

ESTERMA ACADEMY

TOEFL iBT 2026 READING

LESSON 1

COMPLETE THE WORDS

Vocabulary in context - Grammar clues - Word form - Meaning - Fast reconstruction strategies

Learning Goal

Learn how to reconstruct partially missing words by combining vocabulary knowledge, grammar, syntax, collocation, and the meaning of the surrounding text.

A bridge to your dreams

1. The Updated TOEFL iBT Reading Section

The updated TOEFL iBT, launched on January 21, 2026, uses three Reading task types: **Complete the Words**, **Read in Daily Life**, and **Read an Academic Passage**. Reading is adaptive, so the exact number of items and timing can vary.

Official 2026 Structure

ETS currently lists Reading at up to 50 items and up to about 30 minutes. Complete the Words is an official Reading task type in the updated test.

What Does Complete the Words Measure?

You read a short text in which parts of selected words are missing. Your job is to complete those words. According to ETS, the task measures vocabulary knowledge and the ability to understand meaning from context. The official test specifications also describe the task as drawing on word-order rules, lexical knowledge, and reading comprehension.

This means that the task is not simply a spelling exercise. A successful answer must fit the sentence grammatically and make sense in the larger passage.

Core Principle

Do not solve a blank in isolation. Use three levels of evidence: **the word itself + the sentence + the passage**.

2. A Five-Step Method

Step 1 - Read the whole sentence. Understand the basic message before trying to reconstruct a word.

Step 2 - Identify the word type. Ask whether the missing word is probably a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, or another grammatical form.

Step 3 - Use the visible letters. Treat the letters already provided as a strong constraint. Think of words that match both the spelling pattern and the grammar.

Step 4 - Check meaning and collocation. Ask which candidate naturally fits the surrounding words and the topic.

Step 5 - Reread the completed sentence. Confirm grammar, spelling, and meaning before moving on.

Fast Decision Rule

If two words seem possible, prefer the one that satisfies **all three**: grammatical fit, natural collocation, and passage meaning.

Example

Many university students find it diff_____ to balance coursework with part-time employment.

1. After *find it*, an adjective is expected. **2.** The visible beginning *diff-* strongly suggests a familiar adjective. **3.** The natural expression is *find it difficult to...*

Answer
difficult

Why not guess from letters alone? A letter pattern may suggest several words. Syntax and context eliminate candidates that do not fit.

3. Grammar Clues

Grammar can narrow the possibilities before you know the exact word. Pay special attention to determiners, auxiliaries, prepositions, and sentence position.

Noun Clues

Articles and determiners often signal a noun or a noun phrase: *a significant chan____*, *the res____ of the study*, *several fac____*. Number matters: words after *many*, *several*, *these* are often plural count nouns.

Verb Clues

A modal such as *can*, *may*, *might*, *should* is normally followed by the base form of a verb. An auxiliary can signal another verb form: *has incre____*, *is chang____*.

Adjective and Adverb Clues

An adjective may appear before a noun or after a linking verb: *a reli____ method*; *the method is reli____*. An adverb often modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb: *changed rapid____*.

Mini Drill

1. The new policy may aff____ student attendance.
2. Researchers reported a signific____ increase.
3. The population has declin____ steadily.
4. The device operates effici____ in low temperatures.

Answers

1. **affect**
2. **significant**
3. **declined**
4. **efficiently**

4. Meaning, Collocation, and Word Families

Grammar tells you what kind of word is possible; meaning tells you which word is appropriate. Read beyond the blank and look for cause-effect relationships, contrasts, examples, definitions, and repeated ideas.

Collocation

English words often occur in predictable combinations. Examples include *conduct research*, *reach a conclusion*, *play a role*, *significant increase*, and *available evidence*. Recognising these combinations speeds up reconstruction.

Word Families

A root can appear in different grammatical forms: *analyse* - *analysis* - *analytical*; *vary* - *variety* - *various*; *respond* - *response* - *responsive*. The sentence structure tells you which member of the family is needed.

Example

The researchers conducted a detailed ana_____ of the survey results.

The article a and adjective *detailed* signal a singular noun. The natural collocation is *conduct an analysis*.

Answer

analysis

Context Clues

Definition: a nearby phrase explains the concept.

Contrast: words such as *however* or *although* reverse the direction.

Cause and effect: words such as *because*, *therefore*, *as a result* reveal logical relationships.

Example: a specific case can clarify the meaning of a broader statement.

5. Practice Passage 1

Complete each partially missing word. Use the whole passage, not just the sentence containing the blank.

