

HOW TO DESCRIBE A BAR CHART [IELTS WRITING TASK 1]

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Describe Bar Charts for IELTS

Learn everything about bar charts for IELTS writing task 1



There are various kinds of diagrams and charts that you may be asked to describe in the IELTS writing test, and one of those is the **bar chart**. In today's lesson, I want to share some important advice that can help you improve your writing performance in your next IELTS test.

Describing data for task 1 of the IELTS writing exam is quite difficult and it will vary according to what you actually see. In other words, it is hard to simply teach some language for describing bar charts... Instead, your language will vary according to what the bar chart shows.

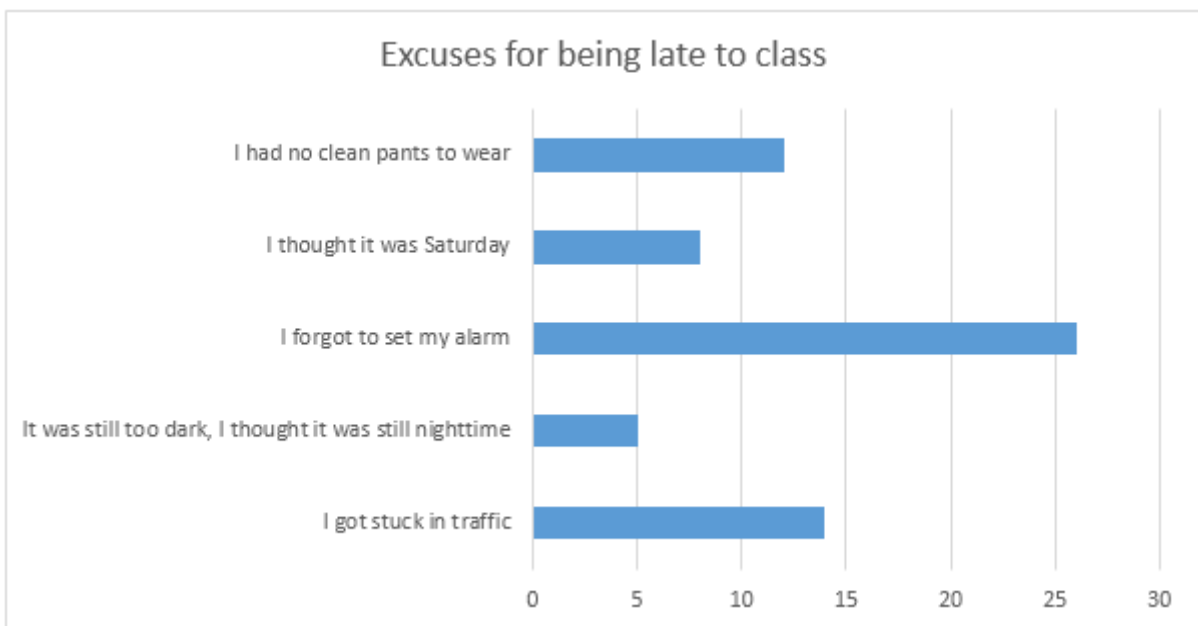
However, in this article I am going to break the process down and show you some examples so that you can understand it fully. At the end, I will give you a sample band 9 answer for a really difficult bar chart about people's weight.

WHAT ARE BAR CHARTS?

First of all, let's start with the most basic question. You can feel free to skip this if you are already totally familiar with it. 😊 What is a bar chart? Basically, it is a visual representation of data using bars, like these:



Bar charts are used to show the difference between volumes or quantities of things because it is easy for the human eye to interpret. Let's take a look at this example bar chart. I just found it on Google and will use it because it is simple. This is not a real IELTS chart. 😊



[\(source\)](#)

You can easily see what this means. The most common excuse is “I forgot to set my alarm” and the least common is “It was still too dark; I thought it was still night-time.”

That is the purpose of a bar chart. It shows data in a way that is really easy for people to understand. As such, you may encounter it in your IELTS test. In that case, you will have to pick out the most important data and describe it.

