Helping Students to Write an Overview for IELTS Academic Task 1

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Abstract
More universities and third level institutions now require at least an IELTS Band 6 for entry into courses of study for non-native speakers of English. This presentation focuses on the IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 and in particular on the marking criterion of Task Achievement. A requirement for candidates aiming at Band 6 and above is that they include an overview in the text that they produce for Task 1. With this in mind, the presenter will examine what exactly is meant by an overview, how students can be assisted in forming one and the type of language which an overview normally incorporates. A number of classroom teaching ideas will be introduced and participants will have the opportunity to compare and discuss sample overviews written by candidates for this examination. Intended audience: teachers of IELTS Academic Writing.

Keywords: IELTS, overview, task achievement
This paper looks at some ways in which students preparing to sit the IELTS Academic Module examination can be given guidance and assistance in achieving a higher band in the Task Achievement criterion of the marking rubric for Writing Task 1. It focuses specifically on the inclusion of an appropriate overview which would enable a candidate to obtain at least a score of 6 as far as Task Achievement is concerned. There are at least 7 or 8 different types of question which can appear in IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 (ranging from single line graphs to process diagrams and plans or maps). This paper will consider only those questions dealing with charts and graphs.

A quick perusal of the Task 1 Writing Band Descriptors (public version) indicates that a Task Achievement band 6 requires ‘an overview with information’. A band 7 requires ‘a clear overview of the main trends, differences or stages’. By comparison, a Task Achievement band 5 indicates that there is ‘no clear overview’. The implication of this, then, is that a candidate will need to produce some kind of overview in order to score a 6. Nowadays, there is increasing pressure on students to get an overall band 6 or higher to continue to the next stage of their academic study and hence the need to be more rigorous in preparation for the examination is clearly important.

IELTS preparation textbooks often do not clarify what exactly is meant by ‘an overview’ and students can sometimes be uncertain or confused as to the difference between writing an introduction to the Task 1 question and producing an overview. The difference between the two (and which needs to be clearly established), is that an introduction is generally a paraphrasing of the language which appears in the task to describe the subject or topic of the graph(s)/chart(s) whereas an overview highlights the main features and provides comparisons where necessary. The overview should generally be two or three sentences in length and should not include any figures – these can come later in the main body of the answer. An introduction need only be a single sentence long. An example of a typical Task 1 question is given in Appendix A (taken from the Official IELTS Practice Materials) and a good, sample answer can be found in Appendix B (where the introduction and overview have both been highlighted).

The importance of an overview is simply that it demonstrates the candidate’s ability to size up a graph or chart and extrapolate the key information from it. It shows that the candidate can take a step back and provide a succinct summary of what is presented in the question.

A point which is worth making is that students aiming for a higher score should also be able to distinguish between the two main types of graphs or charts – static and dynamic. This is again something which is not always made explicit in textbooks but there is an important difference which impacts on the strategies and approaches that are required for teasing out a solid overview. A static graph is one which shows a snapshot of a single point in time – there may be no time reference included at all, in fact. A dynamic graph, on the other hand, presents information over a period of time. Examples of static and dynamic graphs are given in Appendices C and D respectively. For static graphs, students need to look at features such as the highest and lowest figures, similarities and marked differences. With dynamic graphs, they are interested in trends – the change between the beginning of the time period and the end, significant fluctuations, peaks and troughs. A systematic examination of the graph or
chart using these guidelines will go a long way toward producing a good overview which in turn will make the writing of the main body of the answer much easier and more logical.

Although the marking criteria for Task 1 separate out key areas into 4 (Task Achievement, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Range, Grammatical Range and Accuracy), there are obviously parts of each of these which will influence the score on others. An appropriate overview, for example, will need to show evidence not just that the candidate has been able to identify the most salient features of the graph/chart but also that he/she has used suitable vocabulary and has a good command of certain grammatical areas. For an overview, the candidate will need conjunctions such as ‘although’, ‘while’, ‘whereas’, ‘even though’ and be able to produce these in grammatically correct complex sentences. There is also a whole raft of lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases) which the candidate will need to select from to ensure an eye-catching overview. A selection of such lexical items is given in Appendix E. Further language of which students might avail is provided in Appendix F – these are mainly passive structures and time expressions but all are valuable in overview writing. All of this goes to illustrate that while the marking criteria are separated out into discrete areas, none exists in isolation and deficiencies in one area will ultimately affect another.