Urban trees provide several benef____ to people who live in densely populated cities. Their leaves can red____ the amount of direct sunlight that reaches streets and buildings, helping to keep local temperatures lower. Trees can also imp____ air quality by trapping some airborne particles. In add____, green spaces may encourage residents to spend more time outdoors and can make neighborhoods feel more attrac____. However, city trees require careful manag____ because limited soil, traffic, and extreme heat can affect their health. For this reason, urban planners often sel____ species that can tolerate difficult growing conditions.

Write your answers:

1. benef____
2. red____
3. imp____
4. add____
5. attrac____
6. manag____
7. sel____

Strategy Check

Which answers can you predict mainly from grammar? Which require a common collocation? Which become clearer only after reading the full passage?

6. Practice Passage 2

Scientific knowledge changes as researchers collect new evidence. A theory that appears stron___ supported today may later be modif___ when improved technology makes new observations possible. This does not mean that science is unreli___. Instead, the ability to rev___ explanations is one of its central strengths. Researchers publish their methods so that other scientists can exam___ the evidence, repeat experiments, and identify possible errors. Through this process, explanations can become more accu___ over time. Scientific conclusions are therefore best understood as claims supported by the avail___ evidence rather than as ideas that can never change.

1. stron___
2. modif___
3. unreli___
4. rev___
5. exam___
6. accu___
7. avail___

What to Notice

The passage contains several grammatical signals. For example, *be* before a blank may point toward a past participle or adjective, while *can become* is followed by an adjective. Meaning also matters: the passage argues that revision is a strength of science, not evidence that science is untrustworthy.

7. Practice Passage 3

Sleep plays an important role in learning. During sleep, the brain appears to organ____ and strengthen information acquired during the day. Students who regularly get insuffic____ sleep may therefore find it harder to concen____ in class or remember new material. One reason is that fatigue can red____ attention, making it more difficult to process information effectively. Although studying late into the night may seem produ____, sacrificing sleep can sometimes weaken the very learning that the extra study time was intended to improve. A more effect____ approach is to combine regular study with adequate rest.

1. organ____
2. insuffic____
3. concen____
4. red____
5. produ____
6. effect____

Timing Practice

On a second attempt, complete the passage without stopping after every blank. Read in meaningful chunks and return to uncertain words after you understand the paragraph.

Common Mistakes

1. **Solving by spelling only:** the completed word must fit meaning and grammar.
2. **Ignoring endings:** singular/plural and verb/adjective/adverb endings matter.
3. **Fixating on one blank:** move on and use later context if necessary.
4. **Inventing an unusual word:** common, natural vocabulary is often the better candidate when it fits every clue.

8. Answer Key and Explanations

Practice Passage 1

1. **benefits** - *several* requires a plural count noun.
2. **reduce** - after modal *can*, use the base verb.
3. **improve** - *improve air quality* is a natural collocation.
4. **addition** - completes the fixed linking phrase *in addition*.
5. **attractive** - after *feel more*, an adjective is required.
6. **management** - *careful* modifies the noun *management*.
7. **select** - plural subject *planners* takes the base-form present verb.

Practice Passage 2

1. **strongly** - adverb modifying *supported*.
2. **modified** - passive construction after *may later be*.
3. **unreliable** - adjective after *is*; the passage rejects this interpretation.
4. **revise** - infinitive after *ability to*.
5. **examine** - base verb after modal *can*.
6. **accurate** - adjective after *become more*.
7. **available** - adjective modifying *evidence*.

Practice Passage 3

1. **organize** - infinitive after *appears to*.
2. **insufficient** - adjective modifying *sleep*.
3. **concentrate** - verb after *harder to*.
4. **reduce** - base verb after modal *can*.
5. **productive** - adjective after *seem*.
6. **effective** - adjective modifying *approach*.

9. Final Test-Day Checklist

- Read enough context before completing the word.
- Identify the grammatical role of the missing word.
- Use the visible letters as a constraint, not as your only clue.
- Check common collocations and word-family endings.
- Confirm that the completed word fits the meaning of the entire sentence.
- Do not spend too long on one uncertain word; use later context and return.
- Reread the sentence after completing the word.

Esterma Academy Reading Rule

Grammar narrows the possibilities; context chooses the answer. Train yourself to use both at the same time.

Lesson Summary

Complete the Words is an official task in the updated TOEFL iBT Reading section. It tests more than spelling: you need lexical knowledge, grammatical awareness, and contextual reading. The fastest reliable approach is to identify the expected word form, use the visible letters, test meaning and collocation, and then reread the completed sentence.

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