



Ben: Hello there IELTS students. In this tutorial, Robert and myself are going to be talking about complex sentences, namely how complex do your sentences have to be for the writing tasks. And we're going to talk about conditional sentences, passive structures, modality, verb tenses. So, you're going to get a lot of value in this podcast.

But before we start, remember if you are struggling then please get in contact ben@ieltspodcast.com and we can help you get through this. We can help you get to your target country be it Australia, the UK, Canada, wherever. That's why I set this up. We're getting tremendous success and we've got the course Jump to Band 7 or It's Free. Every week we're getting students passing with that course. It's a very powerful very simple straightforward course the system in there and we've been using it for years to get amazing results for our students.



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So, let's get started. How are we doing today, Robert?

Robert: Pretty well, Ben. Pretty well. Good to hear your voice again. We haven't been in touch for a couple of weeks now. How's everything going with you? Good?

Ben: All's going well. All's going well. It's going better for me than it is for Manchester United by the way for the listeners, that's Rob's team.

Robert: I've given up on them this year. It's not the first time in my life. I'd like to go to sleep now and wake up next September when the new season starts again and think it was just a bad dream, a bad dream.



Ben: We are laughing at Man United. My team is Huddersfield Town, so I've got to just keep quiet. Let's change the topic. You don't want to go into the results.

Robert: Huddersfield Town was a fantastic team they told me in the 1920s. I think they won the league about three times.

Ben: Exactly, yeah.

Robert: Good luck to them. They're doing very well at the moment actually, Ben.

Ben: Yes. True, that's true.

Robert: I hope they go up this year. I hope they get promoted again.

Ben: Yeah. Fingers crossed. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see what the Terriers can do. All right. So, do you want to start us off today, Robert with complex sentences?



Robert: Okay, yeah. That's the title. I thought of this title: how complex do my sentences in writing tasks have to be? Well, yes. I know it's a question. I often get asked this and I understand it. IELTS is a test of English and to show that you know how to use English or the English language at a pretty high level, then when we're writing, our written sentences should be I guess sophisticated and complex but now let's have a little bit of think about this.

If we get into the descriptors those ways the examiners have of checking our writing skills in IELTS for the writing task one and two for the academic and the general training versions, if we look at the grammatical range and accuracy the GRA section, it says to obtain a band 8 the test taker must demonstrate-- and I'm quoting here-- a wide range of grammatical structures and to make sure that the-- again I'm quoting-- the majority of the sentences are error-free.

But a band 7, our minimum aim I think, indicates that the range of structures is varied and not wide and that the sentences are frequently error-free. Notice the difference. Not error-free, but frequently. Not the majority, but frequently.



And band 7 also mentioned something about punctuation and grammar when it says that the test taker has good control of grammar and punctuation, but may make a few errors. Okay. All right. All right. I can hear you laughing out there. I know what you're thinking. How can an examiner decide between a wide range and a varied range and how many errors are acceptable for an 8?

Okay. I'll be honest with you. I can't tell you that not because it's a secret that I've sworn to keep to myself as an ex-examiner, but because it's not in the least bit scientific. There's no golden rule there. It's just a feeling we get with practice, with experience.

Maybe there will be some examiners who have this in their heads. A certain number of more complex grammatical structures and if a test taker uses all or most of them in an essay, it's an 8 or possibly an 8 depending on the error-free nature of those same sentences.

Okay. Let's worry a little bit later on about errors and concentrate for the moment then on the grammatical structures, the complexity of them.



Ben: Can I just-- sorry Rob. I just want to mention with the errors, I just want to mention this because this is incredibly useful for students because I remember when I started out tutoring the IELTS students and the quickest way to improve was to identify those errors and how do you identify those errors? Well, you get feedback and you do not have to learn the complete English language and all the grammatical rules. No. All you need to do is find out the areas where you're losing points on.

