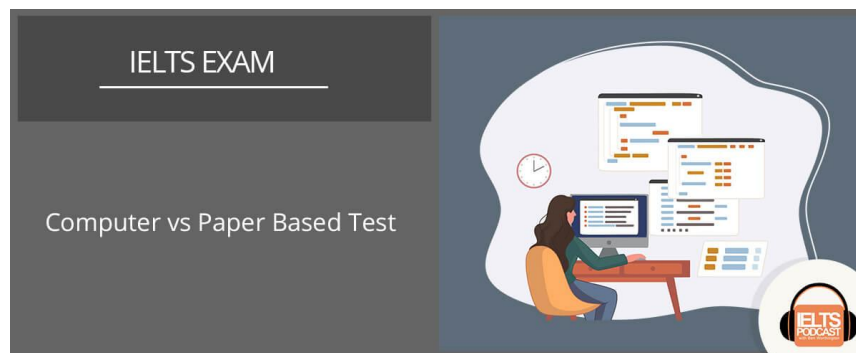**IELTS EXAM**

Computer vs Paper Based Test

Ben: Hello there IELTS students. In this tutorial, we're going to look at whether you should be doing the computer-based IELTS or the paper-based IELTS. And we've got the ex-IELTS examiner Robert Buckinghamshire today. How are we doing today, Robert?

Robert: Very well. Very well, Ben. And you? How are things?

Ben: All good, thank you. All good. We're doing better than United anyway.

Robert: Just about everybody is.

Ben: I was going to say that doesn't mean much, but actually, we're doing really well here. We're doing really well. So, just before we start, let me just tell you who I am, where I'm from. I'm from up north as you may have heard with my accent. It's not super northern anymore and as I said before, this way you can understand me.

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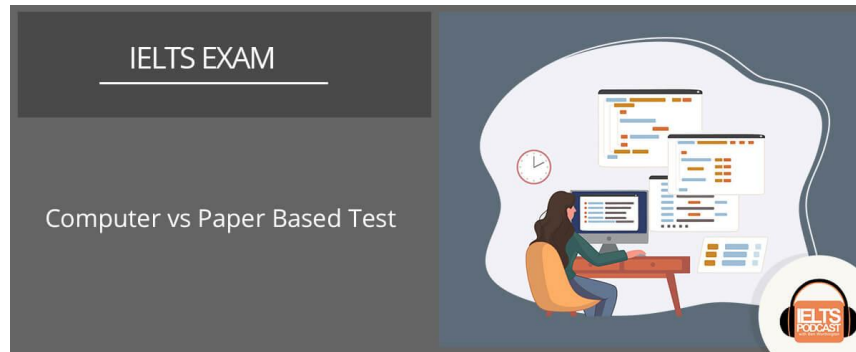IELTS Essay Correction Service

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I had to change my accent so people could understand me. Otherwise, it'd be broad Yorkshire and unintelligible and incomprehensible to a lot of students, but the skills I used to change my accent I put in the speaking confidence course and they really do polish up your speaking.

So, I started IELTS Podcast because I was struggling teaching my students and I wanted to get in touch with the professionals, the experts and I took what I learned from them, put it all in our online course Jump To Band 7 Or It's Free and we've had students get to band 7, band 8, band 9 sometimes in as little as 10 days and we're still getting a ton of success with our students there.

And just before we kick off with the computer-based or paper-based, Robert, how did you get into IELTS? How did you become an IELTS examiner?

Robert: Well, that's a good question. IELTS I didn't know anything about it until about-- oh, I don't know-- probably about 12 years ago when I heard students talking about that. What's that? And I had been working at a university. When I finished my work there, I started doing some
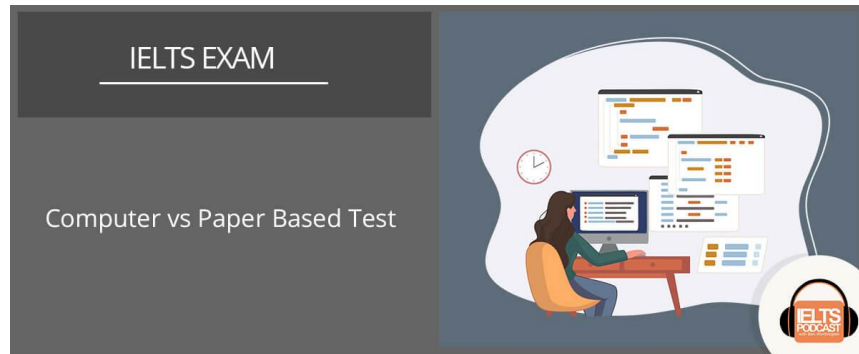
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project work and some teaching for the British Council and then they said hey, we're expanding our examiner team for IELTS. Would you like to have a go at that?

And I said to myself well, why not? Let's give it a try. So, I went through this little short training course they give and I started that-- oh, it must have been about eight or nine years ago now and I was doing it for several years. I really enjoyed it.

At first, it was not only the speaking but also the writing test that we were correcting. Then they made some change worldwide that all the writing tests had to be sent to the UK for correction. So, that cut me out of that because I don't live in the UK, but it was interesting. I've also done quite a bit of teaching of groups and I still do teaching-- IELTS teaching, but the examining I don't do that anymore, but it's an interesting test.

And I thought it would be fun today to talk about this computer-based or paper-based. Is it fun? I guess it could be fun. When I first got into IELTS that's what you heard about it. Every

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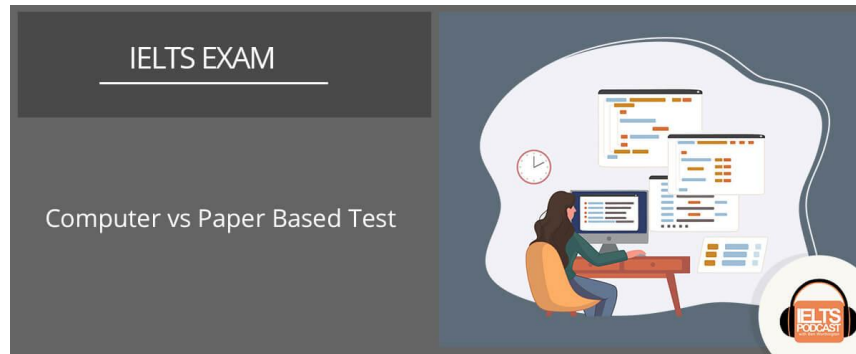Click here for IELTS Materials (free)

organization tries to-- let's be honest-- sell their product and I think the IELTS was sold as some kind of very user-friendly nice type of exam, very personal kind of thing, very different. They said that nasty TOEFL exam where you sit in front of a machine--

And actually, I had a student once who was taking the TOEFL and I gave this guy some private classes and I was looking at it and my goodness me. It was all just sit in front of the computer. Even the speaking test was a kind of weird question and answer. You get the question written on the screen and you speak into a microphone. It's not really a conversation whereas IELTS was always very very insistent on this is face-to-face. This is personal. We have not lost our personal touch.

