

Pearson

Test of English



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Busting myths around PTE Academic

**Ensuring transparency for
confidence and success**

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Introduction

Test providers such as Pearson have a responsibility to protect the confidentiality of their assessment processes, while also providing enough transparency to build trust with users and ensure candidates can prepare effectively. Since its inception in 2009, the Pearson Test of English (PTE) Academic has established itself as a popular and convenient option for test takers who need to prove their English proficiency worldwide for the purposes of study abroad and professional migration. With its growing popularity, however, there is an increasing desire among test takers to understand the “secret sauce” behind its workings and ways in which to achieve the highest score possible. This has led to exponential growth in the test preparation industry. While a lot of the advice and resources are sound, unfortunately misinformation also spreads rapidly, particularly on social media channels. These myths are often tied loosely to personal experiences of taking the test and false perceptions of how scoring patterns work.

This paper aims to dispel six of the most common myths about PTE which frequently circulate on social media.



An overview of PTE Academic

- PTE Academic is a computer-based and computer-scored English test that is typically taken for study, work or migration purposes.
- The test is approximately 2 hours long.
- It is taken in a single session on a computer in a test center.
- It covers the key proficiency skills of speaking, writing, reading, and listening.
- It includes 22 question types, but the content of the questions varies between test sessions due to the way questions are randomized.
- Due to the high-stakes nature of the test, security and confidentiality is paramount to ensuring fairness. Find out more about the three-layer security process in the paper entitled [PTE Industry-leading Security](#).

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Scoring

PTE Academic is scored using an automated computer system that ensures consistency, accuracy, and impartiality. Unlike tests that rely on face-to-face dialog, a PTE test taker inputs all their responses onto a computer, even those involving speech. The PTE scoring engine then uses sophisticated algorithms based on data from thousands of test taker responses to assess their performance. The advantage of this approach is that test takers can feel confident that only their English is being assessed. Other extraneous factors, such as their appearance or ethnicity, are potentially subject to subconscious bias from human examiners. Computer scoring removes such biases.

Scores are given on a scale from 10 to 90 for both overall performance and the individual four skills. Some of the test items assess integrated skills, meaning a single task might evaluate both listening and speaking, or reading and writing. This helps PTE retain authenticity in testing the way English is used in everyday contexts.

The automated scoring system evaluates a range of criteria. For example, in the Speaking section, it assesses content, pronunciation, and fluency, while the Writing section focuses on content, structure, grammar, and vocabulary. The use of AI-powered scoring ensures that every test taker is measured against the same standards, helping to maintain fairness and transparency.

A note about human examiner involvement

While PTE is taken entirely on a computer with no face-to-face component, and is primarily scored using AI, there are two aspects which involve a human examiner:

1. To check response “anomalies”, for example responses that are quiet or otherwise unclear. These responses may not be reliably scored by the AI system.
2. To provide an additional check of some question types to verify that the content of the response is relevant and original. This check applies to all items that feature scoring of content, namely: Describe Image, Retell Lecture, Summarise Spoken Text, Summarise Written Text, and Write Essay. For Write Essay, two additional traits - form and development - are also scored by human examiners.

These enhancements are part of the updated human scoring model introduced with the PTE Academic enhancements, which ensures responses are evaluated for relevance, originality, and structure.

These aspects of the scoring process are illustrated in the diagram below:

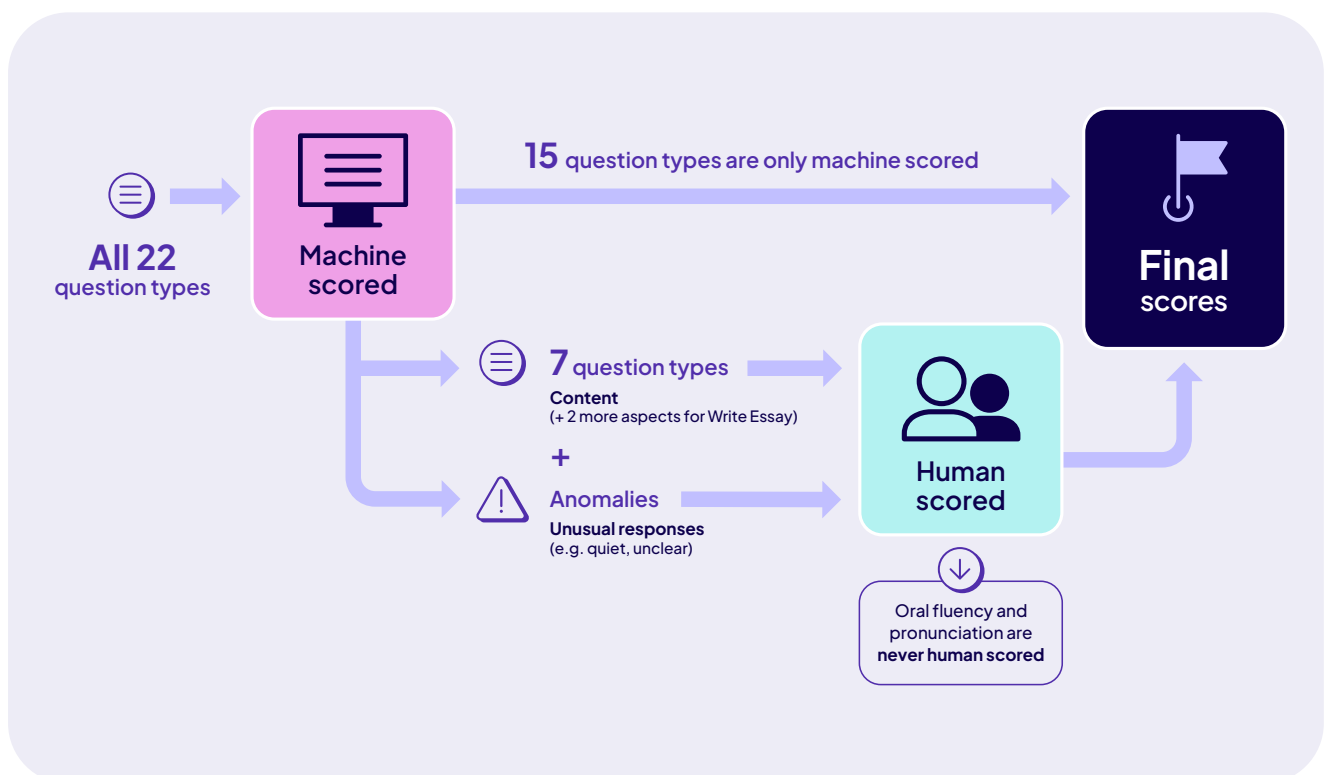


Fig 1. The PTE scoring process combining AI and human examiners

Common myths among test takers

Myth 1: Changing my accent will improve my score

Due to the way that spoken responses are assessed by an automated PTE scoring engine, many test takers naturally worry that their native accent might not be understood by the AI system. They think sounding “more American” or “more British” will result in higher scores.

“ Its scoring system has been trained using almost half a million spoken responses, representing over 100 different first languages and accents. ”

In reality, PTE prides itself on not being prescriptive about what counts as the “correct” accent. Competent English can be spoken in a variety of different ways and with different accents. This natural variation is reflected in the variety of authentic international content that is used throughout the PTE test.

PTE has a number of measures in place to ensure that test takers will not be penalized based on their accent. Its scoring system has been trained using almost half a million spoken responses, representing over 100 different first languages and accents. The result is that the automated scoring system won’t penalize test takers on their accent as long as the answer can be understood.

Test takers with strong accents who receive poor speaking scores may find the myth especially compelling. But quite often, it is not the accent that has affected their score but a lack of clarity, fluency or good pace. As long as speech is clear and easy to understand, an accent won’t negatively affect a score. In fact, changing an accent may be counter-productive as it can lead test takers to produce unnatural speech.

In short:

- ✔ PTE is trained on almost half a million spoken responses and a hundred different accents
- ✔ There is no face-to-face interview, so a test taker’s accent will not be judged by any human examiner, even subconsciously.
- ✔ Test takers should not try to change their accents – they should focus on clarity and fluency.

Myth 2: Speaking louder or faster gives you a better score

Some test takers have come to believe that speaking louder than usual helps the computer “hear” them better. This view is given credibility by the fact that when a test taker takes the test in a test center, they may hear the background noise of other test takers speaking and fear that this will distort what the microphone picks up.