So, it might be the use of articles, it might be conditional sentences. You've got to identify that and the best way-- the fastest way to identify that is by getting some feedback on your work so you can pinpoint the areas you need to work on rather than starting off with all the grammatical rules of English. That's just going to be ridiculous, but if you can just pinpoint your errors, focus on those, that's going to be a quick fast effective way to improve.

Robert: Good point. Good point. I couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more. You're quite right there. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. So, what about these structures, the more complex ones? Well, I



think Ben mentioned one or two of them a couple of minutes ago, didn't he? Conditional sentences, things like this. How complex can that get?

If I wrote or I said if I hadn't paid careful attention to all the feedback I received on my essay writing, I'm sure I would never have achieved that band 8 in IELTS writing. Oh my God. That sounds very posh, doesn't it? Again, it's conditional.

Another thing passive structures. Probably we don't use the passive as much as teachers would like us to use it because it's not that important in many cases, but listen to this one. Competition for places at many top universities is now so fierce that only those candidates with the very highest IELTS band scores are being accepted at those institutions.

Wow! The passive voice: are being accepted. Wow! And this huge area which I always love because it's very vague and you can go in any direction you want and we call it modality.



Modality is just all those verbs like will, can, should, may, might, need to. They're very, very interesting I think. How about this example?

Most young people these days probably imagine that schools in the 1950s must have been excessively strict in terms of discipline. However, in many education systems, it is highly likely that the situation today is quite similar. In my two sentences there, I've got two very good examples of modality. The idea of making a supposition about the past-- must have been excessively strict-- and then making a prediction about a condition these days-- it is highly likely that...

That strictly speaking is not a use of one of the classic modal verbs like will, can, may, might, and must, but it is expressing some notion of probability. It's not talking about a fact. It's talking about my interpretation of things. My opinion. Okay and of course--



Ben: Sorry, just to interrupt. What I like about that one-- it is highly likely-- that's not an expression that you hear every single day and it's just like another indicator for the examiner that you are using higher level language. You're not using the common phrase like it's very likely. Highly likely is just slightly bit above the standard and that's really what we want to be aiming for.

Robert: Exactly, exactly, exactly. Yeah. Those two words go together. It's highly likely. Very likely, sounds okay, but highly likely is what we really say.

Ben: Exactly. We're just using the collocations which definitely help and make it sound more natural as you just said.

Robert: Exactly. And of course all along the line in all aspects of IELTS. This is the writing we're talking about today in particular, but it doesn't matter where we are, speaking and writing,



too. The use of verb tenses; vary them up according to where and how we need them. For example-- okay, I've got an example here.

After I had attended a state-run secondary school that was relatively traditional, I then went on to one of the most open liberal-minded universities in the country. Those liberal values I learned there have guided me throughout my teaching career ever since. That's a personal one. That's a personal statement and it's part of my life and if I were trying to write about my history as a teacher or as an ex-student, I would possibly include those two sentences I've just read out to you.

And I've mixed up my tenses. I've used the past perfect: after I had attended, the past tense simple: I went on to one of the most open liberal-minded universities in the country, and then I'm talking about what I've been doing since: the liberal values I learned there have guided me throughout my teaching career ever since. So, I'm showing that I can handle that notion of time



and how we express time through verbs and different verb tenses perfectly well in those two short sentences.

Okay. So, these more complex structures appear of course in sentences and then oh God, this word sentence it's a word we like to use all the time and of course, we always think we know what it means, but it's a very strange concept really. All the sentence is really my friends is this; it's just a series of words that begins with a capital letter and ends with what we call in British English a full stop or what they call an American English a period I think.

It can be the simplest thing of course. Just one word. Read any sensational novel and you might read sentences are like this uh? Mmhmm. What? No. Just one word can be a sentence because it begins with a capital letter and has a full stop at the end, but usually of course we think of a sentence as having some kind of grammatical structure.



To put it in the simplest terms possible, we have a sequence and it's like this. It's very traditional. We begin with a the kind of s this is the subject I and then we have that followed by a verb am, I am and then usually, but not always because there are some verbs that don't need one, but often we have a kind of follow-up to the verb and we call it a complement. So, it's the S-V-C combination, subject verb complement.

