

TOEFL vs. IELTS: Which language exam to take?

As part of the graduate school application, international students will be required to produce scores from standardized English proficiency tests like TOEFL or IELTS. There are several factors to consider while choosing an exam to take, including costs, exam most preferred by institutions of your choice, and comfort level with exam format. Here is a broad comparison between the two exams:

	TOEFL	IELTS
Administered by	Educational Testing Service (ETS)	British Council, IDP, IELTS Australia, Cambridge English Language Assessment
Purpose	English proficiency requirements for academic purposes, may be required for employment.	English proficiency requirements for academic, immigration, and occupational purposes
Duration	4 hours	2 hours 45 minutes
Sections	Reading: 60-80 minutes	Reading: 60 minutes
	Listening: 60-80 minutes	Listening: 30 minutes
	Speaking: 20 minutes	Speaking: 11-14 minutes
	Writing: 50 minutes	Writing: 60 minutes
Speaking section	Computer-based	In-person interview
Score range	0-120	0-9
Test format	Computer-based, paper-based	Paper-based
Cost (approximate)	\$180-325	\$200-2500
Number of tests offered per year	>50/year	48 per year
Popularly accepted in	US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, UK	US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, UK

Modeled from the following source: <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2017-02-16/ielts-vs-toefl-what-are-the-differences>

Some factors to consider when choosing between the TOEFL and IELTS:

1. **Test format:** Broadly the two tests are similar in that they consist of four sections, testing your reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English. The TOEFL is scored from 0-120 while the IELTS is scored from 0-9 (conversion chart linked [here](#)). Major differences are in the way the test is administered. TOEFL has both a paper and computer-based test (TOEFL iBT is the computer-based test and is most preferred), while the IELTS is paper-based, with an in-person interview for the speaking section. The four sections of the [TOEFL exam](#) are equally weighted (30 points per section, for a total score of 120). In the [IELTS](#), the four sections are also equally weighted, but the scores from 1-9 per section are averaged to give you a final test score. When deciding between exams, consider the format you would feel most comfortable in. If you are quick at typing, speak into a microphone, and prefer to take your exam without having an in-person section, then the TOEFL is your best bet. If you are comfortable with

written exams and taking certain sections in person with an examiner (without being anxious), then IELTS will work.

2. Tests preferred by universities: While compiling your list of universities/programs to apply to, make note of the English proficiency tests accepted by them. Both tests are widely accepted but depending on your list, the test you choose may vary depending on the tests accepted by the universities you are applying to.
3. Comfort level with the language: Depending on your proficiency and preferred mode of test taking (typing versus hand-written), your performance in these exams may vary. The TOEFL is mostly composed of multiple-choice questions and is a longer exam than IELTS, so your answers have to be precise (since you can only have 1-2 right options in a total of 4-5 options provided per question, you have no room for error). The IELTS mostly consists of short answer questions and is therefore more subjective than the TOEFL exam. You will have more flexibility with a written answer than a multiple-choice answer since it is not as *absolute* when it comes to the correct answer.
4. Reading proficiency: The text used in TOEFL's reading section is more academic (and therefore comprises of relatively difficult vocabulary) while text in IELTS is a mix of academic text, and newspaper and magazine articles (relatively colloquial by comparison). Based on your proficiency, your scores in these sections may be vastly different.
5. Writing proficiency: The TOEFL has a higher word count for the writing section (500 words, approximately 50 minutes) while the IELTS is lower (400 words, 60 minutes). The TOEFL also has an independent writing section (scored from 1-5, not part of the 120 from the main exam) and this score is critically reviewed. How well you process the question/prompt, develop a response within the allotted 30 minutes and write a response that expresses your opinions on the prompt (for or against, along with 3-5 substantiative arguments expected) will determine your score here. If you struggle with writing, especially in response to specific prompts that require a critical analysis, the IELTS will work better than TOEFL.
6. Logistics: Depending on your country, there may be more testing center locations and dates available for one exam over the other, which will also need to be factored into your decision.
7. Costs: In addition to fees, there may be additional costs to send test scores to universities or for retests.

Personal Note: Like standardized tests such as the GRE (5-year validity), English proficiency tests have a relatively long validity period (2-year validity for both IELTS and TOEFL). Most students take on standardized test preparation and examination during their final year of university. Year 4 can be stressful in terms of workload, networking and research, coursework, and putting together applications for graduate school. When you throw in standardized test preparation and examination at a time like this, you may not have enough time to focus on your preparation clearly. Since these tests are valid for two years, it is recommended to take these tests sooner, such as year 2 (for GRE) and year 3 (for TOEFL/IELTS). During these years in undergrad, students can devote more time to exam preparation (no more than 2-3 months for TOEFL/IELTS) and can perform better at these exams.