BAR CHARTS FOR IELTS WRITING

As we have seen, a bar chart is just another way of expressing data. For task 1 of the IELTS writing test, you may be asked to write about a bar chart. You will have to write more than 150 words and it is recommended that you do this in 20 minutes or less. (You will have a total of 1 hour for 2 tasks.)

It is important to note that ***you do not have to describe everything in the chart***. Part of the task is picking out and describing only the relevant details. That usually means:

- The highest
- The lowest
- Major differences
- Anything interesting

What does that mean? This is very subjective, and so it is certainly open to debate. Let's look at an example in order to understand it better:



In this bar chart, our eyes are naturally drawn towards the highest and lowest figures. The highest was in Sweden in 2012 and the lowest was in Finland in 2012. Therefore, both the highest and lowest figures occurred in the same year. That's interesting! 😊

Another interesting factor is that, in every year except one, Sweden had a higher divorce rate than Finland. It was only in 2015 that Finland's divorce rate was higher than Sweden's.

THE PROCESS

When you need to describe a bar chart for IELTS, you should take the same basic process as for describing anything else:

1. Take time to read the question carefully.
2. Look at the data and make sure you understand it.
3. Find important data to describe.
4. Plan your essay structure.
5. Write your essay carefully.
6. Check your answer for mistakes.

If you follow this basic routine, you will have a good chance of providing a strong answer to the question.

LANGUAGE FOR DESCRIBING BAR CHARTS

In the past, I have talked about the language required to describe the following IELTS writing task 1 assignments:

- [Line graph](#)
- [Map](#)
- [Process diagram](#)

Bar charts are a little different because the language you would use depends on what is being described and there is no common set language that you would use just to talk about bar charts in general.

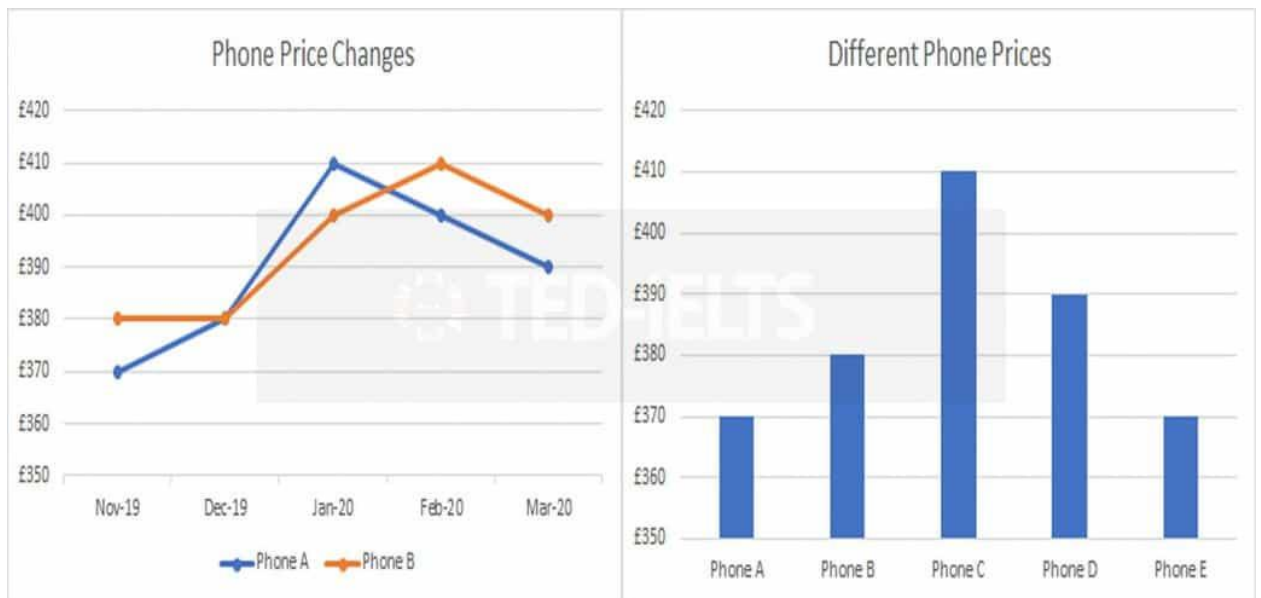
In the previous example, we can see that the bar chart features changing data over time. In such cases, we can use relatively similar language to that which we used for line graphs. You could say, for example:

Divorce rates in Sweden peaked in 2012 at a little under 50%, but fell in each of the subsequent years.

