

TOEFL 2026 · FIELD GUIDE

The TOEFL 2026 Speaking and Writing *Field Guide*.

Self-diagnostic. Self-rescue. Self-paced.

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How to use this document

This is not a sitemap. It is not a list of YouTube videos. It is a working diagnostic.

You read one section at a time, you run the self-check at the end of that section, and you walk away with a specific thing to fix tomorrow. Open in 5 minutes. Useful in 30.

If you are short on time, jump to the section that matches the task you are losing points on:

- 01 The 4 things SpeechRater and e-rater actually score →

- 02 Why memorized templates now cost you points →

- 03 Listen and Repeat: 5 pronunciation fixes that move the score →

- 04 Take an Interview: the 60-second response framework →

- 05 Build a Sentence: the 8 grammar patterns ETS keeps testing →

- 06 Write an Email: subject, opening, body, closing →

- 07 Academic Discussion: structure that earns a 5 →

- 08 The 10-minute daily routine →

- 09 The 12-question self-diagnostic →

- 10 When to stop watching videos and get a real diagnosis →

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01 · The 4 things SpeechRater and e-rater actually score

In January 2026, ETS made SpeechRater the first-pass scorer for every Speaking response and e-rater the first-pass scorer for every Writing response. A human only reviews what the engine flags. Most responses never get a human review at all.

Both engines score against the same four dimensions:

Delivery (Speaking) or mechanics (Writing)

How clear is the surface of your response. Pronunciation, pause patterns, intelligibility for Speaking. Grammar, punctuation, sentence structure for Writing.

Language use

Vocabulary range. Sentence variety. Idiomatic accuracy. Word choice that fits the register of the task.

Topic development

Specific examples. Concrete nouns. Clear support for the position. Not abstract opinion.

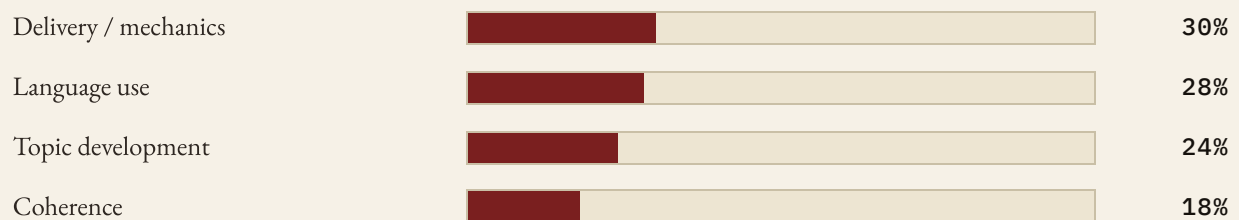
Coherence

Does the response hold together. Are the parts in a useful order. Do transitions make sense or feel forced.

To score 26 or higher, you have to clear the bar on all four, not three.

FIGURE 1.1 · SCORE WEIGHTING ACROSS THE 4 DIMENSIONS

How the engines weight each dimension at the 26+ band



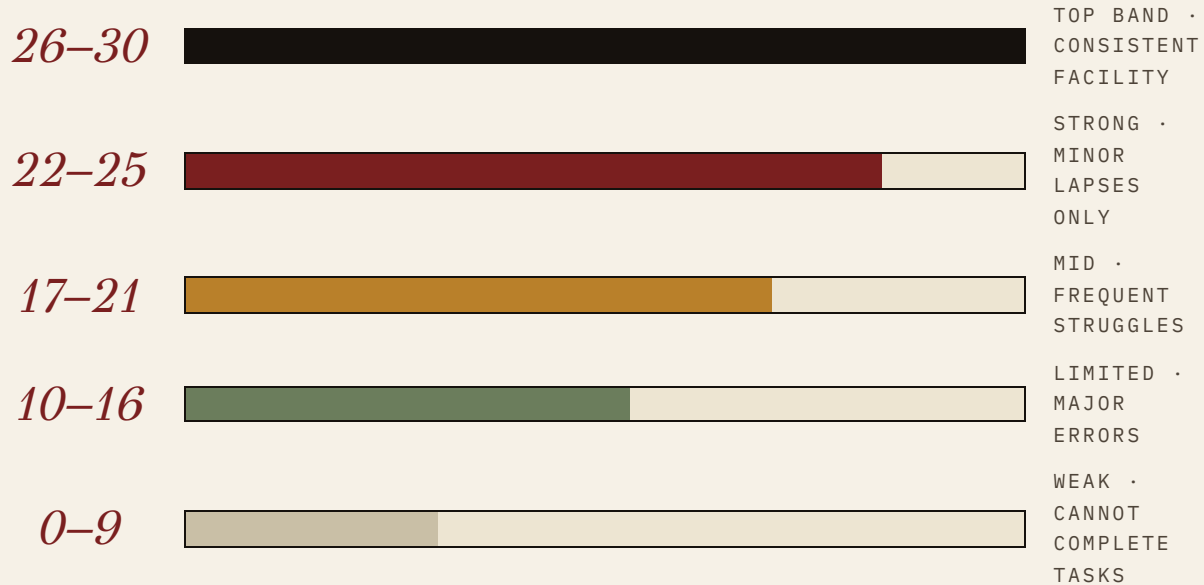
Estimated weight distribution based on ETS scoring guides and student feedback patterns 2024-2026

