

BCU ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TEST

INFORMATION FOR CANDIDATES

The Birmingham City University English Proficiency Test is used to assess your English language ability in the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking.

The tests are designed to activate the language skills you will need to begin a course of study at Birmingham City University, and it will report on your current skill level. There is no single pass mark for everyone, different courses will require you to achieve a different level in the test. The test can be used as evidence of English language ability for any undergraduate or postgraduate course at Birmingham City University.

The following sections give you information about each section of the test in the same order that it is administered on test days.

LISTENING TEST GUIDELINES

Format

The listening test consists of four sections, each with ten questions. The questions are designed so that the answers appear in order in the listening. You will hear each section once only. Please note that the paper becomes more difficult as you progress through it.



The recording for the first three sections deals with various situations set in an educational or an everyday social context. For example, in each of these sections you may hear the following:

- A conversation between two speakers set in an everyday social context (e.g. conversation in a travel or an accommodation agency etc.)
- A monologue set in an everyday social situation (e.g. speech about local facilities, an audio guide to a university's library etc.)
- A conversation between up to four people (e.g. students discussing an assignment, a radio interview etc.)

In section four, however, you will hear a monologue on an academic subject (e.g. a university lecture).

Timing

The recording lasts for approximately 30 minutes. During this time you need to write your answers on the question paper as you listen. At the end of the test you will be given 10 extra minutes to transfer your answers to an answer sheet. You will be told to put your pens down by the recording.

The questions test your ability to understand:

- The main ideas and factual information.
- The opinions and attitudes of speakers.
- The development of ideas.

How can I do better in the test?

- You will be given some time to read through the questions before you listen. Try to predict what the speaker will say. Remember that this will require concentration.
- Do not worry if there is a word you do not understand – you may not need to use it.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, try to answer it but do not waste too much time on it – move quickly onto the next question.
- Do not get frustrated if you think the topic is too difficult or the speaker is too fast. Try to relax and tune in.
- Practise reading, writing and listening at the same time.
- You will hear the word(s) you need to use in the recording. You will not need to change the form of the word(s) you hear.
- Pay attention to the word limit in your answers.
- Attempt all questions. You will not lose marks for answers that are incorrect.
- Always check your answers in the time given to do this.

How can I improve my listening skills?

The first thing to do is learn to listen actively – you need to make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that someone is saying but, more importantly, pay attention, and try to understand the complete message behind the words.

Watching films, TV shows or videos is a good start. Audio versions of your favourite book can also be a relaxing way to develop your listening skills.

READING TEST GUIDELINES

Format

The reading test consists of three texts of approximately 650 – 850 words each. Each text has 13 or 14 questions, and the total test has 40 questions.

The texts are on topics of general interest, usually adapted from journals, books, magazines and newspapers.



Timing

The total time allowed is 60 minutes, so you should allow about 20 minutes for each text. Within the 60 minutes, your answers must be transferred to the answer sheet, as there is no extra time allowed for this. Any answers that are not on the answer sheet will not be marked, so please make sure that you put all of your answers onto the answer sheet within the 60 minutes.

Question order

The questions usually follow the order of the text. If they don't, you will see this advice:

These questions/statements do not follow the order of the text.

So, in this case you will need to scan the whole text. Otherwise, you can continue to read from where you found the answer to the previous question.

Question types

A variety of question types is used, including multiple choice, short-answer questions, sentence completion, notes/summary/flow-chart/table completion, classification, matching, choosing suitable paragraph headings from a list, identification of a writer's views/claims (yes/no/not given), and identification of information in the text (true/false/not given).

These questions are varied and designed to test your ability to:

- Understand the main ideas of paragraphs and the main points in the text.
- Find and understand key details.

These are both essential reading skills for university study.

How can I improve my reading skills for the test?