In reality, test center microphones are designed to only record the speech of the test taker sitting at a particular computer. Audio distortions are rare. In those cases where there is distortion, the scoring system flags the interference and the response is scored by a human expert, ensuring fairness and accuracy.

“ PTE’s AI evaluates fluency based on rhythm and smooth delivery – not speed. ”

The key focus should be on *natural speech*. This also means that test takers should not speak fast in order to sound more fluent. PTE’s AI evaluates fluency based on rhythm and smooth delivery – not speed. Speaking too fast or too loudly can in fact reduce clarity and lower the test taker’s pronunciation score.

In short:

- ✓ The computer’s workstation will not pick up other test taker voices
- ✓ Test takers should speak naturally and clearly – increasing speed or volume doesn’t improve scores.



Myth 3: Using memorized templates is a good idea

One of the most pervasive test strategies to emerge in recent years is the use of memorized templates that are designed to provide a shortcut to a high-scored response. While common short phrases, collocations and expressions are a normal part of English communication, unoriginal longer sentences or paragraphs which are designed to be used no matter the topic are not a true reflection of a test taker's proficiency.

PTE has a responsibility to make sure such attempts are not rewarded by the AI. For this reason, a number of measures have been introduced to prevent templates being successful. As well as boosting the effectiveness of template detection through the use of AI, PTE has introduced a stage in the scoring process where a human examiner double-checks the response of some question types for *originality* and *relevance* of the content.

As tempting as it may seem to use templates to achieve a higher score, the opposite is often the result. Not only are templates usually unsuccessful, but they can often hinder students whose proficiency is good enough to score highly without them. It is worth remembering that a response does not have to be perfect to get a high score.

In short:

- ✔ PTE has introduced a number of measures to ensure that pre-memorized templates are not awarded any marks.
- ✔ If an answer doesn't respond to the question, it will score poorly – no matter how well-written it is.
- ✔ Test takers should focus on providing original and relevant responses, even if they are not perfect.

Myth 4: Some PTE items are a test of memory not language proficiency

Tasks like Repeat Sentence require the ability to recall information, leading some to believe they're being tested on memory alone.

In reality, there is a large body of evidence to show strong correlation between a test taker's ability to recall a sentence and their level of English proficiency. It is easier to recall information that you have understood and processed than information that is simply retrieved from short-term memory. Studies with first language speakers of English reveal similar results across a large sample of individuals. If memory were being tested, we would expect to see greater variety in that sample, in line with different memory spans.

Additionally, every test taker is provided with an erasable whiteboard at the start of the test, and PTE encourages its use to make quick notes to aid with recall.

In short:

- ✓ PTE tests comprehension skills, not memorization ability.
- ✓ For any aspects where memory recall is required, this is a natural part of comprehension and communication in day-to-day life.
- ✓ Make use of the erasable whiteboard to make notes during listening tasks.



Myth 5: If you're good you don't need to prepare

Fluent or first language speakers of English might assume they'll naturally do well and don't need to practice.

In reality, familiarity with the test format, timing, and strategies are essential – even for fluent speakers. Knowing how to approach specific tasks can significantly improve your score.

In short:

- ✓ Preparation is important for everyone—fluency alone isn't enough.
- ✓ Even if English is your first language, it is helpful to familiarize yourself with the format and structure of the test.

“ PTE is still taken on a computer at a test center and the test taker still records all their responses through the keyboard, mouse and headset. The responses are then all scored automatically, using AI, after the test has been completed. ”

Myth 6: PTE is now a primarily human-scored test

Since expanding the role of the human examiner in PTE from August 2025, it may appear that human marking is now a large part of the scoring process, compromising the unbiased nature of the test. Indeed, test takers may be tempted to liken it to other high-stakes proficiency tests that have a face-to-face speaking component. This comparison is unhelpful because the involvement of a human examiner in PTE is very different.

PTE is still taken on a computer at a test center and the test taker still records all their responses through the keyboard, mouse and headset. The responses are then all scored automatically, using AI, after the test has been completed.

Of the 22 question types, only 7 are routed to human examiners for a “double review”. For these question types, a human expert will score the “content” of the response. The figure below shows three of these question types and the proportion which is double-scored by a human.