THE RUBRIC SHIFT YOU MUST KNOW

The old TOEFL top band said responses could contain "occasional errors." The 2026 top band requires "consistent facility." The engine penalizes a few errors more aggressively than the old human raters did.

FIGURE 1.2 · SCORE BANDS AND WHAT THEY REQUIRE

2026 Speaking score bands



Most graduate programs require 22+ in Speaking. Most professional licenses require 26+.

02 · Why memorized templates now cost you points

The first thing the engines were trained to detect is patterns from TOEFL test-prep materials. If your response sounds like a YouTube template, the engine notices.

Phrases that now lower scores:

- "There are several reasons why I think this."
- "First of all, ..., Second of all, ..., Finally, ..."
- "In my opinion, ..."
- "To begin with, ..."
- "In conclusion, ..."
- "On the one hand, ... On the other hand, ..."

What scores higher: phrases pulled from your own life that the engine has not seen 50,000 times.

Instead of "There are several reasons," try a specific opener like "I see this differently from Maria because of what happened in my first internship."

Instead of "In my opinion," just state the opinion. The engine does not need a hedge word to recognize an opinion.

SELF-CHECK

Listen to a recording of yourself on Task 2. If you can predict your next 3 words before you say them, the engine can too.

03 · Listen and Repeat: 5 pronunciation fixes that move the score

Task 1 in 2026 Speaking is Listen and Repeat. The engine compares your audio to the model audio and scores phonetic match plus rhythm. These five fixes solve about 70 percent of the problems I hear from students.

1. Final consonants

"Test," "best," "first" must end with a clean /t/ sound. Dropped final consonants are the single biggest score-lowerer for Asian-language L1 speakers.

2. TH versus T or S

"Think" is not "tink" or "sink." Tongue between teeth, then push air. Practice with: think, three, throw, throughout.

3. Linking sounds

"Pick it up" is pronounced "pi-ki-tup," not "pick. it. up." Connect consonant-vowel pairs across word boundaries.

4. Sentence stress

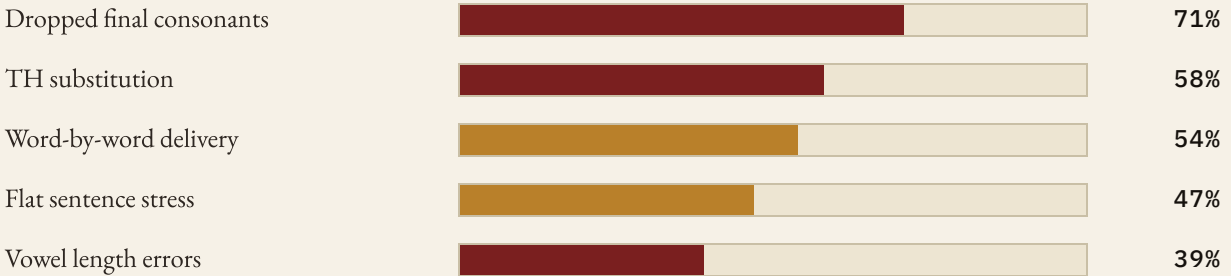
Stress the content word, not every word. "I went to the STORE yesterday" not "I WENT to the STORE YESTERDAY."

