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Cohesion and Coherence



Ellen: Hi everybody. This is Ellen and on today's podcast, I'd like to talk about coherence and cohesion and how you can get above a 7 on this score. One of the first things I do with my students usually is go through the band descriptors. It's really surprising how many people begin their IELTS preparation without actually being aware of the band descriptors and what they need to do to get the score that they actually need.

So, a lot of students come to me and they say oh, I need a 6 or oh, I need a 6.5 or a 7 for my university or for immigration, but they don't actually know what that means. As we had said previously with Ben that we really wanted to focus or at least I really wanted to focus on this band 7+ score. That's kind of what I wanted to focus on today.

So, band 7 for people who need a 7 and above and you know who you are, you probably need a 7 and above if you're trying to immigrate to an English-speaking country or for certain degree



programs like law, like journalism, those of you who are in the health professions and want to register in an English-speaking country professionally in a professional organization. These are all different people who need a 7 and above.

So, what do we need to do to get a 7 and above? Well, first of all like I said, you'll need to take a look at the band descriptors and this is where the internet is really a wonderful tool. The band descriptors are readily available all over the internet. All you have to do is type into your search engine IELTS band descriptors and you will find the public versions for Task 1, Task 2 and of course for speaking.

So, I would like to focus on Task 2 primarily today and so if you would like to join me and open it or look at it, you can see what I'm referring to or I can just describe it to you. So, one of the

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things that I usually tell my students the ones who say that they want to get a 7 and above is that if you want a 7, then you need to aim high. In fact, you need to aim higher than a 7.

So, I typically tell my students to aim for the 8 and in this way, if they don't achieve the 8, well at least they're in a good position to get the 7 which is what they actually need. So, aim high so that you have a comfortable kind of pillow to fall on if you don't actually get that score of an 8 which is challenging. I mean it's not impossible. Lots of people get 8s, but it is a bit of a challenge.

So, having said that, what I want to do is talk about coherence and cohesion and talk about the band descriptors for the 8 and for the 7. Okay. So, coherence and cohesion band 8. The first thing the band descriptor tells us in the public version available online is that the person-- the writer of the essay sequences his or her ideas and information logically.



Okay. So, what does that actually mean? Well, let me explain a little bit what it means. Essentially, when we write an essay in English, there are certain conventions that we must follow. I read a model essay recently from a website that I follow, an IELTS website and I can't really quite remember what the topic was, but it was one of these discuss both views and give your opinion essays.

The author of the essay was in favor of a particular view and what he did in his essay was first, he started talking about the side he was in favor of and then after that, he kind of switched gears and started talking about the side that he wasn't in favor of. And in his conclusion, he sort of reiterated his position that I am in favor of this even though these are some drawbacks, these are some negative elements and so forth.

And as it just so happens, this is the wrong way to sequence your ideas and to sequence your paragraphs in an academic essay. The convention for essay writing tells us that first we discuss

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the side that we don't agree with and then towards the bottom of our essay, we put the side that we do agree with. And there are a lot of reasons for this.

First of all, it shows it shows the reader I'm open-minded enough to show that I have thought about the other side, I have analyzed it, I know what their points are, and I know why they say what they say. However, I still believe this and what I believe is true, what I believe is more correct, and so forth, but just to show you how certain I am, I will show you the opposite side first and then I will show you all the reasons why this logic is false or this logic is imperfect and why what I believe is actually truer.

The other reason why this is a good idea to structure your essays like this is because your viewpoint and the side that you believe actually stays in the mind of the reader. It is fresher. It is

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the last idea. It is the last viewpoint that they have heard and so it remains in the mind of the reader.

Even the conclusion that I referred to sounded a little off to me because the conclusion was there are reasons to believe x. However, there are some drawbacks to this. So, this whole structure is really kind of bizarre because what you actually expect is the second idea to be the one that the reader believes more strongly.

So, it should have really been while there are some drawbacks, on the whole, I believe this. And this is how we appropriately structure our ideas in an essay. First, we talk about what we don't really agree with and then we discuss what we do feel strongly about. Okay. So, that's a little bit about sequencing information and ideas.

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The second one I could probably spend a lot of time talking about, it says that the writer manages all aspects of cohesion well. Okay. So, the first thing that we really have to think about is what do we mean when we say all aspects of cohesion?

