

IELTS multiple choice reading questions

The multiple choice question should be familiar to most candidates. That doesn't make it easy though. In many ways the skills needed for this question are the same as for the True/False/Not Given type – only here you get 4 options and not 3. So, in a sense, it's harder.

The primary reading skill

As with the True/False question type, IELTS multiple choice reading questions require very close reading of one or two paragraphs of the text. Very frequently the difficult part is reading the question carefully too. At least 3 of the 4 possible answers may look ok until you read them closely.

The two types of question – fact and opinion

It's very important to recognise that there are 2 types of question those that:

1. ask you for the writer's opinion
2. ask you to find factual information

Let me explain why this distinction matters with this easy example:

*Different people read for different reasons. For example, the attraction of reading detective fiction can be in the intellectual challenge of finding out who did it, in an autobiography we can eavesdrop on the conversations of the great and good or we can laugh at folly in the celebrity magazine. For many children it is a magic gateway to some other world. **Sadly, that is one of the greatest mistakes they can make.***

According to the author, the attraction of reading for young people is:

1. they find out about other countries
2. different from other generations
3. escaping into another world
4. foolish

Without the words highlighted in red, the answer must be 3., with those words it becomes 4.

Tip: don't stop reading too soon. An answer may seem right but if the next word is something like "but" the meaning changes completely

The traps and how to avoid them

It helps to know how the examiners try and trap you. The way they do this is fairly predictable. Let's look at another example:

What were the findings of the research in Scotland:

1. anti-smoking legislation was more effective in the USA
2. advertising of tobacco products had less effect on old than on young people
3. the legislation was unpopular with the print media
4. almost a third of young people stopped smoking after the legislation

These conclusions are the result of extensive research carried out over the past 20 years around various countries into the effect of banning tobacco advertising. In Scotland it was found that the incidence of smoking fell by 30% in the 18-24 age group after legislation prohibiting the advertising of tobacco products in all print media was introduced. A separate piece of research in the United States of America found that when tobacco advertising was banned in 34 states, this reduced the level of smoking by 50%.

1. In the text but doesn't answer the question

Answer 1 above is wrong because it doesn't answer the question. This was not the findings of the research in Scotland It's easy to fall for this trap as the information is correct.

Tip: always go back and re-read the question before you answer

2. Probably true but you're guessing information

Answer 2 is wrong because we don't have the information in the text. We might be able to guess that this is true, but if it doesn't say so in the text the answer is not correct.

Tip: always make sure you look at all answers, don't guess too soon. You may find a better answer later

3. You're word matching – read the context

This one contains most words from the text so there is an obvious temptation to say "yes". There is in fact no evidence for this in the text at all. A very typical mistake is to match words in the question and text. You need to read the context for meaning to avoid this mistake.

Tip: always refocus on the exact wording of the question before giving the answer. Be suspicious of answers that contain almost the same language as the text

4. Correct – you match meanings –

"almost a third" = "30%" and "18-24 age group" matches "young people"

Suggested procedure

1. Look at the questions first to see what topics you need to look for – be aware you may need to look for synonyms
2. Concentrate on the stem of the question when you are looking for the right part of the text
3. Skim the text to identify the correct paragraphs to read: the questions will go in order so question 5 will come between 4 and 6

4. Read the the correct part of the paragraph carefully and then re-read the question – looking at each option in turn
5. Ask yourself if you are looking for fact or opinion
6. Delete the answers you know to be incorrect
7. underline the words in the text that give you the answer