

FAQ for Test Score Interpretation

- **What is a ‘passing’ score on the TOEFL?**

Although many people think that all students admitted to Purdue have ‘passed’ the TOEFL, standardized tests such as TOEFL and IELTS do not have ‘passing’ or ‘failing’ scores. Rather, the institutions that use the standardized test scores establish their own test score requirements or ‘cut scores’.

- **What are the cut scores for admission to Purdue graduate school?**

TOEFL cut scores for the Graduate School at Purdue University indicate the minimum TOEFL scores that are acceptable for admission. Colleges, schools, or departments at Purdue may establish their own cut scores that are higher (more selective) than the Grad School cut scores.

The Purdue Graduate School cut scores represent the lowest acceptable scores for admission, and are intended as bare minimums. Meeting a total score cut score should **not** be interpreted as an indication that a student will necessarily have a strong command of all English skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing, and so forth). Purdue’s cut scores are currently being re-evaluated and some colleges, schools, and department have changed their cut scores recently. Currently, the cut scores for admission to Purdue Graduate School are shown in the following table, along with ETS score interpretations:

Table 1 TOEFL Score Ranges and Purdue Cut Scores with Score Interpretations

TOEFL iBT Subsections	Range of Possible Scores	Purdue Graduate Admission Cut scores	Purdue ITA Certification Cut Score	Score Interpretation Guide from ETS Website
Total	0-120	77	N/A	N/A
Reading	0-30	19	N/A	High (22–30) Intermediate (15–21) Low (0–14)
Writing		18	N/A	Good (24–30) Fair (17–23) Limited (1–16)
Listening		14	N/A	High (22–30) Intermediate (15–21) Low (0–14)
Speaking		18	27	Good (26–30) Fair (18–25) Limited (10–17) Weak (0–9)

Information was retrieved from <http://www.ets.org/toefl/iBT/> on April 2, 2013.

Further information can be found at: http://www.purdue.edu/oepp/documents/Purdue_Test_Score_Cut_Offs.pdf

- **How were cut scores determined for the Purdue Graduate School?**

Purdue’s Graduate School cut scores for English language proficiency tests were set by a standard setting committee composed of faculty, departmental graduate advisors, and representatives of the graduate school. For the TOEFL iBT, the committee considered comparability data provided by the test developers (ETS) as well as alignment with the cut scores set by our peers in the Big Ten.

- **What does a TOEFL score tell me about the English proficiency level of a student?**

There are two different types of TOEFL scores that provide related but different information. The most commonly viewed score is the **total score**, which provides the sum of all four **subsection scores** (30 points each) on the TOEFL, with a possible total of 120 points. The total score provides a broad strokes picture of a student’s general language proficiency. While a **total score** can provide a quick summary of a student’s general language ability, the total is much more useful when used in conjunction with the **subsection scores**.

The subsection scores, as the name suggests, are scores on the four subsections of the TOEFL (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Subsection scores range from 0 to 30. By looking at the subsection scores we can see in which language skill areas a student is strongest and in which areas a student is weakest. Reviewing subsection scores is an important step to understanding how balanced a student’s language skills are. To illustrate this, let’s look at an example. In the Table that follows, we see the total score and subscores for 2 different students, each with different strengths and weaknesses. Both students meet the Purdue Graduate School cut offs for admission.

Table 2 Example of TOEFL score profile for 2 different students

Skill area	Student A	Student B
Reading	27/30	21/30
Writing	18/30	27/30
Listening	25/30	14/30
Speaking	18/30	26/30
TOTAL SCORE	88/120	88/120

Although Student A and Student B have the same total score, 88/120, there are important differences in their subsection scores. **Student A** did well at reading, with a score of 27/30 and at listening, with a score of 25/30, but did not perform as well in speaking, as represented by an 18/30, or writing, with a score of 18/30. TOEFL defines the speaking and writing scores of **Student A** as “Fair”.

By contrast, **Student B** scored 27/30 on writing and 26/30 on speaking, indicating “Good” proficiency in both of these subskills; however, **Student B** scored a 21/30 in reading, which ETS defines as “Intermediate” and 14/30 in listening, which is considered “Low” proficiency for the listening subskill.

This example shows that although the total scores of Students A and B are equal, their subsection scores are different and provide more specific information about their language proficiency. **Student A** has strong skills in reading and listening, but in the language production skills of speaking and writing Student A’s scores indicate lower proficiency

levels. **Student B** may have strong production skills in speaking and writing, but may have difficulty comprehending course readings and class lectures as indicated by lower scores in reading and listening. Both students have a total score of 88 but their language proficiency profiles are actually quite different.