Students also often ask where exactly an overview should come in terms of the overall structure of their Task 1 answer. Probably the most logical place would be as a second paragraph, following the introduction (which paraphrases language already used in the actual question). If we take the answer as being divided into 4 paragraphs, then the structure might be something like this:

**Paragraph 1:** Introduction

**Paragraph 2:** Overview

**Paragraphs 3 & 4:** Expansion and elaboration of overview with figures and numbers provided

Paragraph 2 (the overview) acts like the skeleton of the answer and is a useful springboard for fleshing out the selection of information in the final 2 or 3 paragraphs. That said, there is nothing inherently wrong in using an overview as a conclusion. This can be a concise ending to the piece of writing and can very effective. However, a Task 1 answer does not require a conclusion – it is most certainly something which is better suited to Task 2 as it implies some form of final judgement or consideration/assessment of a topic or situation. For this reason, students are probably best advised to use the overview earlier on as it lends itself easily to expansion and elaboration.

In summary, then, students preparing for IELTS and aiming at least for a Band 6 should be aware of the following as regards the writing of an overview:

1. Definition of an overview
2. Difference between an introduction and an overview
3. Why an overview is important
4. Difference between static and dynamic graphs/charts
5. Useful conjunctions for producing and overview
6. Useful nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases
7. Passive structures and time expressions
8. Where to put an overview
WRITING TASK 1
You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

The charts below show the number of Japanese tourists travelling abroad between 1985 and 1995 and Australia's share of the Japanese tourist market.

Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.

Write at least 150 words.
APPENDIX B

The charts show the number of tourists from Japan (in millions) who travelled outside their country between 1985 and 1995 and the percentage of Japanese tourists visiting Australia over the same number of years.

From the graphs, it can be seen that over the given period there was a steady increase in both the numbers of Japanese tourists travelling abroad and in Australia’s share of Japan’s tourist market.

The first graph shows a clear upward trend between 1985 and 1995. From 1985 and 1990, numbers rose steadily from 5 million to just under 11 million. Numbers then dropped slightly in 1991 before rising again and remaining approximately the same for 1992 and 1993. The final two years showed a steady climb to a peak of about 15 million in 1995.

The second graph shows an upward trend between the years given. The percentage of Japanese tourists visiting Australia rose from 2% in 1985 to 6% ten years later. There was a steady increase between 1985 and 1989 but in the following year, the percentage fell slightly from 5 to just over 4%. Between 1990 and 1994, numbers continued to rise before levelling off in the final year (1995) at around 6%.

Both graphs are similar in that the trend is upward and over the ten year period numbers more or less tripled.
APPENDIX C
Static Graph:

APPENDIX D
Dynamic Graph:
APPENDIX E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>a rise in increase surge a growth</th>
<th>a fall in drop a decline a dip</th>
<th>a peak</th>
<th>a fluctuation a variation</th>
<th>a period of stability</th>
<th>a plateau</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbs</td>
<td>to rise to increase to surge to grow</td>
<td>to fall to drop to decline to dip</td>
<td>to peak</td>
<td>to fluctuate to vary</td>
<td>to stabilise</td>
<td>to plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrases</td>
<td>to show an upward trend</td>
<td>to show a downward trend to hit the lowest point to hit a trough</td>
<td>to reach a peak</td>
<td>to show some fluctuation / variation</td>
<td>to remain stable / constant</td>
<td>to reach a plateau to level off to flatten out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives and Adverbs</td>
<td>steady steadily</td>
<td>relative relatively</td>
<td>considerably</td>
<td>the second highest to the third lowest</td>
<td>slightly gently a little</td>
<td>gradually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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