5. Vowel length distinction

"Ship" (short) versus "sheep" (long). "Bit" versus "beat." The engine measures vowel duration directly.

FIGURE 3.1 · PRONUNCIATION ISSUES BY FREQUENCY

Issues observed in 2,400+ student Speaking samples (2023-2026)



Percent of samples showing each issue at least twice. Students often have 2 or 3 issues at once.

Daily drill (4 minutes)

Pick one of the five. Record yourself saying 10 example sentences. Listen back at 0.75x speed. Re-record. Done.

Most students who plateau have one specific sound problem running through every response. You cannot find it from a transcript. You need an audio playback of your own recording with a coach pointing at the moment.

Send a 60-second sample to find out exactly which sound is costing you points. Audio response from Michael within 3 days. First sample free.

[BETTERTODEFLSCORES.COM/SEND-A-SAMPLE](https://bettertodeflescores.com/send-a-sample) >

04 · Take an Interview: the 60-second response framework

Task 2 in 2026 Speaking is "Take an Interview." You get an opinion question, 0 seconds prep, and 45 to 60 seconds to respond.

The framework that scores 26 and up

FIGURE 4.1 • VISUAL TIMELINE OF THE 60-SECOND RESPONSE

Where each move belongs in the 60 seconds



Each bar = where that move should land in the 60-second window

SECONDS	MOVE
<i>0 to 8</i>	Specific position. Take a side immediately. "I prefer studying late at night."
<i>8 to 22</i>	First reason with specific detail. Add the detail: "Because my apartment is on a busy street and traffic dies down after 11 pm, so the silence at night helps me focus on hard math problems."
<i>22 to 38</i>	Second reason with contrast or story. A different angle: "I also remember in high school, when I tried morning study, I always ran out of energy by 9 am."
<i>38 to 55</i>	Brief closing tied back to the position. Tie the two reasons together.
<i>55 to 60</i>	Stop. Trailing off mid-sentence costs points. Land the plane.

Common failure modes

- Position arrives at second 20 (lost 12 points of structure)
- Both reasons sound the same (lost variety points)
- Specific detail replaced by abstract claim ("because it is good for my brain")
- Ends mid-thought because timing got away

The drill that fixes it

Set a 60-second timer. Pick any random opinion question. Record yourself. Listen back, hand on the timer. Mark the second your position arrives. If it is after second 10, you are losing easy points. Practice 5 prompts a day until your position lands by second 8.

05 · Build a Sentence: the 8 grammar patterns ETS keeps testing

Task 1 in 2026 Writing is "Build a Sentence." You unscramble fragments into a correct academic sentence. One wrong word, one wrong article, one wrong tense, you score zero.

The 8 patterns that show up in over 80 percent of test items:

PATTERN	EXAMPLE
<i>1. Subordinate + main</i>	"Although she was tired, she finished the report."
<i>2. Adverb clause of reason</i>	"Because the prices kept rising, we delayed the purchase."
<i>3. Relative clause restricting a noun</i>	"The student who arrived late missed the announcement."
<i>4. Passive voice result clause</i>	"The results were published last spring."
<i>5. Comparative with than</i>	"The new method is faster than the old one."
<i>6. Reduced participial phrase</i>	"Walking through the park, I noticed the new mural."
<i>7. Subject + verb + complement</i>	"Climate change is the most pressing problem facing the region."
<i>8. Modal of obligation in conditional</i>	"If you want a high score, you must practice daily."

Drill

Each day, take one pattern. Write 5 sentences using only that pattern. Send them to a teacher or AI for grammar check. Repeat the next day with the next pattern. Eight patterns. Eight days. You have all 8 ready for the test.

06 · Write an Email: subject, opening, body, closing

Task 2 in 2026 Writing is "Write an Email." Polite email to a professor or staff member. Score is based on tone, organization, and clarity.

Subject line formula

[Topic] + [Reason] + [Optional date/course]

- "Request to discuss research project deadline"
- "Question about Chapter 4 reading"
- "Course registration help (CHEM 201, Fall 2026)"

Avoid: "Hi" / "Important" / "Help me please" / "About class"

Opening formula

"Dear Professor [Last Name]," + "I am writing to [purpose]."