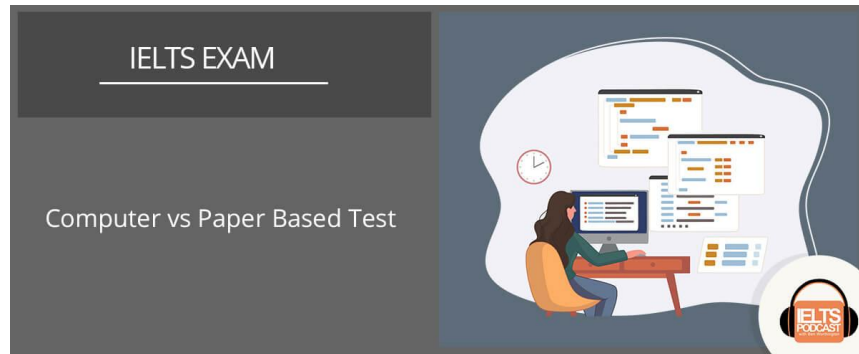**Ben:** Yeah, this is human. This is human and we're testing real skills in real life with real people.

Robert: Exactly, exactly.

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Ben: Yeah, yeah. It's not this reduction of machines and human and talking to a machine. Yeah, it's absolutely bizarre I think.

Robert: But on the other hand, things are changing. One aspect of course which I don't really want to go into because we're all up to here with that, aren't we, the pandemic, but it has changed communication, the way we communicate with each other. And I think going back before the pandemic, I think it was 2017 I believe it was that IELTS started offering this new version of the exam; the computer-based version to go alongside the traditional kind of paper-based one.
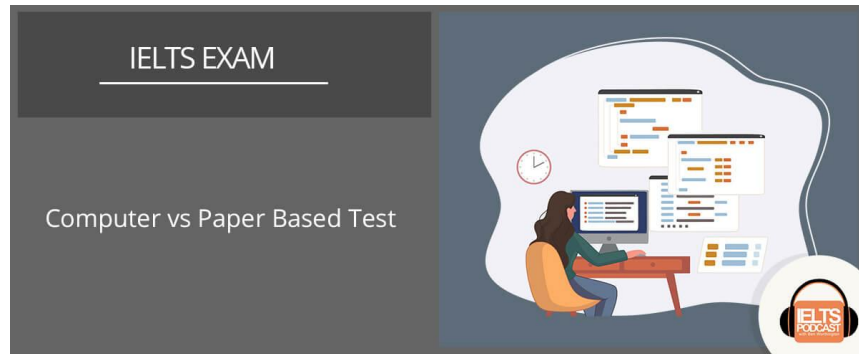
It's all very 21st century, isn't it? Come on. Let's face it. You do your exam on screen. No paper, no broken pencils, no aching wrists after 60-minute writing tests. I come from that generation where it was all pushing pens on paper. It's three hour exams and you leave the exam room and your wrist, your arm is aching, but you did it because you did it for since the age of God knows when until you finish your studies. I couldn't do it again. I'd probably-- I can't even understand my own handwriting anymore.

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But with the new one, with this computer based, I'm not calling it new. Five years ago was 2017. Let's see how they sell it. You get the results in 5-7 days instead of the 13 days compared to the paper-based test. It costs the same. The exam questions are absolutely identical. It's the same exam.

Both versions are equally valid all over the world. It doesn't matter. An institution or a university or whatever is not going to say hey, did you take the computer-based or the paper-based? They don't care. They just want to see the result.
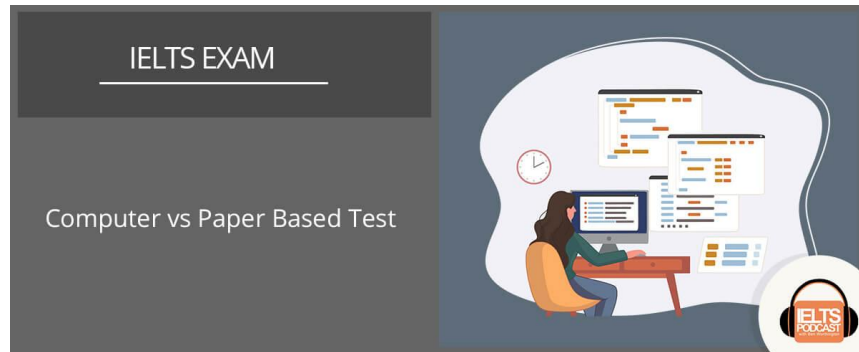
So, what's stopping anybody sign up right away for the computer-based IELTS? Well, should we do that? I don't know, but let's think about it because remember it's-- before we forget, it's only the listening, reading, and writing sections that we're talking about here. The speaking test according to IELTS remains face-to-face. That's what they say.

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So, perhaps we should all happily embrace this new delivery style, the computer instead of the paper one because it seems to make perfect sense. I don't know. It's the most obvious thing.

Ben: Especially with the pandemic I think that just really speeded things up again, speeded it all up and lit a fire underneath them basically and also that's when they rushed out the IELTS Indicator which was kind of like in between. And some institutions were accepting it. I don't know what happened to the IELTS Indicator. Do you?

Robert: I believe it's still accepted, but of course because the pandemic is easing off in so many countries but not everywhere, I think it depends on which country you're in. I think if you're in a country where your test center is still closed and I think there are. I don't know how many. I'd have to check them out. I'll come back to you on that. I don't know how many centers are still closed all over the world, but if the centers are opening again and offering exams, I think the IELTS Indicator is not being used so much in those places.

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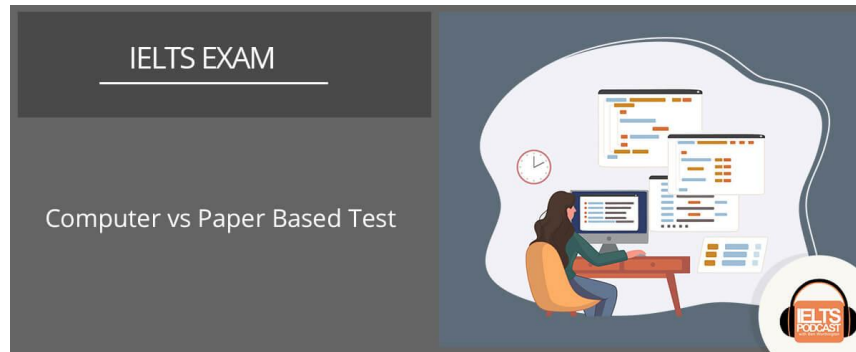
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It's only if you can't get in touch with your center, if it's still closed for whatever reason. I'll check that out actually. That's a good question, Ben. I'm not really too sure on that one, but there's another thing, isn't there? Not only me, but most-- let's face it. The vast majority of IELTS test takers have grown up with the keyboard. No more worries about poor handwriting and of course that idea of ticking boxes or even typing answers on screen it's so familiar to all of you. It's familiar to me. It's got to be more familiar to all the test takers.

Ben: Absolutely and if you're a student who comes from a non-roman-- what do you call it?

Robert: Alphabet.

