

Oxford Test of English

Overview of test design

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This paper provides an overview of the design of the Oxford Test of English. It also offers a brief explanation of how the specific skills are effectively tested in each part of the test. The test design is as follows:

Listening

Part 1 is a series of pictorial multiple-choice questions. These are excellent for assessing Listening as images are easy to decode and do not create an over-reliance upon reading in a Listening test.

Part 2 is a note completion activity. This is a cognitively demanding task because it requires the candidate to manipulate three skills simultaneously (Listening, Reading and Writing). This is consistent with the kinds of demands which are placed on students who have to take notes while reading or listening to a lecture. The relatively simple way in which the task is operationalized (we use high-frequency language in the notes themselves to reduce the cognitive reading load during a Reading task) ensures that the emphasis remains on listening.

Part 3 uses multiple-choice questions to target the speaker's attitudes towards a topic. Critical listening in academic contexts requires students to interpret what they hear and may need to infer the speaker's position or attitude. Part 3 is challenging as test takers need to be able to recognize and grasp the significance of low frequency terms in the recordings.

Part 4 uses multiple-choice questions. These are used effectively as a means of differentiating possible inferences. Inferring meaning is a crucial listening skill in academic contexts as students need to be able to follow precise and detailed arguments made by tutors. The short and simple options in three of the items work well. Part 4 reduces the reading load by giving all three options the same stem and keeping them as short and simple as possible.

Reading

The Reading texts are wide-ranging and representative of text types to be encountered within the remit of general proficiency. There is a high occurrence of Internet-based texts, consistent with the majority of reading which occurs at university. Reading is a crucial academic skill, and it is tested extensively in the Oxford Test of English.

In **Part 1**, test takers complete a series of multiple-choice questions on short texts. This part focuses on reading to identify the main message, the writer's purpose and specific details, all critical to successful reading in academic domains.

In **Part 2**, test takers complete a multiple matching activity. This part assesses expeditious search reading at local and global levels to identify specific information and the writer's opinion and/or attitude. This is designed to assess a reader's more in-depth engagement with a text.

In **Part 3**, test takers complete a gapped text. This part assesses reading to identify text structure and the organizational features of a text. This task is effective because it combines comprehension of the coherence of a text with knowledge of the discourse and syntactic features that give it cohesiveness.

Part 4 assesses the ability to identify the writer's attitude/opinion, purpose. This part focuses on referencing across sentences and the meanings of words in context and the overall global meaning of the text.

Speaking

The Speaking test contains three parts.

Part 1 is an interview in which test takers are asked to respond to a series of questions by providing factual information and expressing personal opinions on everyday topics.

Part 2 offers an integrated skills approach to assessing Speaking. Test takers read and respond to text input by leaving a voicemail (Reading into Speaking). They also have to leave a second message in response to audio-only input (Listening into Speaking). Integrated skills approaches are important in academic domains as students are required to offer their opinions on content that they have heard or read.

In **Part 3**, test takers give a talk on a topic prompted by four images. Part 3 mimics the kind of extended discourse that students may need to engage in during presentations or seminars.

Writing

The Writing test contains two parts.

Part 1 is a transactional email (80-130 words) and **Part 2** is a review or an essay (100-160 words). In total, test takers are asked to write approximately 290 words. Two shorter tasks offer test takers two opportunities to engage with the Writing test. With only one task, there may be a danger of failure due to a lack of engagement with only one scenario. It is also sensible to provide a choice for the longer task, to allow for different interests. The two different text types and foci reflect main Writing skills for a variety of purposes such as describing, narrating, expressing feelings and opinions, making recommendations and developing an argument. These are all crucial for successful writing in academic contexts.