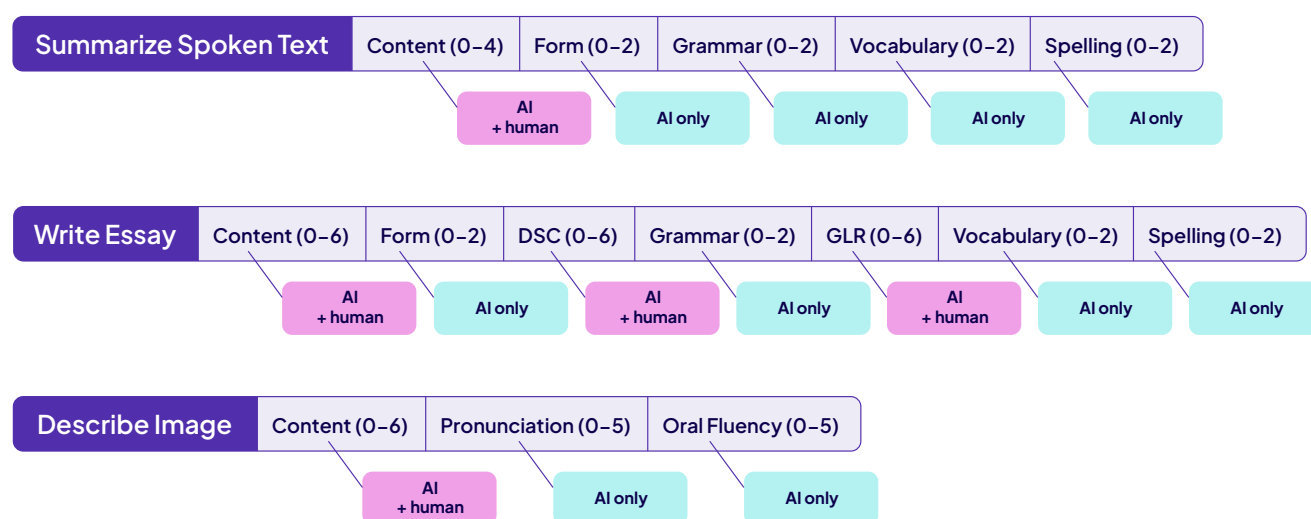


Fig 2. 3 example question types showing the use of AI and human scoring.

Moreover, if the human and AI score do not match, a second human examiner also reviews the response and provides a final score.

Test takers can be assured that no human examiner ever sees any personal details (name, photo, etc.) and while the content of spoken responses is double-scored by humans, oral fluency and pronunciation continues to be exclusively scored by AI.

In short:

- ✔ Human involvement in scoring is in addition to AI scoring and only affects some traits
- ✔ The test remains anonymous and unbiased: Human markers do not see any personal information (e.g., name, photo) and do not assess accents
- ✔ If a human and AI score differ, a second human examiner reviews the response to ensure fairness and consistency.

How to avoid falling for myths

Test takers, teachers and other PTE stakeholders are encouraged to focus on official PTE resources where possible. Pearson produces a number of guides and preparatory materials that have been centrally verified for accuracy. External resources, while often accurate, should be regarded with some scrutiny, especially if they contradict any of the information that is officially provided.



Conclusion

For anyone preparing to take PTE Academic, it's natural to have questions and concerns – especially in a world where advice is everywhere and not always accurate. But test takers should rest assured: the test remains a fair, secure, and reliable test of real English proficiency. While some human involvement has been introduced to strengthen the scoring process, the test continues to be primarily AI-scored, ensuring consistency and impartiality for every test taker.

Rather than relying on myths or shortcuts, the best way to succeed is through genuine preparation and a clear understanding of the test format. By focusing on clear communication, natural delivery, and trusted resources, test takers can feel confident that their performance will be judged fairly—no matter their background, accent, or test center experience.



About the author



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Rushda Burton-Khan is a Senior Product Manager for English assessments at Pearson, where she has worked since 2018. After graduating from the University of Cambridge in 2008, she spent the last 15 years in a variety of educational roles, including Cambridge University Press and Cambridge Assessment. Her current role is focused on the Pearson Test of English where she ensures the test meets the needs of learners, institutions, and other customers worldwide.



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