Read plenty of general interest texts in English language newspapers and magazines. Try to read actively – for example:

- Write a heading for each paragraph.
- Think of questions that are answered in the paragraphs.
- Write short summaries of the whole text, and sections of the text. When you do this, remember that you don't need to worry about grammar for this particular activity, as you are training your brain to read the texts the same way that you need to read them to succeed in the test.

What tips can you give me for during the test?

Stay calm!

- Don't try to read the whole text in detail - you don't have time for this!
- First, skim read the text (first and last paragraphs, and the first sentence of each of the other paragraphs). This will help you to have an overall understanding of it.
- Look at the questions. Only read the parts of the text that are necessary to answer the questions.
- Watch the time; after about 20 minutes try to move on to the next passage, you can always return to a text if you have time at the end.
- Make sure all of your answers are transferred to the answer sheet.
- Put an answer for all the questions – you don't lose a mark if it's wrong.
- If you find a question is too difficult, move on to the next one and come back to it at the end.

Continued

What do I do if I don't understand a word?

You will not need, or be expected, to understand every word in the text. If you do need to understand the word, try looking at the information that comes before and after it; you can often help your understanding if you do this.

Example:

There is great prosperity in the country but many citizens are extremely poor.

You might not know the word “prosperity”, but if you read on you will see: **but** many citizens are extremely **poor**. ‘But’ shows that the information contrasts or is surprising, so we might be surprised that there are many poor people in probably a wealthy country. So we can guess that “prosperity” is related to being rich, or wealthy.

WRITING TEST GUIDELINES

Format

The writing test consists of just one part, a 250-word essay, which you have 45 minutes to write.

The questions usually consist of a statement concerning an issue of contemporary interest which indicates that people have different opinions on the topic (for example, education, health, the environment etc.). In your essay you are expected to discuss these differing viewpoints and to come to a conclusion or give your opinion. You are also asked to support your argument with examples and your own experience.

For example:

Television has had a significant influence on the culture of many societies. To what extent would you say that television has affected the cultural development of your society?



Writing your essay

Four criteria are used to mark the essay:

Task Achievement

This looks at how developed your response to the question is. Make sure you answer all parts of the question and that you develop your ideas and support them examples and a clear opinion.

Coherence and Cohesion

Coherence refers to how convincing your writing is. Your argument needs to be clear, well-structured and persuasive.

Cohesion refers to the flow of your writing. Your sentences and paragraphs should be well-structured and linked together in a clear, logical way.

Lexical Resource

This is your vocabulary. Try to use a good range of appropriate words, and be careful with spelling. You will get credit for using more unusual vocabulary, but this must be completely appropriate in the context. If you are not sure, it is better to use more common words which are correct.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy

Your grammar and punctuation. Of course you will make some mistakes; the important thing is to try and avoid the basic errors that you *know* are wrong and to avoid any mistakes which make your writing difficult to understand.

Possible essay structure

A short **introduction** showing you understand what the topic is about (maybe indicating why it is important/relevant) and that there are different opinions on it. You could then indicate what your argument is going to be. You can paraphrase parts of the question, but don't copy any of it word for word.

A paragraph or two focussing on the side of the argument you **don't** agree with.

A paragraph or two giving the **counter-arguments** to the above.

A short **conclusion**.

General tips

Spend around five minutes thinking about your answer and writing a short plan. Space is given on the answer sheet for your plan. This will help with the structure of your answer and ensure that you don't forget any good ideas you originally had.

Give yourself two or three minutes to check your answer when you have finished, particularly your grammar, spelling and sentence structure/punctuation.

Don't use lots of memorised phrases, which may be inappropriate in context. In particular, don't use clichés such as “every coin has two sides” – your examiner has seen these hundreds of times and they carry no real meaning! Memorised language is easy to spot, and could make the examiner think that you don't really understand, or that you aren't able to produce your own language.

Be as careful as possible with your handwriting, the examiner needs to be able to read your writing easily.

It doesn't matter what opinions you give, as long as they are well expressed. You can be as controversial as you like. The important thing is to try and convince the reader that your opinion is correct.