Ben: Yeah sorry then it's another advantage for you to do the computer. I've seen-- my writing is chicken scratch when I'm handwriting and that's just adding more friction for the examiner and increasing the chances that they misinterpret or even the computer that's grading your paper they
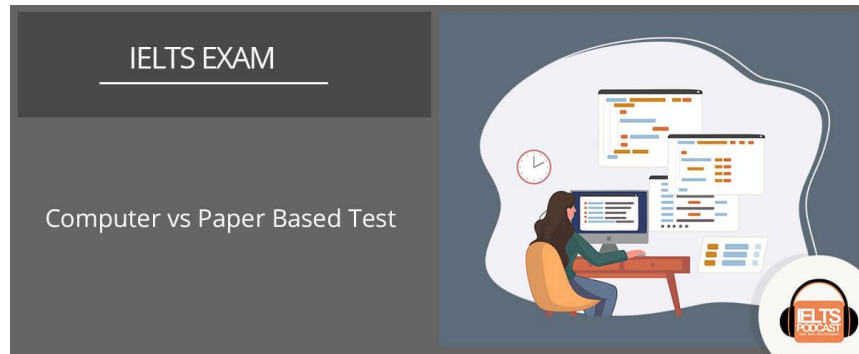
might misinterpret it and mark it down as a spelling mistake whereas the computer it's much clearer and I don't know about you, Robert but I can type much faster than I can handwrite.

Robert: Probably me too these days. Yeah yeah that's true.

Ben: Just as a side note, I remember one academy owner when I was a private tutor, she was a bit behind the times, but when she-- I remember once she came in and I was like how are you doing, Lola? And she's like oh, my finger hurts and I was like why? What you've been doing? And she's like oh, I've got a new online boyfriend. And I was like oh, oh. And then she was like I was typing all night, but she was just typing with one finger, just pushing the keyboard the same thing all night. And I was like ah, okay, okay.

And this same tutor, the same academy owner actually once day she said oh, Ben we've got some online classes. She's South African so she said Ben, Ben, Ben, we have some online classes. Can you do them? And I was like yeah, I'm up for that. I'll do them from home. And she's like okay,

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come into the academy. And I was like why do I have to come in if they are online? She was like oh, no, no. You're going to come in and sit down in our academy and do the classes. And I was like that's bizarre. What's the point of doing that?
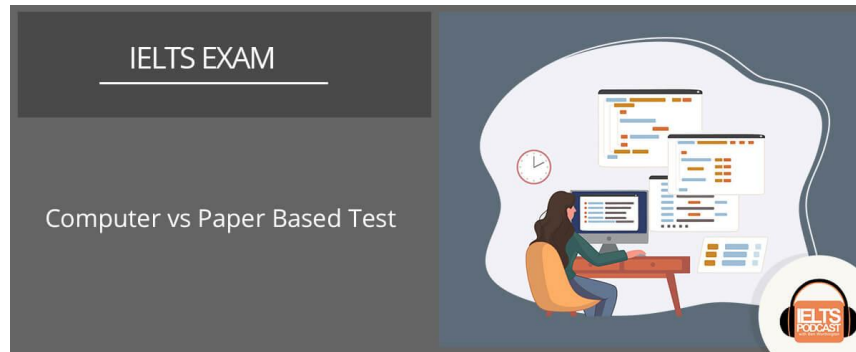
I think we're all-- I think this computer-based test brings us all up to speed and--

Robert: I think so.

Ben: Yes. So many advantages especially for the younger generations.
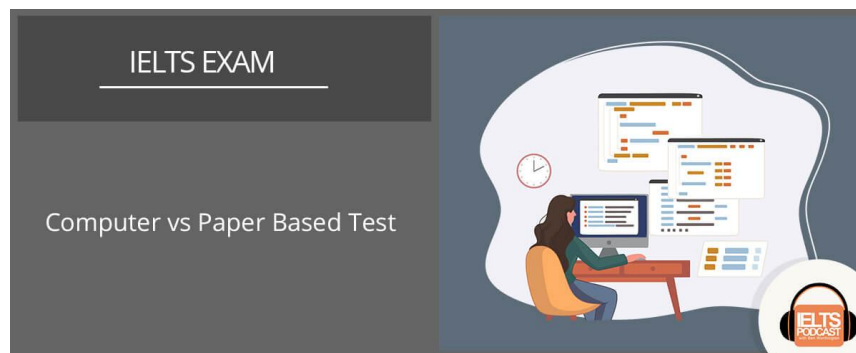
Robert: I think so. I think so. And then there are other things too. What about the listening part? Let's take listening first. You sit there in a small room and you've got your own individual headphones on and that's much better I believe than sharing in a large room, an open room sitting at a table listening to loud speakers. So, it's private.

Also, you can adjust the volume levels if you think it's too quiet for you or too loud for you or whatever. You can adjust it personally.

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Robert: Yeah, yeah. I had a girlfriend-- sorry. I had a girlfriend in Spain and she would listen with one of those small Bluetooth speakers. Yeah and she said she couldn't understand English unless she had it on full whack next to her while she was driving. And I know there's a lot of students like that.
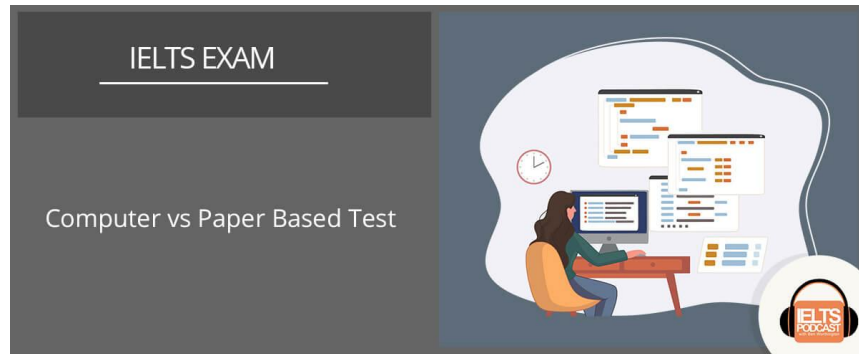
And also I remember one student when I started off the IELTS Podcast I was interviewing him and he was still angry about doing a listening test. I think he did it in Italy in the summer. It was roasting hot, so they had to open the windows because they didn't have air con and of course when they opened the window, there was a ton of noise coming across. Being Italy it's quite noisy, but there's a ton of noise coming in from the vespers, from the traffic and then he said there was a screaming baby and he said he was so angry and he could have scored more. He nailed his writing because he did the course with us, but he said he could have scored more with the listening.

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So yeah, I think it's an excellent point. If you've got the headphones, the volume levels can definitely be easily adjusted. So, yeah.

Robert: And you're living in your own little private world, your own little bubble. Most people do it anyway. I'm not a fan, but most people it seems to me listen to music on headphones. I'm not a fan of that personally. That's irrelevant whether I'm a fan or not, but most people do. Most people are comfortable with that. So, we're in our own little private bubble doing our exam.

And also there are perhaps other reasons too. The official website I think of IELTS British Council website I was checking it out they give all kinds of reasons in favor of the computer-based. Of course they do. They're trying to sell it, aren't they? I'm not trying to sell it, but I went into their website actually the other day and I found some very useful practice materials and I decided to have a go myself. Who am I as an examiner if I haven't tried to do the test myself I thought.