However, you can see that in the first bar chart there was no progression of time, so you cannot use language that shows changes in data. This brings us to the next stage...

COMMON PROBLEMS IN DESCRIBING BAR CHARTS FOR IELTS

I used to teach writing skills at a university in China, and one of the most common problems I would have was teaching my students to write about bar charts. They could describe line graphs really easily, but the problem was that they would use the same expressions and structures for bar charts, when in fact something different was needed. Let's look at two example charts. These contain similar data but there is an essential difference:



*Please note that, once again, these are not real IELTS charts! They are much too simple. I am only using these two explain how to describe bar charts differently from line graphs.

You can see that the line graph talks about changing phone prices over time, whereas the bar chart shows the different prices of phones. These prices are all taken from *the same point in time*.

Therefore, in order to adequately describe these, you must show that you understand the data.

For the line graph, you can say:

The price of Phone A rose from £380 to £410 between December and January.

However, you cannot use this language for the bar chart:

INCORRECT: The price rose from £380 for Phone B to £410 for Phone C.

CORRECT: Phone C cost £30 more than Phone B, which cost £380.

This may seem easy to some people, but it is an important distinction and a common mistake. You should practice often to make sure that you know the difference.

TASK 1 ESSAY STRUCTURE

There is no single perfect essay structure for IELTS, but there are some that are better than others. For task 1, I generally recommend writing an essay like this:

Introduction

Give overview of the data
Describe the main trend

Main paragraph #1

Describe the main set of data
OR
Describe the first group of data

Main paragraph #2

Describe secondary set of data
OR
Describe the second group of data

Let me explain what I mean by that.

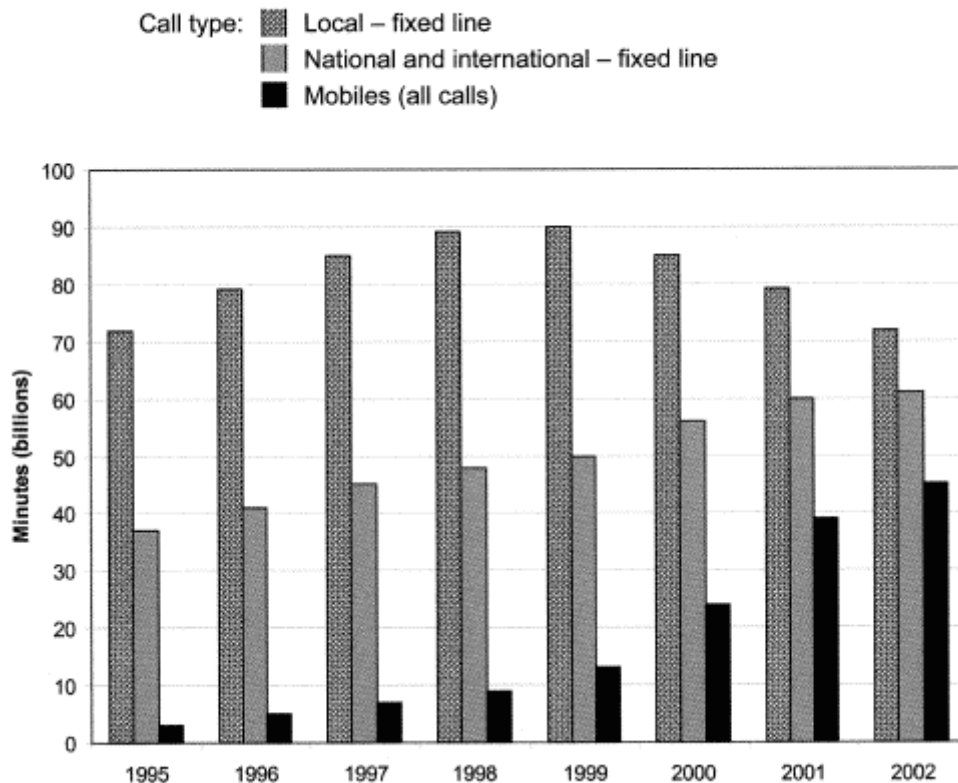
It is really important to group your data appropriately. This can be quite difficult, so you should read [this article](#) first.