- **Why do some students whose overall TOEFL score exceeds the cut score for admission have poor language skills in English?**

Standardized test scores reflect real language performances in testing situations. However, as with all major standardized assessments, it is possible for students to hone their test-taking skills and strategies to score higher on certain sections of a test.

In the instructional or work environment, students who struggle with listening comprehension may not do well on assignments if they failed to comprehend information that was presented orally; or students who struggle with reading or writing may spend inordinate amounts of time completing assignments that involve those skills, resulting in stress and a lack of attention to other tasks.

- **Should I ignore the English language proficiency scores (TOEFL, IELTS, PTE)?**

No. While each language proficiency test has idiosyncrasies and limitations, they do provide valuable information about a student's language proficiency. Test scores can help programs understand how a student performs under timed conditions (like many of the assignments and tasks of real university classes), and can also help identify areas of strength and areas that may need improvement, if the subsection scores are read carefully.

Table 3 below shows how TOEFL iBT subscores correspond to the Common European Framework (CEFR)¹ language proficiency levels, along with helpful descriptors from the CEFR that reference language levels needed for participation in university activities. Note that the current Purdue TOEFL cut off for Speaking is 18, which falls in Level A2 on the CEFR schemata.

¹ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, is a guideline used across Europe to describe levels and achievements of learners of various languages.

Table 3 TOEFL iBT/Common European Framework of Reference descriptors for participation in university activities

TOEFL iBT Speaking	TOEFL iBT Writing	TOEFL iBT Reading	TOEFL iBT Listening	CEFR Level	Description of Common European Framework Levels
30	30				
29	29			C1	C1 is a level at which a student can comfortably participate in all post-graduate activities, including teaching.
28	28	28			
27	27	27			
26	26	26	26		
25	25	25	25		
24	24	24	24	B2	B2 was designed as the level required to participate independently in higher level language interaction. It is typically the level required to be able to follow academic level instruction and to participate in academic education, including both coursework and student life.
23	23	23	23		
22	22	22	22		
21	21	21	21		
20	20	20	20		
19	19	19	19		
18	18	18	18	B1	B1 is insufficient for full academic level participation in language activities. A student at this level could 'get by' in everyday situations independently. To be successful in communication in university settings, additional English language courses are required.
17	17	17	17		
16	16	16	16		
15	15	15	15		
14	14	14	14	A2	A1 and A2 are insufficient levels for academic level participation.
13	13	13	13		
12	12	12			
11	11	11			
10		10		A1	
9		9			
8		8			

• **What are the OEPP recommendations for selection of graduate students according to TOEFL or IELTS?**

A TOEFL iBT total score of at least 100, with no subsection scores lower than 22.

An IELTS overall band score of at least 7.5, with no single band score lower than 7.0

For detailed information about TOEFL scores at every skill level go to

http://www.hhl.de/fileadmin/texte/relaunch/Conversion_Table_TOEFL_%28PBT,CBT,iBT%29.pdf

for listening, writing and reading,

and for speaking to http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/Speaking_Rubrics.pdf .

ABOUT THE ORAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TEST (OEPT) AT PURDUE

- **What do OEPT scores tell me about a student's English language proficiency?**

The OEPT is a test of oral English proficiency for graduate students who are prospective teaching assistants in the Purdue context. The OEPT holistic scale below makes reference to both the student who has taken the test (the speaker) and to the test rater who listens to the test (the listener). With what level of ease can the listener understand and follow the speaker? With what level of ease can the speaker produce language (fluency, automaticity)? How intelligible and coherent is the language that the speaker produces, and how accurate (error free)? How successfully can the speaker fulfill the test tasks?

The OEPT scale has three passing scores (60, 55, 50) which certify students as having oral English proficiency adequate to teach in an undergraduate instructional setting. A score of 45 does not certify a student, but is considered a borderline score and allows a student to take the English 620 course (referred to as 'support' in the scale) and teach in a classroom setting concurrently, if the department wishes.

A failing score of 45 or 40 allows a student to be placed on the waiting list for the English 620 course (Classroom Communication in ESL for International Teaching Assistants). A failing score of 35 does not allow a student to be placed on the course list; students with scores of 35 must retest after at least 6 months and score at least 40 on the OEPT in order to be considered for the English 620 course.

OEPT scores have nothing to say about a students' teaching ability or writing ability; rather, the scores indicate the general level of English proficiency for oral communication in a Purdue instructional setting.