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So, I'm pretty comfortable using a keyboard and performing simple tasks on screen such as highlighting text, moving or dragging parts of the text from one place to another, scrolling up and down and so on. Of course I am. I do it almost every day, but at the same time as I said before given my advanced age which I'm not going to tell you, I do come from the kind of pen and paper generation.

I've never in my life taken an online test in a formal context. Never. Never. Never. Never. So, I thought it might be fun to try it out just to see how I felt. So, the result positive. On the whole positive. I found it much more accessible than I thought it would be. My main worry before was that I imagined that the screen would not be big enough and that I'd be constantly scrolling up and down and losing my way. That was my fear actually.
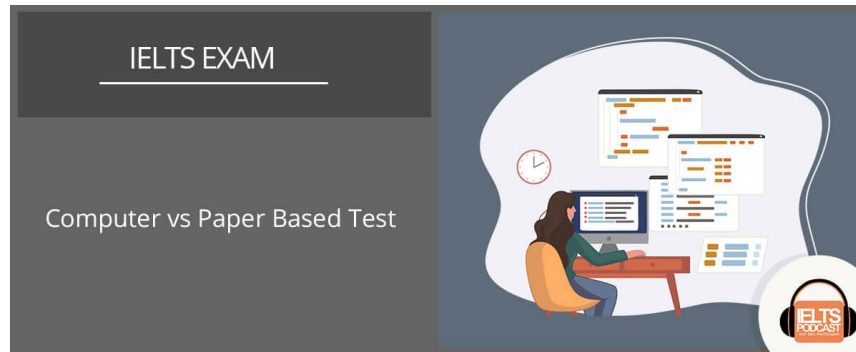
Ben: So, how does it work? Let's start with the listening and just talk us through that.
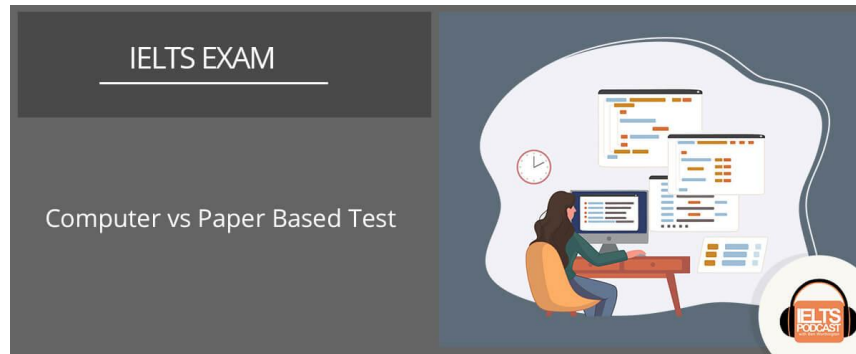
Robert: Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah. Okay. Listen. Obviously, there are some worries about the listening and the reading part answering and questions because what are we doing? We're listening, reading, and answering questions; selecting a box, writing short answers, dragging text to answer matching questions. Remember there are so many different types of questions both in the reading and the listening exams.

The issue with the reading of course-- sorry with the listening is that we're doing all these things simultaneously; listening, reading, following instructions, and answering all at the same time. Some people say that's challenging, but come on. It's the same in the paper version too, isn't it? It's exactly the same thing.

Ben: That's true, but Robert, one student told me that although you're doing similar skills, well obviously one of the differences you've got both hands engaged rather than just one when you're doing these simultaneous acts which I think might affect some people differently in the brain, but also I imagine a lot of people have been doing it with one hand all their life like these

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simultaneous tasks. Like maybe listening to instructions and opening a door or I don't know, but well the point what I want to make is that the student said this is like a kind of like a new skill and like a new area where you might not have been engaged before.

Just like you said, it's like a formal online and it was your first time. It wasn't totally formal, but it was-- you said you'd never done a formal online activity before and maybe some other test takers haven't, but he said he was like it was really good getting the practice with the practice exam exactly like you did with the British Council before.

Robert: Absolutely.

Ben: Otherwise you're going in there blind you've never done engaging both hands and the listening and the dragging and the dropping. If you've never done it before, it can be quite a pill I guess. I guess.
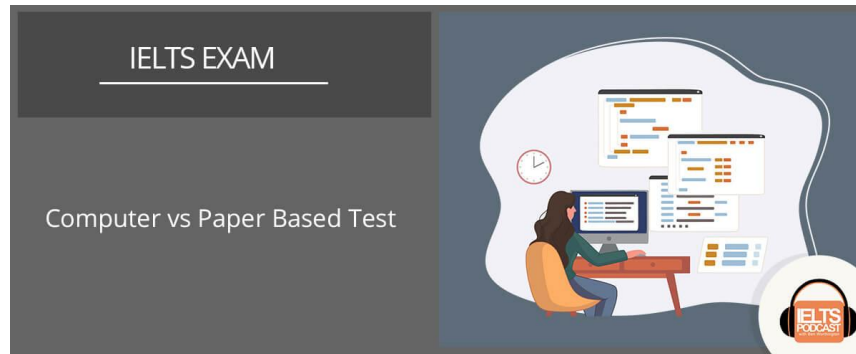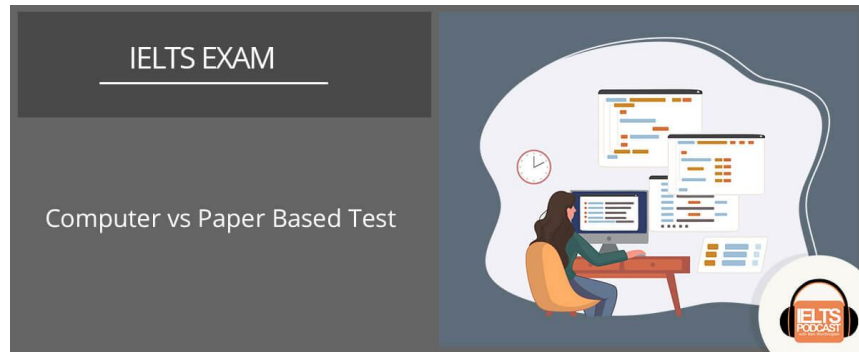

Robert: I think I'm at an advantage to most people because I'm left-handed. So, I use my right hand an awful lot on screen; the mouse, whatever-- I don't have a mouse. I have a track pad, but I use my right hand a lot on screen. So, I think left-handed people we are more adaptable to using our right hand than right-handed people using their left hand. So, I think that's one of the advantages that left hand people have.

Ben: Definitely.

Robert: Ha-ha-ha, but the other thing I noticed immediately with this of course it's similar in the paper test, but-- okay. The most important thing is to use those precious seconds you've got before the audio starts. It already opens on the practice. You've got let's say four questions. On the left-hand side of the screen you've got your listening instructions and on the right-hand side of the screen you've got the space for the answers, but you've got around 30 seconds, 30 seconds to go over the test questions on screen.