I get a lot of students who write their first couple of essays for me and they're full of expressions like firstly, secondly, thirdly, lastly, in conclusion, for example and those are fine as far as cohesive devices are concerned, but if you want to get a 7 or an 8 in cohesion, you're going to have to do a little more.

And to show you exactly what I mean and why I say this, take a look at what the band 9 tells us for coherence and cohesion. The first bullet under the nine says uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention. And I think this is so interesting. What do we mean it attracts no attention?

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What it's saying is that the cohesive devices you use whatever they are are so seamless and so invisible that you don't even realize you're reading a cohesive device. And this is what we mean by really invisible cohesion. Think about what cohesion actually means. It means the glue for your essay, the glue for your ideas, the glue for your sentences. So ideally, this glue will be invisible and you won't see it, but in fact, all you'll really see is the ideas.

So, can you have that invisible glue if with every sentence you start with a firstly, secondly, for example? No, not really because what do these words do but they act like a speed bump. Every time you see one of these words followed by a comma whether you want to or not, when you see them visually, you stop. Your eye pauses briefly at them. And so the eye cannot just kind of flow and go smoothly over the essay.

Now again, I'm going to say this. I'm not saying that these are wrong. They're actually very nice. However, those of you who need to do a little more and who are aiming for that 7 or 8 or maybe

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even the 9 are going to have to find other forms of cohesion to create this kind of seamless invisible glue in your writing.

So, the next question you're probably asking then is well, what is that invisible glue? There are a number of different ways that you can create cohesion in your writing that is seamless. One way we create cohesion is with words that are pronouns. So, if you refer to one thing in one sentence with its name, of course, in the following sentence, you refer to that thing as it, he, they, whatever.

Using pronouns is a form of cohesion. It's a cohesive device whether you're familiar with this or not. These actually create cohesion because you're referring to a previous idea with a different word.

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Other types of cohesive devices are words like this, that, these, and those. These create cohesion because again they're types of pronouns that refer back to a previous idea and kind of glue these things together without being repetitive.

Other words that create cohesion are words like so. And this is also a little bit of grammar because if you use so in this way, it does require a little bit of advanced grammar. So, for example, you have a sentence like companies must recycle their waste in order to improve the environment. In doing so, less waste will go to landfills.

So, by using this expression in doing so, I've shown you some advanced grammar, but have also created cohesion with the previous sentence in a way that has not used things like furthermore, moreover, in addition because we do also want a little bit of variety.

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In fact, the band 7 for coherence and cohesion tells us that the author uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately. Of course, the next thing that it says is that there may be some over or under use. Okay. Let's try to aim for neither overuse or under use, but just using a range of cohesive devices.

So, looking at the 8 then, the next bullet point says uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately. Typically, what I recommend to my students is that they use a four-paragraph structure. There should be an introduction, there should be a conclusion, and in between there should be two body paragraphs.

Most of the topics that I have seen in my years of teaching IELTS allow the writer to follow this kind of structure. So, if it's a discuss both views, this lends itself perfectly. You have one

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paragraph for one view, another paragraph for the other view. In a problem and solution essay, you have one paragraph for the problems and you have another paragraph for the solutions.

Even in a lot of these essays where it says to what extent do you agree or disagree, I usually tell my students that it's mostly common that we won't agree with the viewpoint expressed 100%. So, your thesis will be something like while I believe x, y, and z on the whole, a, b, and c. So then, you will spend a paragraph talking about whatever x, y, and z is and then another paragraph discussing a, b, and c.

So, there's really no need for these paragraphs sometimes some of my students write in the beginning like two sentences or three sentences. You need to have appropriate and sufficient paragraphs.

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So, I've pretty much covered what the band 8 says for coherence and cohesion. Band 7 however says a couple of other additional things that I'd like to discuss. In fact, what I want to say here is the last bullet point in the band 7. The last bullet point for coherence and cohesion under band 7 says that the author presents a clear central topic within each paragraph.

