

# TOP TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR VTEST ENGLISH WRITING SCORE



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## Introduction

You can improve your VTEST English Writing score by understanding how your work is assessed. Your writing is marked based on the following criteria: Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resources, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. But what do these mean, and how can you ensure that your writing meets all the criteria?

## Task response

### What this refers to

First, and most importantly, you need to make sure you have understood the task. Task Response assesses how relevant your response is to the task. In other words, have you understood the question and addressed all the required points? Is your response relevant and on topic?

### Tips for ensuring your response meets the Task Response criterion

The following tips will help you stay on topic and ensure your response is relevant.

#### Tip 1: Analyze the prompt

Begin by reading the question carefully and making sure you have fully understood it. Break it down by asking yourself questions such as: **Who/ What** is it about? **What** has happened / will happen? **What** is the issue? **What** do I need to do? The following is an example task. Read the prompt and see if you can answer the questions above.

Example task:

*“High school students should not waste time studying the arts; instead they should study only practical subjects, like mathematics and science.” Say whether you agree or disagree with this statement and give your reasons. Include as many details and examples as you can.*

**Who is it about?** *High school students*

**What is the issue?** *Whether they should not waste time with the arts and focus only on practical subjects.*

**What do I need to do?** *Say whether I agree or disagree and give reasons.*

#### Tip 2: Identify key words providing instructions

Understand what it is you need to do and what you need to include. For example, are you being asked to *describe* something, give an opinion, or explain something? Identify key words that provide instructions. Examples of key words to look out for include *Describe, Explain, Say (what / how / why / when / whether / if, etc.)*.

Is there more than one instruction in the prompt? If so, make sure you include all points in your response.

Prompts often include an instruction to provide details and examples. Does the prompt also require you to provide reasons, or to include any other points? Look out for instructions indicating what other information should be provided.

Look again at the prompt below. The key words providing instructions have been underlined. You should make sure you address all these points in your response.

*“High school students should not waste time studying the arts; instead they should study only practical subjects, like mathematics and science.” Say whether you agree or disagree with this statement and give your reasons. Include as many details and examples as you can.*

How should I address this task? 1. *Say whether I agree or disagree with the statement.* 2. *Give reasons to support my opinion.* 3. *Include many examples and details.*

**Tip 3: Familiarize yourself with typical task types and common topics**

Read as many task types as you can get your hands on and practice tips 1 and 2 above. You don't need to write the response for each one (unless you want to!) however, exposing yourself to prompts and analyzing them to understand what the question specifies will greatly help you improve your writing.

Familiarize yourself with common topics by reading as much as you can. Read anything that interests you—books, articles, blogs, magazines. Reading will not only help you improve your English skills, but it will also increase your general knowledge and make it easier for you to come up with ideas for your writing.

What if you still don't fully understand the question in the actual test? If you don't understand the prompt, take your best guess and write about what you think it is asking. It is better to write something than nothing!

## Coherence and cohesion

### What this refers to

The second criterion is **Coherence and Cohesion**. This deals with organization and flow. Your ideas will need to be presented in an organized manner with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Your writing should be organized into clear paragraphs using correct punctuation, and there should be a smooth transition between ideas and paragraphs.

### Tips for ensuring your response meets the Coherence and Cohesion criterion

Once you have understood the task and formed some ideas about points you want to include, it's time to put your ideas into a logical and organized format. The following tips will help you write a well written response.

#### Tip 1: Study good examples of writing

Read short articles or model test responses and analyze their structure and flow. Underline linking devices connecting sentences and paragraphs. Notice how the writer links ideas and how each paragraph is organized. Locate the topic sentence in each paragraph that highlights the main idea of the paragraph.

Analyze the introduction and conclusion. Notice how the topic is introduced and how each paragraph is linked to the one before it or after it. Look at the conclusion, notice how it summarizes the main points covered in the response or restates the writer's opinion.

#### Tip 2: Plan your answer and structure your ideas

Take a few minutes to plan your answer. Write bullet points of ideas you will include in each paragraph. Organizing your ideas and structuring your response before you write it out will save you time and ensure you cover all the points required in a clear and coherent way. Think about what the purpose of your response is. What message do you want the reader to be left with when they have finished reading it?

Write an introduction. Begin your response with an introduction that clearly presents your main idea. Write a topic sentence for each body paragraph that identifies the main subject of that paragraph in just a few words. Present a few connected supporting ideas in each body paragraph that are relevant to your topic sentence.

End your response with a conclusion that clearly restates your opinion or summarizes the ideas presented in the body paragraphs.

#### Tip 3: Use linking devices to connect ideas

Make sure your writing follows a logical progression by connecting ideas with linking words such as *First, ... , Then, ... , Next, ... , Finally, ... ,* etc. Try to use a variety of linking words and devices, but don't overdo it; not every sentence or idea needs to include a linking word.

Connect ideas in one sentence with another and connect one paragraph to another. Link each paragraph to the next by ending a paragraph with a sentence that leads to the next paragraph, or by starting a new paragraph in a way that *links back* to the previous paragraph.

Linking what has already been said with what is about to be discussed is a good way of helping the reader understand the writing more easily. Some words or phrases you can use to do this include *however, moreover, similarly, on the other hand, in contrast, and despite*.