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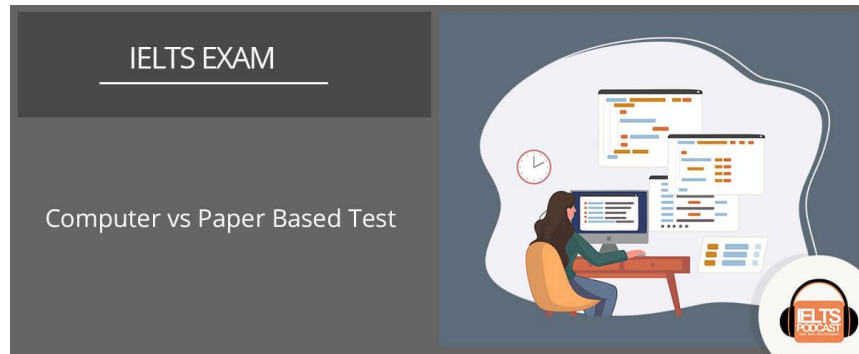Click here for IELTS Materials (free)

So, you know what you're going to listen for. It's that kind of very important thing that you must do. Use those seconds. So, after that of course I had no problems answering the questions and when it comes to writing answers, the one word fill in, for example, there was no issue at all because-- this is an important point I think-- as I was writing, the audio carried on in my ears, but it contained no new important information, but it just kind of like filled in extra stuff about the answer that I was giving. So, I had time to write the word or write the number whatever it was.

So, in other words, as long as you can type relatively quickly, you don't have to be so fast, but relatively quickly, you shouldn't fall behind and find it hard to catch up with what you hear which is concentration and keeping up to speed with the questions and the answers in the listening is absolutely vital.

Ben: Absolutely and I guess as well because you're typing as we said earlier, a lot of people type faster than they actually write and I guess this is definitely true for those who are writing in Cyrillic or in other characters. I knew if I was to write in Cyrillic it would take a couple of

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months for me to write an essay and I guess this is another advantage of doing it typing especially the younger-- our generation and below and maybe above.

And I just wanted to say like the older generation if you're older and you do have problems reading on the screen then perhaps you might want to go for the paper-based because I know some people struggle with reading on screen, but I guess the vast majority of our listeners are digital natives as they're called.
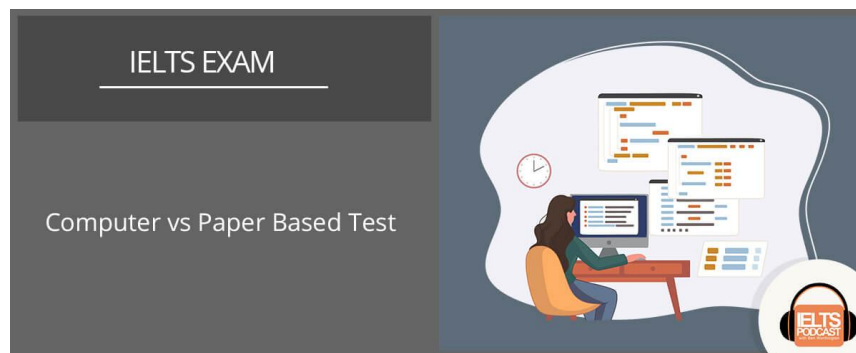
Robert: I think so. I think so. The other point I think is important to remember is that because in the paper-based you've got I don't know how many minutes. Is it five or ten minutes right at the end to transfer your answers onto your answer sheet. There's a kind of danger in the paper, isn't it, that you could transfer mistakes you've already made into other mistakes or correct spelling into incorrect spelling because don't forget everybody you will receive zero points if you spell something wrong. Horrible, isn't it?

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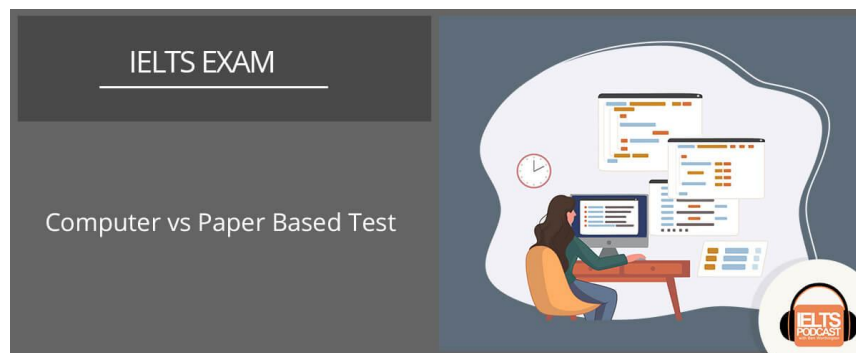
So, there's also of course the danger online that when you're typing fast or if it's a word that you hit the nerves you're suffering or whatever, we all make typing mistakes of course. We're all guilty of that. Nobody is perfect, but we don't have a spelling check available to us on the exam of course, but you do get two minutes, two entire minutes, 120 seconds at the end of the test to look over the answers again and you can change anything you want to.

If I say all right, maybe I had to spell a word like receipt. Okay. Okay. What was the person waiting for? A receipt. Oh God, receipt is a notoriously difficult word to spell, isn't it? r-e-c-e-i-p-t okay, but I put the i and the e the wrong way around when I typed it. I check it out and think my God. Oh my God, I spelt it wrong. I can easily edit just as I would do on any word processing thing and using Word or something simplifies that.

Ben: That's a really good point. Just before we get on to the writing, I think we're going to mention it, but editing is such a valuable advantage you have with the paper-based and I'm just thinking back to my school days, the amount of exams I did multiple choice where I got mixed

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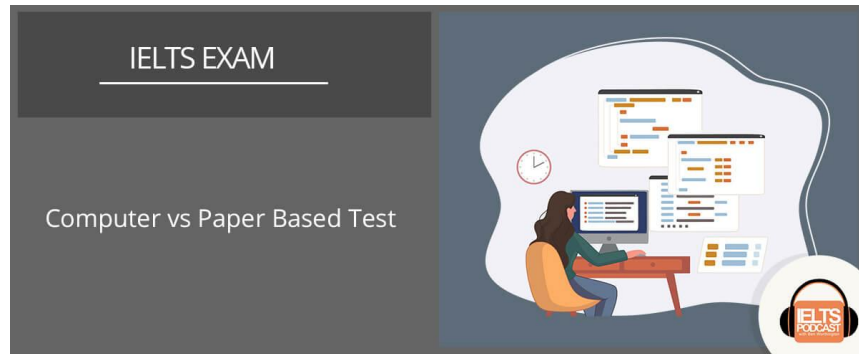Click here for IELTS Materials (free)

up and I'm putting answer 27 in box 25 and then I'm having to go back and scratch it all out and put arrows there. An absolute train crash.

And the same with my written essays. Like ideas would pop in and I want to go back and put them in, but anyway, let's go on to the reading I guess next.

Robert: We wasn't so bad either. It wasn't so bad, Ben, the reading. What I most liked about the reading test was the split screen: text on the left, questions on the right and because of the screen size, only the relevant parts of the text is seen on screen.

Ben: It's kind of like a clue that, isn't it?