It could be a simple adjective. I am sleepy. I am tired. I'm cold or whatever and it can be something extraordinarily complicated. Of course, it can and we can complicate the subject by putting extra words in there. The verb can be more complex and the complement can be very long, but it's the basis for all sentences.

And I think there are basically three types of sentence: a simple sentence, a complex sentence, and a third type I'd like to call a compound sentence. Now, what does that really mean? A simple sentence is just as simple as this. It has one subject and one verb that goes together with it. Let's



go back to one of my examples before. Let's take one sentence to pieces and kind of build it up again and see what happens.

Now, how about that last one about school and university? Where was it? Oh yeah about the-- okay. All right. All right. It's a complex sentence because it has three verbs. Three verbs. If we break them up into their simple parts, we've got these things. Sometimes we can call these things propositions, three ideas if you like. One two three.

1) I attended a state-run secondary school. Not a private school, just an ordinary secondary school. I attended a state-run secondary school. Idea no. 2: this school was relatively traditional. Okay. That fits in with that first one. One and two. 3) Then after I went on to one of the most open-minded liberal universities in the country.

Okay. So, I've got in each one my subject I, this school, I. I've got verbs: attended, was, went on to and then I've got my compliments: a state-run secondary school, relatively traditional, and one



of the most open-minded liberal universities. That's a long one, isn't it? And we can have a complement which is extremely long just the same as we can have a subject which is very long. It looks complicated, but behind it all is just as simple. They're all really simple ideas.

By themselves, separate, those three are all simple sentences, but they are joined together logically by myself in this case in one complex sentence because of the obvious fact that there's a kind of thematic and time-based connection between the three. I want them to be together. It makes sense to have them all together. They're talking about the same thing and there's a time relation.

So, how do we connect them? Well, that's where our little friend cohesion comes in, this very important notion of cohesion. The simplest way to connect of course is with the relative pronoun that as in in a secondary school that was relatively traditional, in a secondary school that was relatively traditional. I don't have to repeat the word school. I attended a state-run secondary school that was relatively traditional.



And another pretty straightforward simple way to join sentences is if it's a time sequence a kind of a before and after that we're talking about. And I've done it in this case with a very simple one then. I used it to join the third proposition to the first and second after a comma. I attended a state-run secondary school that was relatively traditional comma then I went on...

So, my reader or my listener gets the point of it's a sequence. First one thing then the other and I made it even more interesting because of course I introduced the first verb in the past perfect to show one thing happened then another thing and then another thing. I've got a sequence of three things happening one after the other, all right? Although of course my second one really explains something more about the first one: that was relatively traditional.

Okay. So, I've got these three interconnected ideas. If we look at the first two parts the idea of that was relatively traditional referring to the school is adding useful, but not necessarily absolutely essential information to the first part, the idea of after I had attended a state-run secondary school.



In other words, all parts of the sentence that begin with that are known as dependent or subordinate clauses and the other part is often called the independent clause or main clause. The third clause or the third part of my clause is the third one: then I went on to a university... adds new information and if we separate it from the other parts of the sentence, it would make perfect sense on its own. In other words, it is an independent clause or a main clause some people call it.

And in fact, we could easily, easily if we wanted to instead of using then, I could use the word and to join it to the rest and if I've got and it can make for what we call a compound element to it. All those sentence parts joined by words like and, but, then, so are examples of compound sentences where the two parts have if you like equal value.

It's like something-- let's put it in a very simple way and it sounds very redundant, but if I say I like football and Ben likes football. Obviously, Ben likes football. I like football. They're equal. We can't say that one is more important than the other. They have equal value in the sentence. So, that is a very simple example of a compound sentence.



Now, complex sentences usually have this idea of being dependent on something else and oh God, I'm sorry about this. Oh. I know. I know. I know. I know. I know. It's a subject I quite like actually. It sounds very traditional, but it's all a bit boring, isn't it? I'm sorry about this.