It's OK to use some personal language in this type of essay, but not too much. Try to keep your writing style quite formal.

Quality is better than quantity – you won't get extra marks for writing more than 250 words.

How to improve your writing

Do lots of reading – anything (as long as it is in English!). Simply reading will improve your writing, but you could also make notes on how ideas are expressed in writing or write down new vocabulary (preferably in context). You could also do a more extensive analysis of part of a text. Then try to write in this way yourself and to use the new words you have read.

Take part in online discussion groups etc. Start your own blog, maybe with friends.

Work together with friends and colleagues, reading and commenting on each other's writing.

Common mistakes that you should avoid making

No introduction or conclusion (or neither).

Answer not relevant to the question. If you do not answer the question (perhaps by reproducing a memorised irrelevant or vaguely relevant essay) you will fail, even if the English is perfect.

Basic grammar mistakes which you should be able to easily correct yourself (and therefore should avoid in the first place).

Few or no linking words, or these are used incorrectly.

Poor sentence/paragraph structure.

Testing Unit, Centre for International English Language Assessment and Validation, Birmingham City University, August 2016

SPEAKING TEST GUIDELINES

Please note: for overseas tests (outside the UK), your speaking test may take place the day after the other parts of the test. Please be prepared for this.

Format

The speaking test comprises three parts and lasts for around 11 – 13 minutes. It is taken individually, with one examiner.

Part 1: you will be asked some general questions about yourself, where you are from, your interests etc. This part lasts 3-4 minutes.

Part 2: you will be given a topic to prepare and talk about. There is 1 minute to think about this and note down some ideas, and then you are expected to talk for around 1 to 2 minutes.

Part 3: the examiner will ask you some questions to elicit more detailed discussion on the topic. This part should last about 5 minutes.



How your performance is assessed

Fluency and Coherence

This is the ability to speak at length, with as little repetition and hesitation as possible. You should try to link your ideas with connecting words and phrases, and stay focused on the topic that the examiner has asked you about.

Lexical Resource

This is your chance to show how many different words you know related to the topic you are discussing. The examiner is also interested in your ability to paraphrase (say something in a different way if you can't think of particular words), this is an important real-life skill.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy

Try to use a range of grammatical structures accurately and appropriately.

Pronunciation

This refers to your pronunciation of both individual sounds and your intonation. This doesn't mean that you need to sound like a native speaker, it is just important that your speech is clear and easy to understand.

General advice for the speaking test

Don't memorise long pieces of language (for example, about your city) and try to give a memorised speech. Your examiner will notice this immediately and ask you another question on a different topic.

If you don't understand a question or an aspect of the topic you are given, don't be afraid to ask the examiner to explain. This is a natural part of communication.

Try to develop your answers as much as possible. The fewer that we have to ask you, the better.

Part 3 gives you the chance to show off a bit and impress your examiner – make sure you take full advantage of it.

Leave the test room quietly – don't start talking loudly to friends outside.

Make sure you have a pen or pencil with you to make notes in Part 2.

Don't ask the examiner at the end how you have done or if you have passed. We cannot tell you this; your results will be sent to you by our International Office.

We want you to do well! Your examiner will try to make you as relaxed as possible and will encourage you throughout the test. Deep breaths can help with nerves. Just be yourself.

General tips for the test

- Arrive at least 30 minutes before the scheduled examination time.
- Make sure you are prepared and have something to eat and drink beforehand. You will not be allowed to take food into the test room.
- There will be no breaks between the listening and the reading tests, so you are advised to go to the toilet before the tests start.
- You will be asked to switch your mobile phones and any other electronic devices off. You will be asked to place these with other personal belongings in a location designated by the invigilator.
- Make sure you have your passport with you. If you arrive with the wrong ID, you will not be allowed to attend the test.
- You can use either a pen or pencil to complete the question papers and the answer sheets.

Good luck!