Robert: That's right yeah, but of course, the longer the text, the more you might need to scroll up and down to answer or check, but the computer version does offer one or two useful ways to do that. On screen you can select and highlight text for reference just by selecting a part and then
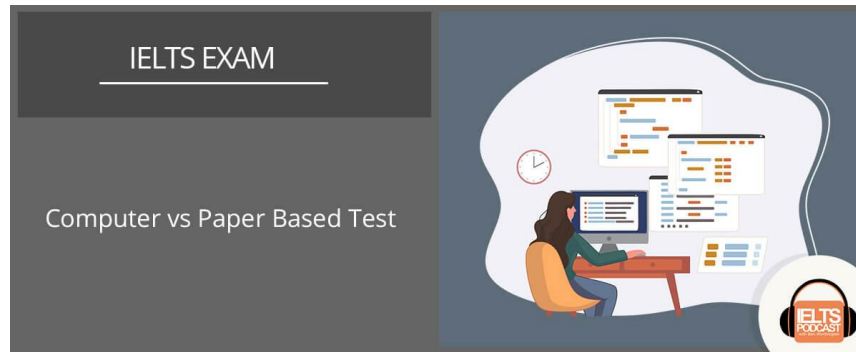

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right clicking and it says highlight and it goes yellow. And you can also in the same way open a kind of notepad and make any highlighted notes on the highlighted section.

So, well it could get a bit complicated that, but for a short test like a short text, but IELTS centers will also provide test takers with a pencil and a pen-- sorry a pencil and paper to make notes during the test. If you say hey, can I have a pencil and a paper? They must give it to you so you can write down anything that you want like reading all right text one. Okay. Answer one. I think it's false, but let me check. So, I could write that down on a piece of paper if I want to and then go back and check later and then write my answer in if I've got time.

It's tricky, but you can do that kind of thing particularly with the writing test of course when you have to make notes before you start.
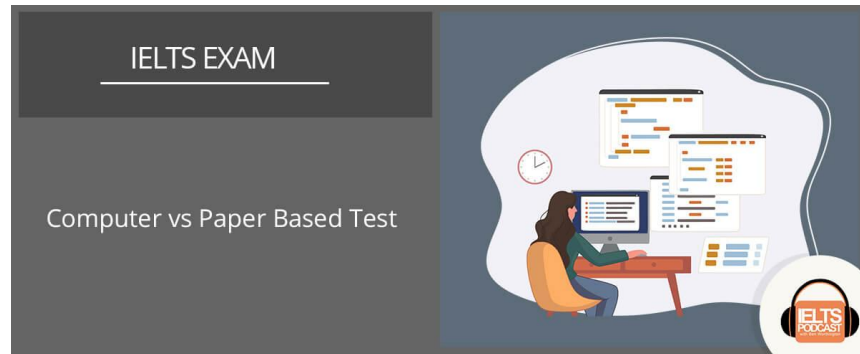
Ben: Oh, yeah yeah. On our writing course we've got a whole process, a whole system in place and taking these notes and doing a mini plan at the beginning is absolutely critical to the process

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because it's like a tube. If you get on on the wrong tube you'll end up in the wrong destination and it's like this is your essay right and if you start off wrong, you'll end up with the wrong essay and you won't score points in task response. So, yeah absolutely. I'd strongly recommend everyone to get the pencil and paper.

Robert: Of course obviously both in listening and reading, some types of questions are trickier more difficult than others, but I feel it's exactly the same in the paper version of course, but I think in reading, it's those matching tasks when you have let's say eight perhaps seven paragraphs in the text and you've got to match each paragraph with a heading, a title for it and you've got to drag the titles into each little box at the beginning of each paragraph.
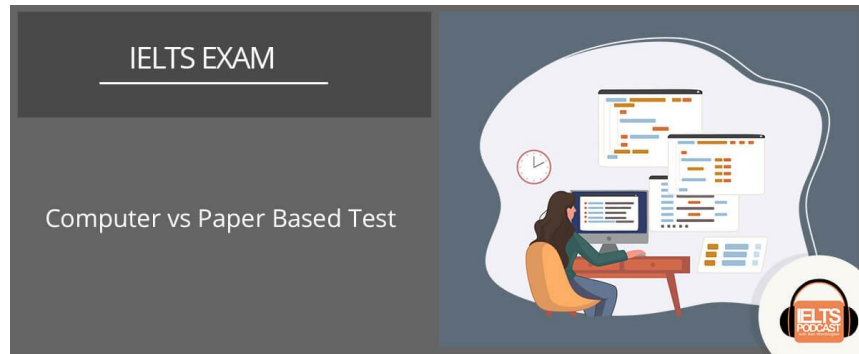
On screen it's a question of scrolling and selecting and dragging the answers to the appropriate space. I find it pretty easy to do. In fact, on purpose I made a couple of mistakes just to see what would happen and to see how long it took me to eliminate my choice and put another one there and it was easy. You just get rid of it and change it with another one. It was easy. It's accessible.

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Anybody who's done that normally with editing a Word text in their daily studies or daily job it's as easy as that.

This is easy as that, but as you say, do the practice test first. It gives you a familiarity. Familiarity that's the word. The other thing is great I know in the paper-based at least where I was doing the tests as an examiner, I know very well that in the room where they took the exam, there's a huge clock on the wall and it goes tick tock tick tock. So, you can see how much time you've got left and I do know that the invigilators will say something like you have 10 minutes left or something like that.

That's fine, but on screen, there's a timer which tells you exactly how much time you got left and in the reading and writing tests with ten and later with five minutes to go, the screen changes color to warn you. I think it changes color to red or something. So, you think oh my God, something's happening. What is that? It can be a bit frightening for some people particularly if you're behind time in the writing, but you've got to have that right.

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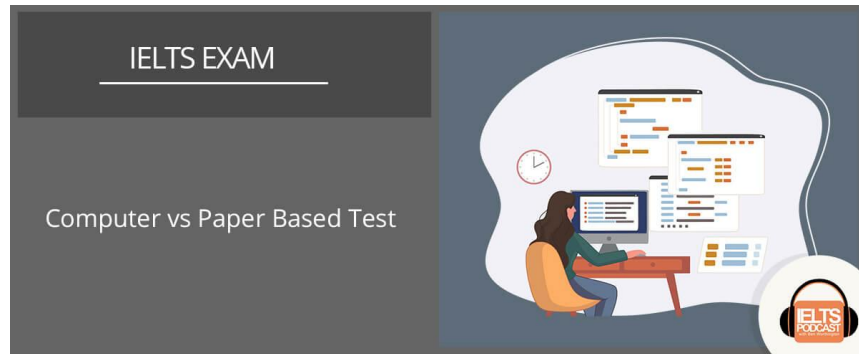
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Well, writing; some little things about writing. It's same thing I was saying; the split screen. The questions on the left, space for the answers on the right. Editing, erasing, or moving stuff is just so easy just with any word processor and you can't edit the spelling of course because they're testing you on that.

The other thing you get an automatic word count, so you've got no issues with counting words yourself manually. You don't have to worry about that. It tells you how many words you've been like you've been using.

Ben: That's super handy. That's super handy. It's a bit of a gray area because I've read on official IELTS exams you must write something about 250 words and then I'll go to the IELTS IDP criteria and they don't put anything about 250. So, that's a bit of a gray area for me. Maybe it was an old rule. However, I do know that most band 7 essays are usually always over 250. That's for certain. That's for certain. And also-- oh go on. Sorry, Rob.