- **How are TOEFL speaking subsection scores and OEPT scores related?**

Table 4 shows the OEPT Holistic scale. OEPT exams are rated holistically; that is, they are not given subscores for different aspects of proficiency such as grammar or vocabulary, but rather one holistic score.

Table 4 Purdue Oral English Proficiency Test Holistic Scale with descriptors

OEPT HOLISTIC SCALE	
Level	General Proficiency Level <i>Performance of speaker</i> <i>Requirements of Listener</i> <i>/ indicates and/or</i>
60	Excellent and Consistent across items. <i>Minimal listener effort required to adjust to accent. Frequent displays of lexico-syntactic sophistication and fluency. Speaker is at ease and confident fulfilling task, elaborating a personalized message, using accurate English. Errors are minor and few. Speaker could be placed in any classroom.</i>
55	More than Adequate. <i>Little listener effort required to adjust to accent/prosody/intonation. Consistently intelligible, comprehensible, coherent. Strong skills across items. Wide range of vocab and syntactic structures, generally sophisticated responses. Speaker may exert a little noticeable effort or show minor fluency or prosodic issues in elaborating clear message to fulfill task. Any grammar errors are minor but may be systematic. Speaker could be placed in any classroom requiring strong language skills, even an ESL class.</i>
50	Adequate and ready for the classroom without support. <i>Acceptably small amount of listener effort required to adjust to accent/prosody/intonation. <u>Consistently intelligible, comprehensible, coherent.</u> Speaker may exert a little noticeable effort, but despite minor errors of grammar/vocab/stress/fluency, message is adequately coherent, with correct information, some lexico-syntactic sophistication, and displays of automaticity and fluency. Good listening comprehension.</i>
45	Borderline with 50 - Inconsistent – Minimally adequate for classroom with support. <i>Tolerable listener effort required to adjust. <u>Consistently intelligible and coherent.</u> Strengths & weaknesses across characteristics or items. Messages may require more than a little noticeable effort for speaker to compose, or delivery may be slow. Or message may be clear and expressed fluently, but language use is somewhat simplistic. Good listening comprehension. Grammar and vocab resources at least minimally adequate.</i>
40	Limited - Not ready for the classroom. <i>Able to address tasks and complete responses, but consistent listener effort may be necessary to follow message. Speaker may be occasionally unintelligible/incomprehensible/incoherent. Grammar and/or vocab resources may be limited. Message may be simplistic/repetitive/unfocussed/occasionally incorrect. Speaker may have to exert noticeable efforts to build sentences/argument or to articulate sounds.</i>
35	Restricted - May need more than 1 semester of support. <i>Listening may require considerable effort. Speaker may be unintelligible or incoherent <u>more than occasionally</u> OR have marked deficiencies in at least 3 other areas: fluency, vocabulary, grammar/syntax, listening comprehension, articulation/pronunciation, prosody. May have difficulty completing responses, but not necessarily.</i>

The following Table shows the correspondence between TOEFL iBT Speaking subsection scores and OEPT (Oral English Proficiency Test) scores. Purdue’s cut-off for ITA certification is a 27 on the TOEFL iBT speaking section, or a 50 on the OEPT.

Table 5 Comparison of TOEFL iBT Speaking Subsection Scores with OEPT Scores

TOEFL iBT Speaking	OEPT
30	60
29	
28	
27	55
26	
25	50
24	
23	45
22	
21	40
20	
19	
18 or below	35

Use of Standardized Test Scores**

Institutions are responsible for ensuring that test-score data are used appropriately. Here are some of the guidelines developed by ETS to help institutions use TOEFL scores reasonably and effectively:

- Base the evaluation of an applicant’s readiness to begin academic work on all available relevant information, not solely on TOEFL test scores.
- Take **section scores**, as well as total scores, into account.
- Consider the kinds of English-proficiency levels required in various fields and levels of study.
- Consider the resources available at your institution for improving the English-language skills of nonnative speakers.
- **Do not use TOEFL scores to predict academic performance.**

ETS. (2013). *Understanding your TOEFL iBT scores*. Retrieved April 2, 2013, from <http://www.ets.org/toefl>.

ETS. (2005). *TOEFL iBT Scores. Better information about the ability to communicate in an academic setting*. Retrieved January 28, 2014, from http://www.hhl.de/fileadmin/texte/relaunch/Conversion_Table_TOEFL_%28PBT,CBT,iBT%29.pdf (p. 18)