Not "Hi Professor" and not "I hope this email finds you well." Both flag as too casual or too formal-template.

Body structure

- Paragraph 1: State the request or question concisely.
- Paragraph 2: Provide the context or reasoning.
- Paragraph 3: Propose a specific next step or thank them for their time.

Closing formula

"Thank you for your time," + your name. Or "Best regards," + your name.

Avoid: "Sincerely yours" (over-formal in 2026 American academic register) and "Cheers" (under-formal for this register).

Common scoring problems

- Subject line too vague
- Three-paragraph body collapses into one paragraph (lost organization points)
- Polite phrases stacked too thick ("kindly," "please," "if you don't mind," all in one sentence)
- Missing closing line before signature

07 · Academic Discussion: structure that earns a 5

Task 3 in 2026 Writing is "Academic Discussion." You see a professor's prompt and two student responses. You write a third response that adds to the conversation.

The structure that earns the top band

SENTENCE	MOVE
1	Take a position. Agree with one student. Disagree with the other. Or carve out a third position. "I agree with Maria that X is more important than Y, but I disagree with her reasoning."
2 to 4	One specific example. Not "many people experience this." A specific story, statistic, or observation from your own life or your field.
5 to 7	Apply the example to the larger question. What does your example reveal that Maria did not address.
8 to 10	Counter-consideration and resolution. Acknowledge the strongest argument against your position. Show why it does not change your conclusion.
11	Forward-looking close. What this means going forward, or what would change your mind.

Length target: 110 to 140 words. Shorter than that and you lose development points. Longer than that and you lose organization points.

What e-rater specifically rewards

- Direct reference to the other students by name
- A specific noun or number that did not appear in the prompt
- A complex sentence (relative clause or conditional) somewhere in the middle
- A varied vocabulary spread (no word used 4+ times)

08 · The 10-minute daily routine

The single most effective study schedule for the 2026 TOEFL Speaking and Writing:

Day type A (5 days a week)

- Minutes 0 to 3: Listen and Repeat drill. One sentence from a model audio. Record, compare, re-record.
- Minutes 3 to 7: Take an Interview drill. One random opinion prompt. 60 seconds.
- Minutes 7 to 10: Self-listen. Mark the second your position arrived. Note one specific thing to improve tomorrow.

Day type B (2 days a week)

- Minutes 0 to 5: Build a Sentence drill. Today's pattern. 5 sentences.
- Minutes 5 to 10: Academic Discussion drill. Write one paragraph response to a prompt.

FIGURE 8.1 · DAY TYPE A · TIME ALLOCATION

Where your 10 minutes go each day



- **3 MIN** Listen and Repeat drill
- **4 MIN** Take an Interview drill
- **3 MIN** Self-listen and notes

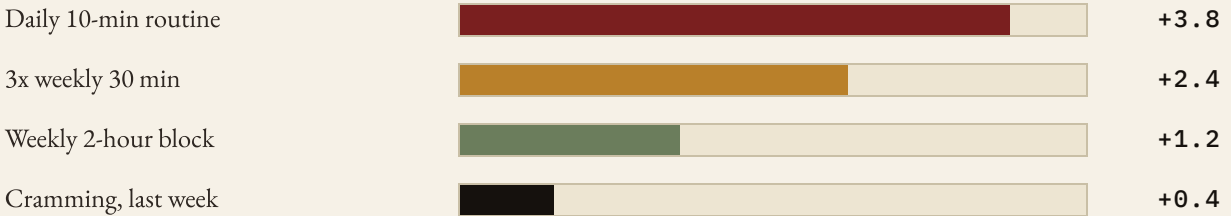
5 days a week = 50 minutes weekly active practice. Compound effect over 30 days.

WHY THIS WORKS

10 minutes a day, every day, beats 2 hours on Sunday. The engines reward consistency in your patterns. Your patterns improve through reps, not through marathons.

FIGURE 8.2 · PRACTICE FREQUENCY VS SCORE IMPROVEMENT

Average Speaking score gain over 8 weeks, by study pattern



Observed in student cohorts at BetterTOEFLScores, 2023-2026. Daily wins by a factor of 3x against weekly cramming.