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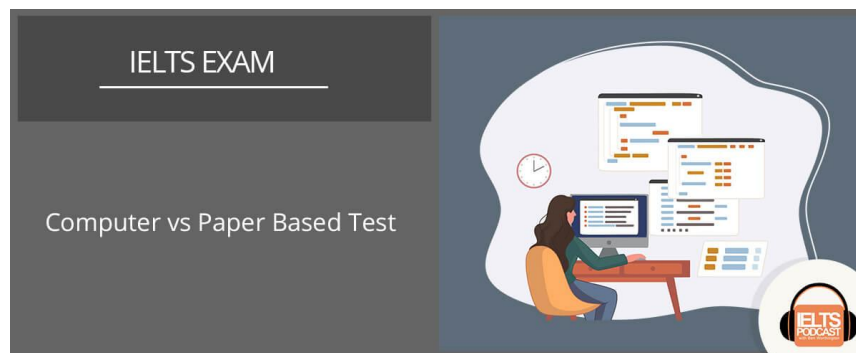Click here for IELTS Materials (free)

Robert: No no no no no. It's okay. Well, I was just going to say what happened there, Ben was a few years ago they decided to eliminate-- what we did before with writing was this. If somebody doesn't write 250 words in task 2, there was a kind of scale. If they write like between 10 and 20 less than 250 you would take off half a point.

Ben: Oh wow!

Robert: You were penalized. If it was very short, you'd take off one or even two points off the first category in task 2 writing.

Ben: Wow! Even if it was perfectly written?

Robert: Absolutely. The idea was originally that of course a person who didn't write as much-- didn't write 250 words wrote less than 250 words wouldn't have been able to fully develop their argument, but then they just made the change that said no, forget that. There is no penalty for

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writing less because it doesn't really make any difference to the final results. They did a whole statistical analysis of that.
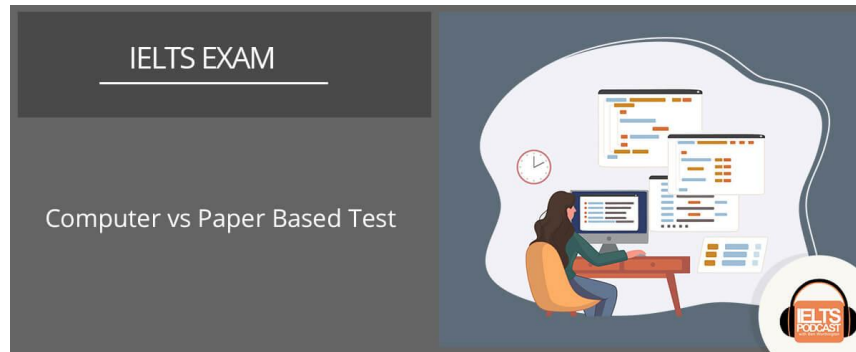
Ben: Wow! Interesting.

Robert: But you do find actually if someone writes less than 250 words in task 2 and less than 150 in task 1, you tend to find that they haven't really fully developed their answer.

Ben: Yeah I was thinking like 250 words can you really sufficiently develop the whole idea, the whole argument, your whole position?
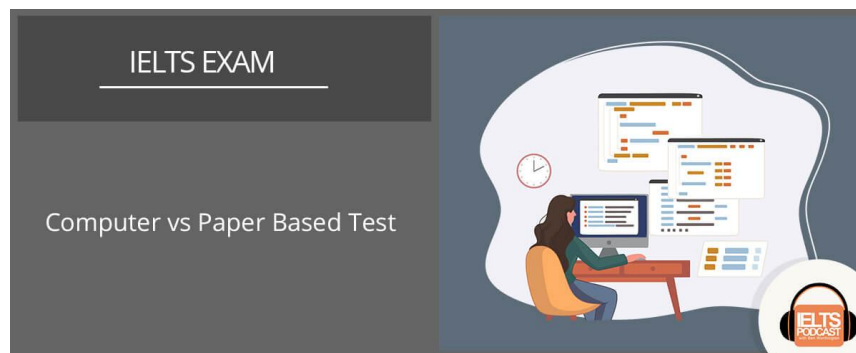
Robert: Not really.

Ben: This is why on our course when you follow the system we've got, the essays will come out around 300, 350. Between 300 and 400 usually.

Robert: That's right if you can make it that way. Yeah yeah, that's true.

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Ben: Exactly and it's just like automatically coming out at that length which is why we're able to offer the guarantee. And just back to the writing on the computer, I just want to mention again and this is a massive advantage for students who struggle to organize their ideas because you can edit the essay while you're typing and it's not going to look like a disaster. The examiner is not going to see it and be like oh my gosh because this is exactly why when we started our essay correction service we never accepted essays handwritten because I would just look at it and I'd be like I am not going to spend 30 minutes scrambling through this for this absolute disaster of a writer when I can just ask the student to type it up and then we'll correct it and so you've got that luxury to reorganize it if necessary.

Second, you're probably in most cases more used to typing than writing. I remember when I went back to uni and we would sit in the exam, it felt so weird because we do the whole term writing on our computers and then we're going to the exam and have to write pen and paper and it felt so odd.

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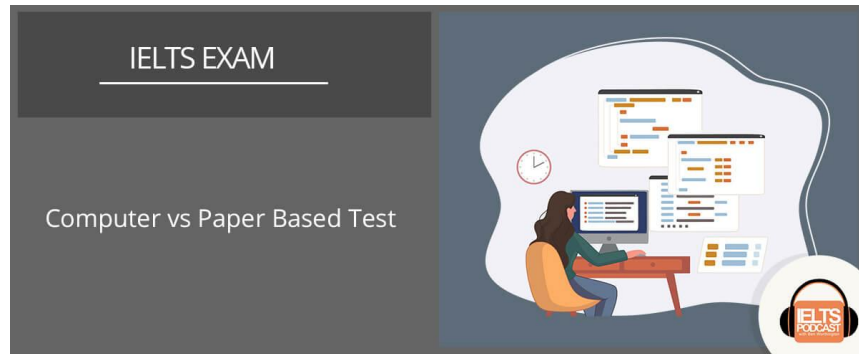Click here for IELTS Materials (free)

Robert: It must be very weird.

Ben: Yeah yeah yeah and I think for most of the IELTS students nowadays it's a tricky one, but you could say pen and paper is a relic. I don't think we're going ahead--

Robert: Almost. We're almost there.