Ben: No, no, no. Our listeners I'm pretty certain will enjoy this. If you were a normal tutor talking about this, then there would be some questions. How can I use this? But you're an ex-IELTS examiner and you're sharing this because you know from correcting essays-- not correcting, grading essays not only in the writing, but also even reviewing people speaking and grading them in the speaking, you know this information is useful. So, please do not apologize, Rob. You're doing a smashing job. So, keep going.

Robert: And I recommend all of you out there when you get the chance get into the website, the ieltpodcast.com and check out what I've been talking about in the written version because then you can see all those little commas. I'm sorry. I'll come back to this later probably. I'm a bit of a fanatic about the comma. I love it. Punctuation is something which really is pretty vital because



it's all part of the way that we organize our thoughts in writing which is the way of getting our message across quickly to our reader which is exactly the point in IELTS.

Your busy examiner is going to be looking at about 25 different writing essays in the same morning. How is yours going to stand out, not only from your ideas of course, but the impression that you give in terms of your sentence structure and your punctuation? It was always a thing I used to be very conscious of as an examiner.

I'd give it a first read and I'd read it a second time to get into more detail, but my first impression would be yeah, this person knows what they're doing. It not perfect. There are a couple of errors I noticed, but I can see they know where they're going.

This person is going to be all right. If this person goes to wherever it might be Australia, the UK, Canada, USA to study something, they're going to be fine. They're going to find it a bit hard at



first, but they're going to survive. They'll be okay. And you just know the difference. You just know it. You just know it.

Okay. So, let's think about this. All right. My sentence was more time-based, wasn't it? All I wanted to tell you was I did that and that was a characteristic of that school. It was very traditional, but then I went on to university. It was a very different atmosphere, but what if I wanted to change my idea? What if I really wanted to emphasize in this case something a little bit different? What if I began my sentence with a connector or a cohesive device as they call it like although?

Although always introduces a dependent clause. What it says in that part of the sentence doesn't make perfect sense until we hear or read the independent clause that goes with it. If someone says something like although I think it's a good idea... and then you're waiting in the air and you would say to that person yeah? Okay, go on. What are you going to tell me? Although I think it's a good idea... come on then, say something. It needs something else to make sense.



Let's try it. I rewrote it like this. Although I attended a state-run secondary school that was relatively traditional... Tell me more. Tell me more. Go on. I went on and then I complete the sentence with the independent clause. It's a different sentence structure, a different emphasis.

My first version with then connecting it was very time influenced. I'm just giving you a narrative story. It's very sequential. The second one although is perhaps more openly and consciously contrastive. I wanted to contrast it. I wanted to say yeah, in my educational days, schools were pretty traditional kind of stuff, the uniforms and the school motto and all that kind of rubbish which was good or bad. I'm not saying any more about it, but all yes sir, no sir, thank you very much sir, sort of stuff.

I went on to university and it was all first name kind of stuff. Really that was my experience. It was very open-minded, very liberal, very kind of personalized. It was a completely new experience for me, so I wanted to stress that with my although.



But wait a minute. What if I really want to get that band 8 in IELTS and I'd rather use or impress the examiner with a however. You know very well-- I hope you know very well however is a word which is pretty dramatic. Every time someone says however, you know that what they're going to say yes at least in their opinion is pretty important, but I've got these choices.

If I use however, I got to worry about punctuation too. Remember this. However is always a word which introduces an independent or a main clause and it's kind of separated off from the rest of the words around it. It's got some kind of-- I don't know. It doesn't have a pandemic or something like that, but it doesn't like to be associated that closely with other words. So, you separate it out. It's got a colon, those two points after it or a semicolon like a point and a comma or even a full stop.

We can begin a new sentence with it and after it and after it, it's always got always got a comma. That would give us, for example, I attended a state-run school that was relatively traditional. And then I put a semi-colon. However comma I went on... I need that comma.