#### Tip 4: Use proper punctuation

Make sure your sentences are properly punctuated with commas, capitalization, and periods (full stops) in the right places. Use exclamation marks for emphasis, but only when necessary! Don't use abbreviations or common social media slang such as LOL. Don't use emoticons or emoji. Proper punctuation goes a long way in helping the reader understand your writing, so make sure you use it in the right way.

## Lexical Resources

### What this refers to

Lexical Resources deals with range and accuracy of vocabulary. In other words, you will be assessed on how well you use appropriate vocabulary. You will have to use a variety of words, and the chosen words need to be used correctly. The vocabulary you use will have to be appropriate for the register (formal, semi-formal, or informal). Your writing should show that you have a range of simple and more sophisticated vocabulary and can use structures like phrasal verbs and idioms.

### Tips for ensuring your response meets the Lexical Resources criterion

This is the time for you to show off your vocabulary! The following tips will help you learn to use a good range of vocabulary appropriately.

#### Tip 1: Use synonyms where appropriate

Try to avoid repetition of words by using synonyms where possible. The more you use unique words, the better your score will be. When studying vocabulary, learn the synonyms too and use them interchangeably, if appropriate. However, make sure you know how to use the synonym correctly; synonyms used incorrectly may reduce your score. Don't try to force it—only use a synonym if you are sure it fits the situation.

#### Tip 2: Study vocabulary in context

When learning vocabulary, also study a few example sentences to understand the context in which the word is normally used. Not every word can be used in every context; understanding the correct context is vital for making sure your writing is fluent. Choose the most appropriate vocabulary for the register of your response. For example, do not use overly informal and chatty language or humor when writing about a serious subject.

#### Tip 3: Use a variety of simple and more advanced vocabulary

Trying to use the most advanced vocabulary you know all the time may result in your writing sounding forced and unnatural and may even be inappropriate, depending on the context. It could also lead to misunderstanding because the chances of using advanced vocabulary incorrectly increases—some less-frequent words can only be used in specific contexts. Use a mix of simple and advanced vocabulary to express your ideas more clearly and fluently.

## Grammatical Range and Accuracy

### What this refers to

Grammatical Range and Accuracy deals with the use of grammar. You will be assessed on whether you make grammatical errors and the severity of the errors you make. You will also be assessed on whether you use a range of structures and tenses.

### Tips for ensuring your response meets the Grammatical Range and Accuracy criterion

The following tips will help you increase your grammatical range and accuracy.

#### Tip 1: Avoid repetition by paraphrasing

Try to avoid repetition by using a variety of structures to say the same thing. For example, instead of repeating the phrase *In my opinion, ...* you could use other phrases such as *I believe that ...*, *It is my feeling that ...*, *It seems to me that ...*, *In my view, ...* and so on.

#### Tip 2: Know your tenses

Using a variety of tenses correctly will make your writing clearer and more fluent and increase your score. Don't stick to only one tense as this will lower your score and may lead to misunderstanding. However, don't mix tenses just to mix tenses—be sure the tenses you choose are appropriate for the context.

#### Tip 3: Use a variety of simple and complex structures

Overly complex sentences could lead to confusion and interrupt the flow of your writing. Try to use a variety of sentence structures and make sure your complex sentences are not too complex. Overly long sentences are difficult to understand, so break them down into shorter, clearer ones. The following is an example of an overly complex sentence:

*The writer states that high school students should not waste time on subjects like art, but they should instead focus on subjects like math and science, and although I know many people agree with this viewpoint, I do not agree with it as I believe studying art is also valuable for the following reasons.*

This sentence combines a variety of ideas into one long sentence, making it awkward and hard to read. This sentence could be broken down into two shorter sentences in the following way:

*The writer states that high school students should not waste time on subjects like art and that they should instead focus on subjects like math and science. Although many people agree with this viewpoint, I do not. I believe studying art is just as valuable, for the following reasons.*

## More tips for improving your score

- **Proofread and review your work before submitting it.** Use the following checklist: Have I answered all parts of the question? Is my writing organized into clear paragraphs using appropriate linking devices? Have I provided enough examples and supporting details? Are there any typos or vocabulary and grammatical errors? Have I used proper punctuation? Have I avoided repetition by using synonyms and paraphrases?
- **Be mindful of timing.** Practice preparing your response within the allocated timing. Leave sufficient time for planning your response (about 10 minutes), and for reviewing and proofreading your work at the end (about 5 minutes).
- **Know your wordcount.** You must write the minimum number of words, but you should write more if you can. Use the word count function to keep track of how much you have written, and how many words you still need to write.
- **Use formal language and correct punctuation.** Don't use words such as "gonna" or abbreviations such as LOL or emojis. Don't use ALL CAPS, or write in all lower case. Begin each sentence with a capital, and end it with the proper closing punctuation. Use correct spacing between words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- **Don't copy the prompt word for word.** Use ideas from the prompt in your opening paragraph, but make sure to paraphrase and not copy.
- **Practice writing regularly.** Try to write a little daily or several times a week. The more you write, the easier it will become.
- **Read your writing out loud.** One of the best ways to see if your writing has a natural flow is to read it out loud. Consider editing the parts you stumble over and see if you can make it clearer.
- **Keep a list of your common errors.** Look out for these errors when you are reviewing your work.