Ben: Yeah yeah yeah. It's going to be a skill where maybe we don't need it in the future. Let's see, but it was exciting times and transition.
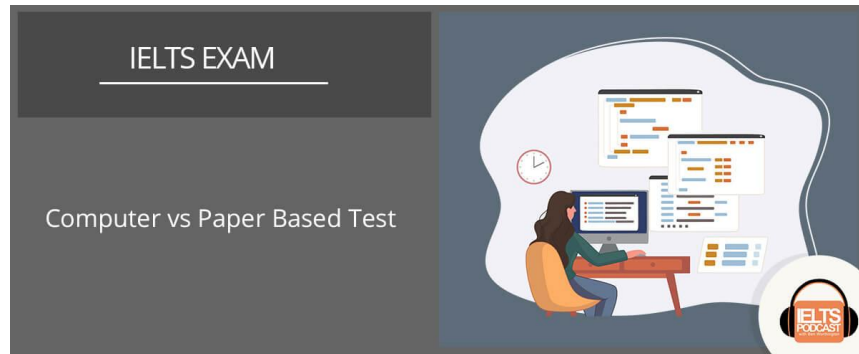
Robert: I come from that generation where handwriting was praised. It's not such a-- in some cultures obviously I can't say, but obviously in oriental cultures, Japan, China for example, beautiful handwriting, beautiful ability to paint whatever your answer is highly skilled and highly praised. I'm not sure that's true in other cultures anymore. Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps I'm wrong.

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Ben: I think it might be one of those skills that is just nice to have. It's a bonus, but it's not an essential one, but anyway, but back on topic. Can you give us your overall verdict on how you found the computer-based exam? How did you find it?

Robert: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I find it a very enjoyable experience. I would recommend it to anyone who's given the choice to be honest with you between the two versions on condition that you feel happy online. If you think no, I'm a pen and paper person, all right. Go for the pen and paper, but of course do we have a choice anymore? I think the trend in many centers is to use the computer-based as much as possible.

It does have its limitations maybe for the centers themselves because of space. You need enough space to be able to have seating for a certain number of people at a computer. Maybe some centers don't have that space. Maybe they do. It depends. It depends. It depends. It depends on resources, but generally speaking, if any of you have spent most of your life online, I really think
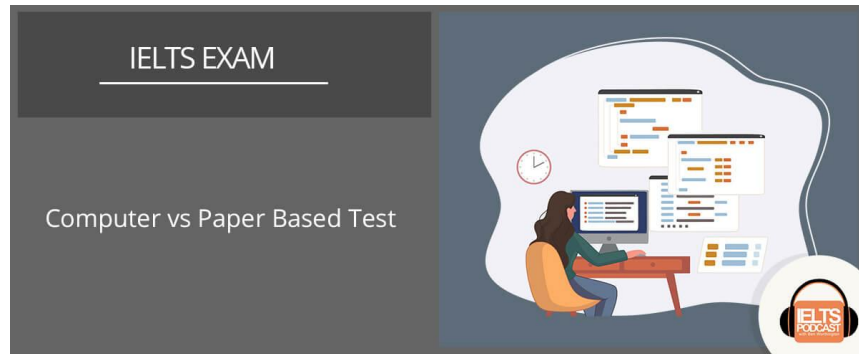
at the same time it's very important as you said Ben to get the experience online of the test itself. Do those practice tests.

I just went to British Council IELTS computer-based tests and there it came up either immediately on Google. The practice tests are all free. Just get in there and do it. I'm sure IDP has the same kind of stuff.

Ben: Absolutely.

Robert: The official sources of those links which are useful for us and trying it out is really worthwhile, but I find it very worthwhile. I'd recommend it.
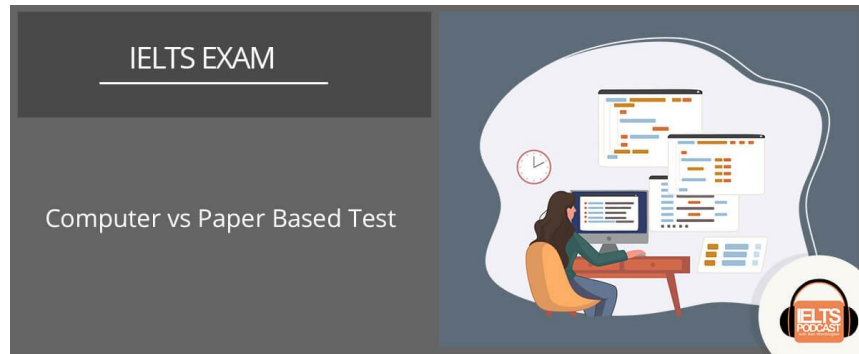
Ben: Definitely. Just two things before we finish. I've had students who have done the paper-based and then they didn't get the grade they wanted and then about literally two weeks later, they went in for the computer-based one and because they were more comfortable doing it online typing up their answers and whatnot, they did get that band score improvement.

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I doubt they jumped at half a band in two weeks because they improved their English skills, but I'm very very confident they increased half a band because the examiner didn't have to struggle through their handwriting and the student was just able to edit and write a better essay just because of the tools that they were given. They're getting better, faster, more efficient, and clearer tools to write the essay.

So, I'd strongly recommend my students even if the computer-based test is in the next city, take the trip and do it and especially if you're a student who struggles with the handwriting, it's worth it to jump on the train and go to the next city and get that computer-based one. That's my recommendation, but it's largely down to you, but I think most of our students are digital natives as we're saying and more than comfortable with typing their essays rather than handwriting.

Now, we're coming to an end and I just wanted to say a big thanks for joining us and we have launched an online mini course and you can go to ieltspodcast.com and you'll see the advertisements for that and we're giving away free feedback for the students who are joining this

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course and that's real authentic feedback so you can improve much much quicker. And that's available at ieltspodcast.com and as soon as you sign up for the newsletter, you'll get the information about that free online course.

So, have a fantastic day. Good luck with your IELTS preparation. Before we finish, anything to say, Rob? Before we finish?
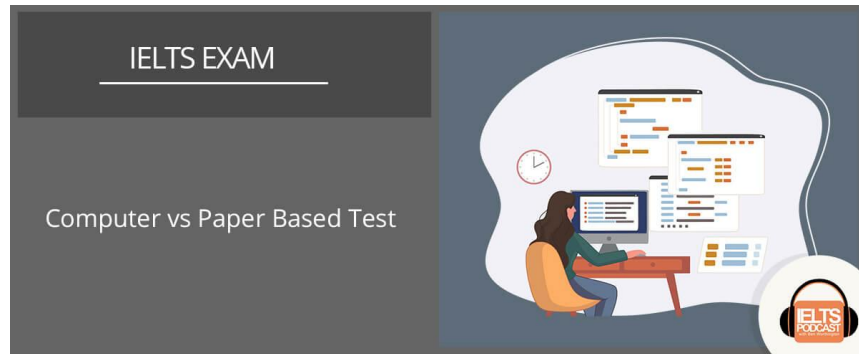
Robert: No no no no no no.

Ben: Not even good to our students?

Robert: Yes yes yes. Good luck. Good luck. Good luck. Just one more. I think a lot of people I speak to they're also so happy that they get the results so quickly. I don't know why. It doesn't make any big difference to their lives. Yes, I think it does. People love to get the answers.

Ben: A few days less of pain and anxiety.

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Robert: Absolutely. I remember one student who kind of texted me the day that she got the result, but before she got it she said hey, Rob do you know when they're giving the results? I said well, probably today. Check it out. And then she was like yes, I got them.

Ben: Okay. Thank you very much for listening and have a super day.

[Music]

Female Speaker: Thanks for listening to ieltspodcast.com

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