people
 - bring a problem to light
 - a campaign by residents
 - come up with some possible designs
 - a bypass
 - blocked off
 - quality of life
 - outdoor seating
 - a safer and more pleasant place
- a positive knock-on effect

Sunday, August 16, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: paraphrasing

In last Sunday's lesson I wrote that an advanced user of any language is someone who can express the same idea in a variety of ways. When you do this, you are paraphrasing.

Let's practise paraphrasing some of the ideas from Friday's speaking lesson. Can you express the ideas below in one or two (or more) different ways? Note: you don't need to use **exact** synonyms - just make sure you communicate the same overall idea.

- Traffic clogs up the main street.
 - Local people need to bring the problem to light.
 - They should come up with some possible designs.
- This would have a positive knock-on effect.

Sunday, August 30, 2015

IELTS Grammar: 'future perfect' tense

Did you notice that I used the 'future perfect' tense in the answer that I wrote for Thursday's writing task 1 lesson? Here's the sentence:

- *By 2024, a third building will have been constructed.*

In fact, this is a 'future perfect passive' sentence. Another option was to write:

- *In 2024, a third building will be constructed.* (simple future, passive)

There's a small difference in meaning between these two sentences. The future perfect sentence suggests that construction of the building will already be finished in 2024, whereas the simple future sentence suggests that the construction work will happen in the year 2024.

Sunday, September 06, 2015

IELTS Grammar: 'by/in contrast' and 'on the contrary'

A few people have asked me about these phrases. Do they have the same meaning? When is each one used?

By contrast / In contrast

I often use these two phrases in both writing task 1 and 2. They are exactly the same, and are used in a similar way to "however" or "on the other hand" to introduce a contrast / comparison. Put "By / In contrast" at the beginning of a sentence, with a comma after "contrast".

Example

Unemployment rose in the UK. By contrast, the number of unemployed people in Canada fell.

On the contrary

I don't think you'll need this phrase for any part of the IELTS test. It doesn't mean the same thing as "by / in contrast". We use "on the contrary" to deny that something is true, and to explain that the opposite is true.

Example

- Person 1: "You had some problems with your hotel, didn't you?"

- Person 2: "On the contrary, the hotel was great, but the airline lost my suitcase."

Sunday, September 20, 2015

IELTS Grammar: correct the mistakes

Here are some phrases (parts of sentences) that people wrote below Thursday's writing task 1 lesson. Can you find and correct the mistakes?

Note: I'm focusing here on the parts of people's sentences that contained a problem. Don't worry about the information that I've missed out.

- The highest numbers of sales were 3 million Euros and 15 million Euros respectively.
- The highest sales figures for Fairtrade coffee and bananas was recorded in Switzerland.
- Switzerland was earning 15 million euros of fairtrade bananas.
- ...with the sales figures for coffee and bananas stood at 3 million Euros and 15 million Euros respectively.
- Switzerland was the highest sales in fairtrade of coffee and bananas.

In case you didn't see it, here's my correct version:

In 1999, Switzerland had the highest figures for sales of both Fairtrade coffee and Fairtrade bananas, with 3 million and 15 million Euros of sales for the two respective products.

Saturday, October 24, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: weekly review

Did you note down the good vocabulary from this week's lessons? Here's a list of some of the best words and phrases. Try using them to make your own sentences.

- erratically
- precipitation
- mishandling, bungling
- convenient, handy
- certain key subject areas
- the courses of their choice
- from a personal perspective
- on the societal level
- job opportunities, career progression, better salaries
- knowledge and skill gaps are covered
- greater future prosperity
- passionate about what they are learning
- value creative thinking skills above practical or technical skills
- if this were the case

I personally prefer the current system in which...

Saturday, October 31, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: 'less common' phrases

Did you note down the following 'less common' phrases from the description that I wrote yesterday? Could you use these phrases in your own sentences?

- each episode featured
- spectacular footage
- it was broadcast
- the DVD box set
- it was advertised repeatedly
- it was aired (means 'it was shown on TV')
- the trailers were eye-catching
- incredibly beautiful images
- the voice of the narrator
- stunning photography
- global scope
- to film such interesting creatures in so many locations
- opened my eyes to the hidden wonders of our planet

Note:

The phrase 'less common vocabulary' (or 'uncommon lexical items') is used in the examiner's mark scheme. It refers to any vocabulary that examiners don't expect most candidates to use. But this **doesn't** mean 'difficult' words; it means the kind of 'natural' phrases that native speakers use. A good example is "DVD box set" - this isn't a difficult phrase, but it's something that English learners might not be expected to use.

Sunday, November 01, 2015

IELTS Grammar: conditional mistakes

Can you correct the mistakes in the following conditional sentences?

- If there was a ban on cigarette, less people would smoke cigarette.
- If the tax rate on junk food had increased, people would likely to prefer making food at home.
- If schools administered with any teachers, disorder and lawlessness would arise.

If uncensored commercials had been banned, the crime rate would be seized from rising.