Essentially, you need to choose how to put groups of data together. Let's take another example:

The chart below shows the total number of minutes (in billions) of telephone call in the UK, divided into three categories, from 1995-2002.

Summarise the information by selecting a reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.

UK telephone calls, by category, 1995–2002



For this sort of bar chart, you might choose to write two or three body paragraphs. Perhaps you would describe local fixed line phones first, then start a new paragraph for national and international ones, with another paragraph for mobiles.

Another way would be to break the data in half – one paragraph for 1995 to 1998 and another paragraph for 1999 to 2002.

There are lots of different ways. The only really important thing is that you make it clear to your reader why you have chosen to group the data this way. In other words, it must be **logical**.

SAMPLE ANSWER

My answer to this question would look something like this:

Introduction	Give overview of the data Describe the main trend
Main paragraph #1	Describe local calls
Main paragraph #2	Describe other 2 types of call

Note: It is important that you draw comparisons or show similarities between the data, so in in main paragraph #2 I will refer briefly to the other data. This may seem to confuse the structure a little, but it is logical and important.

The bar chart shows the time spent on three different kinds of phone calls in the United Kingdom over a period of eight years, starting in 1995 and ending in 2002. Local calls were the most common type of phone call made during the entire period, although both national/international and mobile calls grew in popularity to narrow the gap between these three types of call by 2002.

In 1995, local calls were by far the most common type of phone call in the UK, with more than 70 billion minutes recorded on this chart. This is about double the amount of time spent on national and international calls, and more than ten times as much as was spent on mobile phone calls. All three types of phone calls grew in popularity until 1999, after which local calls decreased year-on-year until they ended the period at around the same figure as they began it – 70 billion minutes.

National and international calls grew steadily over the recorded eight years, from about half the popularity of local calls to only slightly less in 2002. Mobile phone calls, however, grew ten-fold from about four billion minutes to more than forty billion.

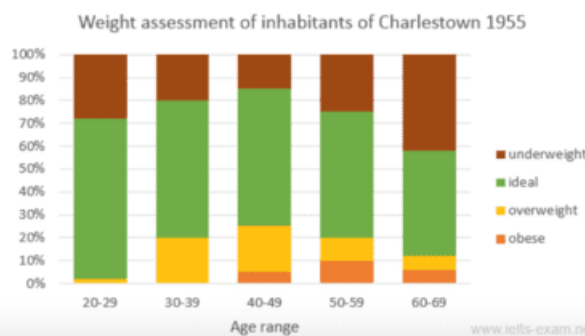
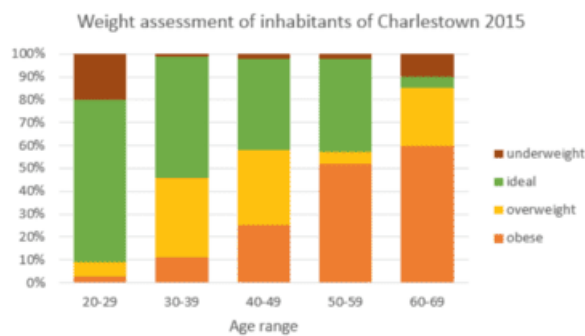
A REALLY DIFFICULT BAR CHART

Finally, let's look at a difficult bar chart in order to show how we can tackle challenging problems.

The charts summarise the weight measurements of people living in Charlestown in 1955 and 2015.

Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.

Write at least 150 words.



As you can see, the first problem is that there are two charts! Already, that will prove more difficult than describing just one chart.

Another issue is that these bars look strange. They are all the same size... Why? Well, these represent the population. Each one is 100%, with the colours making up the different weight categories. The total can never be more than 100% because that it is the full population.