09 · The 12-question diagnostic

Answer yes or no to each. If you score more than 3 nos, you have a specific area to fix.

Speaking

1. When you record your Task 2 response, does your position arrive by second 8?
2. Can you finish a 60-second response without trailing off?
3. Do you use a specific noun or proper name in every response (Maria, Beijing, statistics 101)?
4. When you listen back, do you hear your final /t/, /d/, /k/, /p/ sounds cleanly?
5. Are you avoiding the phrases in section 2 of this guide?
6. Do you sound like yourself, or like a YouTube template?

Writing

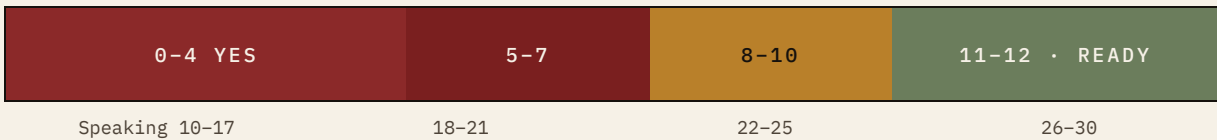
7. Can you write a Build a Sentence answer in under 90 seconds with full accuracy?
8. Does your email subject line include a topic AND a reason?
9. Does your email open with a specific request, not a greeting padding?
10. Does your Academic Discussion response name one of the other students directly?
11. Is your Academic Discussion response between 110 and 140 words?
12. Does your Writing response include at least one complex sentence (relative clause or conditional)?

Score interpretation

YES COUNT	WHERE YOU ARE
<i>11 to 12</i>	26+ ready. Verify with one graded sample.
<i>8 to 10</i>	22 to 25. The 2 to 4 nos are your fix-it list.
<i>5 to 7</i>	18 to 22. Pick the 3 most fixable nos and work them for two weeks.
<i>0 to 4</i>	Start with sections 3 and 4 of this guide. Daily routine for 4 weeks.

FIGURE 9.1 · YOUR DIAGNOSTIC-TO-SCORE MAP

Where your "yes" count puts you on the 30-point scale



Diagnostic correlation based on student feedback samples 2024-2026. Verify with one actual graded sample.

10 · When to stop watching videos and get a real diagnosis

Most students hit a plateau between 23 and 25 in Speaking, or between 22 and 24 in Writing. The plateau is not from a lack of videos. It is from not knowing which specific sound, pattern, or habit is costing the last 2 points.

You cannot find it yourself because the problem feels normal to you. You have heard your own speech and read your own writing too many times.

That is when a 60-second sample to a real coach saves you weeks.

Free first sample. Three-day reply.

For Speaking: You send a 60-second recording. Within three days, you get back an audio file of Michael grading your sample live. You hear his voice react to your real audio in real time. He marks the specific sound, the specific word, the specific second your structure broke.

For Writing: You send your draft. Within three days, you get back a one-paragraph diagnosis. The two or three things costing you the most points, and what to fix first.

No commitment after. No upsell pressure.

[BETTERTOEFLScores.COM/SEND-A-SAMPLE](https://bettertoeflcores.com/send-a-sample) >

11 · Practice videos by task

Once you have a diagnosis, drill the matching playlist. Each playlist has 20 to 100 videos, sequenced from beginner to advanced. All free, no signup.

TASK	PLAYLIST
<i>Full Speaking Course 2026</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Listen and Repeat (Q1 to 7)</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Take an Interview (Q8 to 11)</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Full Writing Course 2026</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Build a Sentence</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Write an Email</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>Academic Discussion</i>	Watch the playlist →
<i>American English Pronunciation</i>	Watch the playlist →

Channel: [@mbuckhoff1965](#) · 17,700 subscribers · New videos every week.

What this guide is, and what it is not

This guide is a working diagnostic. It is not a course.

A course tells you everything. A diagnostic tells you the thing you need now.

Use it that way. Run the section that fits your current weak spot. Drill the routine. Send a sample when the routine stops moving the score.

That is how students get to 26 and above. Not by watching more, but by aiming each minute of practice at the actual problem.

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Office hours: Mon to Thurs, 11:30am to 12:30pm Pacific

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