Saturday, December 05, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: this week's review

In my Saturday blog lessons, I often list the good vocabulary from the previous week. Today I'm going to ask **you** to do this week's vocabulary review.

So, look back through this week's lessons here on the blog, and make a note of any good vocabulary that I used. Feel free to share your lists in the "comments" area below.

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Sunday, December 13, 2015

IELTS Vocabulary: useful phrases

I used some good phrases in yesterday's letter task. Even if you're doing the academic IELTS test, I recommend that you note them down.

- at short notice
- made the spontaneous decision
- to eat out
- we could not have chosen a better restaurant
- the ceremony had taken place
- my friends and I
- we were relieved to have finally (+ past participle)
- we were in good hands
- friendly and obliging
- such a memorable evening

Task:

Think about how you could use these phrases in your speaking test.

Saturday, December 19, 2015

IELTS Grammar: superlative without 'the'

In this lesson I gave a grammatical explanation of when to write "highest" without the word "the" before it. For example:

- The UK had **the** highest rate of unemployment. (the highest + noun)
- The unemployment rate was highest in the UK. (noun before 'highest', no 'the')

However, there might be an easier way to remember when to miss the word "the". We miss the word "the" when "highest" means "at its highest" or "at their highest" e.g. The unemployment rate was **at its highest** in the UK.

Let's try this with a few more examples:

1. Rainfall is highest in October. (Rainfall is **at its highest** in October)
2. Temperatures are warmest in the south of the country. (at their warmest)
3. Traffic is slowest between 7 and 9am. (at its slowest)

In the above examples, don't put the word "the" before the superlative adjectives.

Note:

I'll add a bit more to this explanation in tomorrow's lesson, so feel free to

ask any questions in the comments area below.

Sunday, December 20, 2015

A note about grammar

The two lessons below demonstrate how crazy grammar 'rules' can be. Most people learn that we always use the word "the" with superlatives (e.g. the highest, the oldest), but in reality the English language breaks this 'rule' on many occasions.

I'm not a fan of learning such detailed grammar rules myself; I prefer my students to focus on vocabulary. So don't worry if my "superlative without the" lessons seemed confusing to you. It wouldn't affect your score if you made a mistake when using one of these phrases.

Sunday, January 03, 2016

IELTS Grammar: interesting 'article' question

A student noticed something interesting in my video lesson about "discussion essays". In the lesson I wrote the following two phrases:

- their determination will help them in competitive situations
- more useful than a competitive determination to win

The student asked why I used the article "a" in the second phrase. Isn't "determination" an uncountable noun? The answer is, not always.

Sometimes we use "determination" as a countable noun. In the second sentence above, I'm writing about one specific type of determination: the determination to win. In this case it's correct to write "a determination".

Note:

People often ask me to make a lesson that explains how to use articles. The problem is that article use doesn't follow a set of simple 'rules'. I think it's best to learn gradually by reading lots of English and by **noticing** things like the example above.

Sunday, January 24, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: 'easy' words in 'less common' phrases

You might think that a word is 'easy' because you understand it. But do you really know all the uses of that word? There might be some 'less common' uses that would impress the examiner.

Take the word "interest" for example. When teaching a class of advanced-level students, I used the phrase "out of interest" (e.g. I decided to take the course out of interest in the subject*). My students admitted that they had never heard the phrase "out of interest" before.

*out of interest in the subject = because I'm interested in the subject
Can you think of any other examples of 'easy' words that are used in 'less common' phrases?

Sunday, February 07, 2016

IELTS Grammar: 'most' or 'most of'?

Should you write "most people", "most of people" or "most of the people"?

Answer:

- Don't write "most of people".
- "Most of the people" is correct when you are talking about a specific group of people e.g. most of the people in my department.
- For IELTS writing and speaking "most people" is the best phrase.

Here are some examples for IELTS Writing:

- English is taught in most countries. (~~most of countries~~)
- Most people agree that the ability to speak English is a useful skill.
- Most products are made in factories rather than by hand.
- Crime is on the increase in most major cities.

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Sunday, February 14, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: 'less common' not 'advanced'

In the comments below Wednesday's lesson, a few people said that they didn't see any "advanced" vocabulary* in my essay. But examiners are not looking for "advanced" vocabulary; they are looking for "less common" vocabulary.

"Less common" vocabulary means words and phrases that most students wouldn't think to use in their essays. For example, in the first line of my essay, I used the verb "to rival". You might know the noun "rival", but have you ever used it as a verb? This is not an "advanced" word, but it is certainly **less commonly used** by IELTS candidates, and the examiner would be impressed to see it used in this way.

Here are the "less common" phrases from my essay:

- the Internet is beginning to rival newspapers
- the traditional press
- vital source of information
- the Internet age
- traditional means of communicating
- rural areas
- the ability or opportunity to get online
- trusted as reliable sources
- employ professional journalists and editors

- news in real time
- gadgets and mobile devices
- contribute with our own updates on social media
- an explosion in the use of platforms

Note:

Although you probably **understand** the phrases above, most candidates would not **use** them in their essays.