If I see that the person has omitted the comma after however, I'm not going to say oh no, that's a band 7 and not a band 8. I'm just going to think hey, wait a minute. This person uses however, but doesn't have perfect control over however yet. I would always insist on sending a person be careful with your punctuation when you're using a word like however. And there are other ones too. Nevertheless is another example.

Okay. So, let's think about this. In our IELTS essays, using effective complex sentences will score you high marks both in the grammatical range and accuracy and when we get into the idea of coherence and cohesion, being able to do this successfully.

All right. There are shortcuts or not I don't know, but I really think it needs time, it needs practice. Practice, practice, practice. One of my ideas today with this little talk to you was it also needs us a little chance occasionally to step back and take a little thought for a moment about what is a sentence? It's that kind of word we think we know what it is, but don't forget it's a very artificial concept. We only talk about it really in writing.



When we're speaking, we don't speak in sentences. We speak, we pause and maybe that is a kind of a conscious comma or something like that, but it's a different notion. It's a different way of putting ideas together when we're speaking. It's similar, but different.

Think about it also in your native languages. I handle Spanish quite well I guess these days and so I know that in Spanish there's a different feeling to it sometimes. I've noticed in Spanish you can get away with these endless kind of commas and carrying on with your ideas when I'm thinking oh my God. This sentence is never going to end.

Ben: Yeah, this is so true. Yeah. When I'm correcting essays I can usually tell what is the student's native language. If it's from the Slavic countries, maybe they're struggling with the articles. If it's from a romance language country, usually it's quite long sentences and then another stereotype the Asian writers again probably the articles and sentences as well.



It just shows you that each country has their own writing style and if you're writing in English, getting a grip, getting a grasp of the idea of a sentence in English will help you significantly and also, as we just said you can't carry it over. The idea of a sentence in Spanish is very different from the idea of a sentence in English.

And just one last thing while I'm talking about sentences. It's not all about complex sentences and it's not all about long sentences. A good paragraph has the variety: a short sentence, a complex sentence like we just mentioned, and then a medium length sentence or even a long sentence.

We're not saying all complex sentences are necessary for your paragraph. We're not saying only medium ones. We're not saying only time sentences. We're just saying a mixture, a variety and it actually says in the criteria grammatical range and accuracy. Range. Have that variety there.



Robert: It's true. It's true. It's true and you're quite right. I couldn't agree more and that idea of the short simple dramatic sentence, for example, at the beginning of an IELTS essay when you are stating your point of view. You may be explaining something and then you say in the last sentence of your first paragraph, your opening paragraph in this essay, I will show that... Just a short little sentence.

Ben: Yeah, yeah, exactly and this comes back to just one other element. I'll just mentioned this and then we'll have to go because of the time, but your use of complex sentences, short sentences, long sentences, medium length sentences, once you get a grip on these, we can start looking at other areas and like stylistic elements and there it takes your use of sentences and your control of sentences to another level similar to what we were talking today with the complex sentences. But once we start using complex sentences in a more stylistic element, your writing improves yet another level.

So, anything else do you want to say, Rob before we finish?



Robert: No, no, no, no. I'm fine. I'm fine. I think where we're going here is we're getting into style. We're getting into this notion of the grammar also cohesion and maybe we could go on and talk about things like coherence, how we kind of combine the idea of making sense with the actual content of our paragraphs, our sentence construction. It's all part of the same thing.

I hope it's been useful. I've had fun preparing this and talking to you about it, Ben and I hope everybody out there is keeping going, keep safe, keep well, keep studying and good luck if you're taking IELTS soon or sooner or later.

Ben: I totally agree. If you are with the IELTS exam and if you are struggling, then please get in contact ben@ieltspodcast.com and remember we've got lots of courses and we'll soon be launching some online classes as well to help you progress, to help you improve. And if you're worried about the IELTS exam, then perhaps just take one small step with us. See if we're a good fit for each other. Get your essay corrected. We've got some special offers on at the moment. You



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