

IELTS Reading: The Puzzle Method

A practical summary of the webinar

1. Reading is something you already know how to do

Think about your reading habits. Do you normally read sitting on a chair at a desk? Probably not. We read on the sofa, in bed, on the bus, or in the park.

You do not naturally read everything at the same speed. You skim, scan, stop, skip and re-read according to your purpose. How you read in a bar, on a plane, at the dentists, in a shop or in bed can be totally different.

IELTS Reading makes this process more deliberate because you are working under time pressure.

2. Think like a jigsaw-puzzle solver

Doing an IELTS reading task is a bit like doing a jigsaw puzzle.

The picture on the box consists of the title, subheadings, pictures, graphs and diagrams.

Observing paragraphs, names, dates, and repeated terms can be compared to sorting out the pieces of the puzzle.

Identifying paragraph structure and locating topic sentences is similar to finding all the edge pieces of the puzzle.

These things can be done very rapidly, but once you have done them, you are ready to start dealing with the task.

3. Activate your schema

Schema is the knowledge framework you already have about a topic. A quick preview of the text, using the jigsaw puzzle technique, activates that knowledge and helps you predict vocabulary, ideas and relationships. Prediction is not guessing the answer; it is preparing your brain to understand the text.

Important: background knowledge helps you understand, but IELTS answers must be supported by the information in the passage.

4. Use paragraphs as signposts

A paragraph normally develops a central idea.

The topic sentence often signals that idea. It is often but not always the first sentence.

First and last sentences can be especially useful during a quick skim.

Watch out for linking and contrast words such as however, although, yet, instead, therefore and for example.

Try giving each paragraph a short mental heading. This creates a map of the whole text.

5. Use three reading gears

Gear	Purpose
SKIM	Get the general idea and structure.
SCAN	Locate a name, date, term, keyword or idea.
READ CLOSELY	Understand the exact meaning of the relevant sentence(s).

6. Let the question guide your reading

Identify what kind of information the question requires.

Think of possible synonyms and paraphrases before searching the text.

Use the question to find the right 'neighbourhood' in the passage.

Once you locate it, slow down and read that part carefully.

Match meaning, not simply identical words.

7. Strategies for common IELTS Reading tasks

Multiple choice: Read the question stem first. Locate the relevant text and, where possible, formulate your own answer before looking closely at A-D. The wrong answers are called, 'distractors'. Distractors may repeat familiar words or contain true details that do not answer the actual question.

True / False / Not Given: TRUE means the text agrees; FALSE means the text contradicts; NOT GIVEN means the passage does not provide enough information. Do not answer from general knowledge.

Yes / No / Not Given: Use the same evidence principle, but here you are usually identifying the writer's views or claims.

Matching headings: Look for the paragraph's central purpose or umbrella idea, not one memorable example or detail.

Matching information / features / sentence endings: Scan for the relevant idea, person, feature or section, then check the surrounding text carefully. Expect paraphrase not the same words in the text and in the question.

Sentence / summary / note / table / flow-chart completion: Read the word limit. Predict the grammar and meaning of the gap before scanning. Copy required words accurately.

Diagram label completion: Use the diagram itself as context. Scan the passage for the corresponding description.

Short-answer questions: Respect the word limit and answer exactly what is asked. Do not add unnecessary words.

8. The six-step attack plan

1. PREVIEW - title, visuals, layout and text type.
2. MAP - skim paragraphs and identify topic ideas.
3. READ THE TASK - decide what information you need.
4. LOCATE - scan for ideas, keywords and paraphrases.
5. ZOOM IN - read closely around the likely answer.
6. CHECK - evidence, spelling, grammar and word limits.

9. Exam-day reminders

Do not read every sentence at the same speed.

Do not panic when you meet an unknown word; ask whether you actually need it.

Expect the question and the passage to express the same idea in different language.

Do not choose an answer simply because it contains words you recognise from the text.

KEEP MOVING. If one question is consuming too much time, mark it and return later.

Trust the text: every correct answer is based on evidence.

The central idea

The more of the picture you can see, the easier the individual pieces become.

Build the picture first. Then the individual pieces will start to make sense.

Michael Lacey Freeman

<https://www.acrosstheskybooks>.