*I never use the terms "advanced vocabulary" or "difficult vocabulary". Anyone can find a "big" word in the dictionary and translate it. The difficult skill is to use words together in collocations and phrases.

Saturday, February 27, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: trying to be 'difficult'

I recently read a student's essay that contained the following sentences:

- As a matter of fact, it is no clandestine issue to anybody that sport has indisputable impacts on overall health of people.
- The proponents of this view perceive that investment in enhancing the number of health-related facilities is not alone a cure-all for protecting and maintaining healthy atmosphere.
- To revolutionize public health, alternative effective measures are entailed.

I told the student that I thought she was trying too hard to be 'difficult'. Which words or phrases in each sentence do you think I suggested changing?

Sunday, February 28, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: yesterday's sentences improved

Here are my improved versions of the sentences in yesterday's lesson. I've replaced the strange words with more natural alternatives.

- It is widely accepted that sport has a positive impact on people's physical and mental health.
- Investment in facilities will not, by itself, lead to an overall improvement in public health.

In order to revolutionise public health, alternative measures will need to be taken.

Saturday, March 05, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: essay analysis

Did you analyse the essay in Wednesday's lesson? Here are some good phrases that you could try to use yourself:

- seen as places of opportunity

- major drawbacks
- a large metropolis
- the average inhabitant
- the cost of living
- urban areas, rural areas
- high crime and poverty rates
- the air quality is poor
- public transport systems are overcrowded
- take steps to tackle these problems
- affordable housing
- ban vehicles
- promote the use of cleaner public transport
- traffic congestion, a congestion charge
- curb the traffic problem
- provincial towns
- reduce the pressure on
- implement a range of measures
- enhance the quality of life

Remember that 'topic vocabulary' is the key to a high score in writing task 2.

Sunday, March 06, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: the problem with synonyms

Someone asked me the following useful questions:

- Instead of '**reduce pollution**', can we write '**bring down pollution**' or '**lessen pollution**'?
- Instead of '**reduce the pressure**', can we write '**cut down the pressure**'?

My answer is no. Although 'bring down', 'lessen' and 'cut down' can be used as synonyms of 'reduce' in some situations, most native speakers wouldn't choose to use them in the contexts above. In other words, 'reduce pollution' is a common collocation, but 'bring down pollution' isn't.

Saturday, March 12, 2016

IELTS Grammar: correct the mistakes

Can you see the mistakes in the following topic sentences?

- On the one hand, people facing different situation living in a city.
- The problems that urban inhabitants may face with are high cost of living, many kinds of social problems as well as poor air quality.
- People dwelling in cities are facing different kind of issues every day.
- On the one hand, the denizen need to face the challenge life in urban sprawl.

- The fantasy of high standard city life is infact faced with reality of many daily challenges.

Tip: the easiest way to improve these sentences is by **simplifying** them.

Sunday, March 13, 2016

IELTS Grammar: corrected (simplified) sentences

Here are my suggestions for correct, simplified versions of the sentences in yesterday's lesson:

- People who live in cities face various problems.
- The problems that urban inhabitants face include a high cost of living, social problems, and poor air quality.
- People who live in cities face various problems.
- People who live in urban areas face various challenges.
- City life is much more challenging than many people are led to believe.

Notes:

- Sentences 1 and 3 were trying to communicate the same simple idea, so I used the same easy sentence for both.
- Notice that I removed the words 'dwelling' and 'denizen'. Don't try to show off with difficult words in your introduction.

Notice how the verb 'face' is used: A face(s) B. For example: people face problems.

Sunday, March 20, 2016

IELTS Grammar: mistakes with the passive

In which of these sentences is the passive used correctly?

- The amount of rainfall was increased last month.
- An increase in rainfall was seen last month.
- The UK was experienced an increase in rainfall.
- Rainfall has been reduced this year.

Income tax has been reduced this year.

Saturday, March 26, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: band 7-9 phrases

Did you note down these good phrases from Wednesday's lesson?

- it is an abstract concept with no definite meaning
- it can mean or represent
- depending on a person's age, culture or background
- a feeling of pleasure in a particular moment
- a state of mind
- adults equate happiness with...
- health, security, financial stability or success

- we seek contentment
- in our own individual ways

If you want to write at a band 7-9 level, vocabulary is the key!

Sunday, March 27, 2016

IELTS Vocabulary: paraphrasing and comparisons

Did you notice the paraphrasing that I used in Thursday's lesson?

- the amount of time = the time spent
- 10 to 15-year-olds = aged between 10 and 15
- chatting on the Internet = chatting online = chat online = engage in online conversation
- playing on games consoles = playing computer games = play on their consoles
- more popular = boys favour = girls prefer
- the majority of = most of them = most girls

and the comparisons that I made?

- ...is more popular than...
- Boys favour... / By contrast, girls prefer...
- while 85% of boys..., only 55%...
- close to 70% of girls..., compared to about 50% of this cohort who... most of them..., whereas most...