

English Proficiency Tests Factsheet

The exigencies of graduate study in an English language institution require that students enter the University with a basic level of competence in four distinct English language skills: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. The English language proficiency of incoming graduate students is therefore a critical determinant in predicting their success in graduate studies at McGill.

Although informal interviews with prospective students may demonstrate certain aspects of their language proficiency, such interviews cannot reveal the broader spectrum of a student's abilities to communicate in English at an advanced academic level. While no test is perfect, standardized tests are a proven means of determining students' English language abilities in all the competencies necessary for success in graduate studies. These tests are not intended as bureaucratic hurdles, and the levels that McGill asks its students to achieve are not set unattainably high. Using these tests as a quality assurance baseline helps to ensure that McGill does not admit students to degrees they may not have the ability to complete.

Applicants meeting any one of the following conditions are NOT required to submit proof of proficiency in English:

- 1) The student's mother tongue (language first learned and still used on a daily basis) is English
- 2) The student has obtained (or is about to obtain) an undergraduate or graduate degree from a recognized foreign institution where English is the language of instruction, or from a recognized institution in Canada or the United States, whether anglophone or francophone
- 3) The student has lived and attended school, or been employed, for at least four consecutive years, in a country where English is the acknowledged primary language

For students who do not meet any of the above-listed conditions, there are several ways in which they may demonstrate proficiency in English.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)

McGill asks that students attain a minimum Internet-Based TOEFL (iBT) score of 86. This is in line with our peer universities, which typically require graduate students to achieve scores ranging from 79 to 100.¹ The TOEFL tests four areas of English language competence: Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing. The maximum score in each of

¹ Educational Testing Service. "TOEFL® iBT Scores Set by Universities and Other Score Users." Accessed June 3, 2008.

<<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=031e4e63dcc85010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD&vgnnextchannel=333bd898c84f4010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD#Graduate>>

these areas is 30, for a possible total of 120. The followings sections will explain what a TOEFL score in this range can tell us about students' proficiency in English.²

Reading

When reading in English, students who meet McGill's minimum language requirements will, for example, be able to understand English vocabulary and grammar and to recognize the most salient points in English-language academic texts and assess their relative importance. Students who fall below McGill's cutoff grade will have only a borderline likelihood of meeting these levels of competency: such students, for example, are not likely to understand English academic texts well enough to answer questions about them.

Listening:

Students who meet McGill's minimum language requirements in the listening category will, for example, be able to understand important facts and details of lectures and conversations and recognize the relative importance of these details and relationships among them after the lecture has ended. A failure to meet the cutoff level indicates that there is only a borderline likelihood of a student meeting these levels of competency.

Speaking:

When speaking English, students who fulfill McGill's minimum language requirements will, for example, be able to participate in conversations and discussions in English; state and support their opinions; talk about facts or theories with which they are familiar and explain them to others; speak for about one minute in response to a question; and orally summarize information they have read in English.

Students who do not meet McGill's minimum requirements have only a borderline likelihood of being able to display these levels of spoken English.

Writing:

Students who meet McGill's minimum requirements for written English will, for example, be able to write a summary of information they have read in English; organize their writing so that the reader can understand the main and supporting ideas; and support their ideas with examples or data.

An inability to reach McGill's minimum cutoff grade points to a poor command of English grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation in written English.

Acceptable Alternatives to the TOEFL

The Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Office of McGill accepts a variety of tests as sufficient demonstration of English language proficiency. The following list provides the minimum acceptable scores for each test.

² Educational Testing Service. "English Language Competency Descriptors: iBT/Next Generation TOEFL Test." 2004. PDF Document. Accessed June 3, 2008.

<<http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/EngLangCompDescriptors.pdf>>

- 1) IELTS (International English Language Testing System): An overall band score of 6.5 or greater
- 2) MELAB (Michigan English Language Assessment Battery): A mark of 85% or higher
- 3) University of Cambridge ESOL Certificate in Advanced English (CAE): a grade of “B” (Good) or higher
- 4) University of Cambridge ESOL Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE): a grade of “C” (Pass) or higher
- 5) Edexcel London Test of English – Level 4 – with an overall grade of at least “Merit Pass”
- 6) Edexcel London Test of English – Level 5 – with an overall grade of at least “Pass”
- 7) McGill Certificate of Proficiency in English or McGill Certificate of Proficiency – English for Professional Communication: Certificate of Proficiency awarded

Some Facts:

TOEFL and other scales are not linear and do not follow simple percentage differentials; it takes significant studying or practice to move upwards from one level to another. Therefore, while a difference of 7 percentage points in other contexts might not appear to be a crucial distinction, an overall iBT score of 86 places the graduate candidate at the Percentile Rank of 47, while an overall iBT score of 79 places that same candidate at the Percentile Rank of 37. This demonstrates a significant drop in the likelihood that the candidate will have necessary skills in English as the overall iBT score falls below 86

- Candidates who repeat a test in quick succession will achieve better results, not because they are becoming more proficient in English but, simply because they are becoming familiar with the test and know what to expect
- ESLN590 and ESLN650 are designed to enhance existing English language skills, not compensate for an inability to meet our admissions minima

Some relevant websites for more detailed information:

- McGill Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies:
<http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/documents/admissions/>
- Educational Testing Services:
<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.22f30af61d34e9c39a77b13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=73b2be3a864f4010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD> and
<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.1488512ecfd5b8849a77b13bc3921509/?vgnextoid=e9772d3631df4010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD&vgnextchannel=4e0bd898c84f4010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD>
- Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks:
http://www.language.ca/display_page.asp?page_id=1
- Ontario Skills Passport:
http://skills.edu.gov.on.ca/OSPWeb/jsp/en/OSPskillsandworkhabits.jsp?announce_r=OSP%A0skills%A0and%A0Work%A0Habits
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:
http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp

- International English Language Testing System:
http://www.ielts.org/teachers_and_researchers/analysis_of_test_data.aspx
- University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations:
<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/home/researcher.html>