So, that's sort of related to what I was saying before, but I do want to talk about this a little bit more in detail. How can you show a clear central topic? As far as I am concerned, the best way to show a clear central topic is by using a topic sentence. And I know this is something that Ben talks about quite a bit in the IELTS Podcast courses for writing. Every paragraph absolutely needs to have a central topic.

So, how do you show that? You show it with a topic sentence. What is a topic sentence? A topic sentence is essentially an introduction to the sentence letting the reader know ladies and gentlemen, this is what my paragraph is about. So, if the paragraph is going to talk about the

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problems involved with traffic in modern day cities, then the topic sentence should say something like there are numerous problems associated with traffic in modern-day cities.

If the next paragraph needs to be about the solutions to the problems of traffic in modern-day cities, then it should state something pretty much just as simple. So, it needs to say despite the numerous problems that exist, solutions exist. This way, what you're really doing is you're kind of directing your reader in a direction so that he or she knows where you're leading him, where you're taking him or her.

When I read something like despite the problems, there are solutions available, immediately in my head I say oh, okay. So, this paragraph is going to talk about what the solutions are. And this is the job of the topic sentence to kind of direct the reader-- obviously, in the case of the IELTS the leader is the examiner-- where you're taking him, where you're taking her because essentially, essays in English need to give the reader something like a flashlight, something like a map. We

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need to know where we're going. We need to know where you're taking us. You need to tell us okay, now I'm going to take you here. And that's what the topic sentence does. Okay?

However, in order for you to do that, in order for you to have an appropriate topic sentence, you need to make sure that the ideas that follow fit under this. So, occasionally what happens is-- we're actually going to talk a little backwards here-- first, you have to come up with the ideas. You have to come up with the central idea of your paragraph and once you've pretty much managed to put all of these ideas into your paragraph, then you have to say okay, well this is the introduction that kind of glues them together.

So, once you've actually formed the ideas of your paragraph, then you can come and you can say well, this is how I will introduce it. First, you have to come up with the ideas which leads me to

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another piece of advice I always like to tell my IELTS students. There is nothing better than dedicating a few minutes in the beginning of your writing to brainstorming.

It is crucial and it is especially crucial I will say this again for all of you who need the higher scores. It is crucial to have lots of ideas and even to select them, to edit them, to say okay. Well, if these are my problems and these are my solutions, I can develop this idea. I can develop another idea. I can thematically link these particular ideas together and put them under one topic sentence that makes sense.

So, I think really there's no substitute for spending a little bit of time at the beginning in order to organize your thoughts. It makes your writing so much easier. And a little anecdote that I like to tell some of my students is from way back when I was a university student. I remember I used to take a class where my professor once a week would give us these five-page essays to write

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And the topics were usually very interesting and I was very excited about starting to write it and I had all these ideas and when I sat down to write, I would go straight into writing. And as soon as I did that-- and this is back and we didn't use computers, but we actually used pen and paper. And so I would start writing. That pen would go to the paper and I would write down all these ideas.

And then while I was writing, I would think oh, I have to remember later on to mention this and then I would keep writing and keep writing and keep writing. And then I would get to the point where I had to mention what I said I was going to mention, but you know what happened? I forgot what my great idea was.

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I invariably forgot what this great sort of mind-blowing idea that was so important to me earlier on was and I couldn't put it in. Or if I did somehow remember it, I couldn't remember where I wanted to put it.

So, for this reason, it is so worthwhile to spend a couple of minutes before you actually start writing your essay to plan your ideas because coherence and cohesion is really telling us that our ideas need to be glued together as ideas, but also as sentences. That's the whole point behind this; that there is logic and there is structure on a sentence level linking ideas together on a sentence level, but also on an idea level.

And that's the idea of coherence. There needs to be a straight structure, there needs to be organization, there needs to be cohesive devices, but a variety of them. So, not just first and second and thirdly, in conclusion, for example, but look into a variety of them.

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We mentioned a couple today. I mentioned using things like such, using things like so, using words like this, those, these, using pronouns; him, her, it, they. These are all ways to create cohesion between sentences or within sentences between different ideas. So, these are some of the things that we need to think about when we are trying to get a high score for coherence and cohesion.

So, I thank you very much for listening today. Of course, Ben goes into greater detail on all of these issues in the podcast courses, so I recommend checking them out as well. So, best of luck with your IELTS preparation.

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