Now, you should try to interpret the data. What are the main changes?

- In 1955, there are lots of people at an ideal weight and very few people are obese.
- In 2015, many older people are obese. Fewer people are at an ideal weight.
- The weight distribution was similar regardless of age in 1955, but in 2015 it is very different.

Once you have picked out the important data, you should figure out how to structure your answer. I will use this structure:

Introduction	Give overview of the data Describe the main trend
Main paragraph #1	Describe 1955 data
Main paragraph #2	Describe 2015 data

However, I will make sure that there are **clear comparisons** between the 1955 and 2015 data. It is not enough to describe them in isolation.

LANGUAGE FOR TALKING ABOUT AGE AND WEIGHT

To be honest, the hardest part of this bar chart is not that data but the terminology around age and weight. You can see from the chart that we are looking at age groups and weight groups. Many native speakers find this really difficult to talk about.

When we talk about age and weight, we usually say some form of “to be” rather than “to have.” For example:

- INCORRECT: In 2015, a higher percentage of people had overweight or obesity than in any other group.
- CORRECT: In 2015, a higher percentage of people were overweight or obese than in any other group.
- INCORRECT: In both years, the people who were most likely to be an ideal weight had 20 to 29 years.
- CORRECT: In both years, the people who were most likely to be an ideal weight were aged 20 to 29 years.

You can see how I explained this to one of the students on my [writing correction service](#):

Near the start, you said:

- over half of people in all age groups ~~had-were~~ ideal weight

We do not talk about weight in this way. You do not “have” weight; rather, you “are” in that group. For example, “he is overweight” or “she used to be underweight, but now she’s an ideal weight.” In the next line, you said,

- ~~had-were~~ underweight ~~and-or at an~~ ideal ~~assessment~~weight

Again, we do not say “have/had underweight.” We use “to be” and also we can occasionally say “at ___ weight.” This is very rare but saying “ideal” is quite challenging and it is useful here. I will underline some useful phrases in my sample answer on the next page because talking about weight is such a challenge.

There are also problems with grouping people according to age. We can just say “people in the ___ age group/category” but this becomes repetitive after a while, so we need to use different language.

Talking about age is difficult, especially when describing groups of people who fall into different age categories. One thing to know is that, when you say use numbers, it is a sort of adjective and thus you need a noun to follow it or else it is meaningless:

- The criminals arrested were all 16 to 25 years old.
- I saw a 15-year-old boy running away.

You can turn the “old” into a noun by adding an “-s”:

- There was an increase of 25% in the unemployment rate for 20-29-year olds.

You can also put “aged” before the numbers:

- Most of the recipients were aged 18-22.

SAMPLE BAND 9 ANSWER

Here is my description of the bar chart above:

There are two bar charts showing the distribution of weight categories for people living in Charlestown. The first one is from 1955 and the second is from 2015. It is clear that vast changes have occurred in people’s health during this sixty year period.

In 1955, very few people were overweight or obese, and most were healthy or even underweight. In each of the age groups, at least half of people were classified as in the ideal weight range, but towards the ends of the spectrum – the youngest and the oldest people – there were more people who fell into the underweight bracket. Being overweight or obese was a problem primarily affecting middle aged people, but not the most elderly ones.

However, this distribution had completely changed by 2015. Although some young adults and elderly people remained underweight, a very slim number in the middle of the age groups did. Being overweight had become increasingly common, and obesity had become a huge issue, affecting people more and more as they got older. For people aged

fifty and older, more than half suffered from obesity, and very few fell into a healthy weight range.

USEFUL LANGUAGE

I will excerpt some of the useful phrases that appeared in this answer so that you can see how I have managed to describe ages and weights:

- very few people were overweight or obese
- most were healthy or even underweight
- at least half of people were classified as in the ideal weight range
- people who fell into the underweight bracket
- Being overweight or obese was a problem
- elderly people remained underweight
- Being overweight had become increasingly common
- obesity had become a huge issue
- more than half suffered from obesity
- very few fell into a healthy weight range

This was a really difficult bar chart to describe, but using this language I have managed to do it accurately and comprehensively.