

# The process of writing items for a task-based test of reading

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## Investigating item writing

What processes do item writers go through in crafting test tasks?



### 1. Commissioning of

- 4 trained and experienced IELTS item writers
- 3 untrained, non-experienced writers

to write one IELTS academic reading test section

- 750 to 950 word text
- 2 or 3 item *types*
- 16-17 items (13 or 14 used in final version)

### 2. Group interviews about the item writing process

### 3. Editing meeting: making improvements to submitted tasks

The process of writing items for a task-based  
test of reading



The item writing process

The texts

The items

# The item writing process

Commissioning, pre-editing, editing

# Participants

*(All names are pseudonyms)*



## Non-experienced group

- Victoria
  - PGCE, MA TESOL
  - 18 years as EFL teacher
  - IELTS examiner (writing and speaking)
- Mathilda
  - MA Pragmatics
  - Recent IELTS candidate
- Mary
  - BA Politics, DELTA
  - 6 years as EFL teacher

## Experienced group

- Jane
  - BA, Dip TEFLA
  - 12 years teaching EFL, 12 years as item writer
- Anne
  - MA mod. languages, RSA Dip.
  - 20 years teaching EFL, author of IELTS preparation book
- William
  - MA mod. languages, RSA Dip.
  - 16 years teaching EFL, author of IELTS preparation book
- Elizabeth
  - MA
  - 34 years teaching EFL, author of IELTS preparation book

# Flowcharts of item writing process



## ***Mathilda***

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### 5-step flowchart

1. looking at sample IELTS texts
2. browsing for a suitable text
3. selection of text from shortlist
4. text adaptation
5. selecting parts of text to target and writing questions/tasks based on the example of the sample tests (from IELTS website, sample papers)

## ***Anne***

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### 11-step flowchart:

1. Text sourcing: check in files, investigate previously fruitful websites, Google a topic suggested in commission or that seems promising (30 mins-1 day)
2. Careful reading (30 mins)
3. Typing up with amendments (1 hr)
4. Length adjustment (to target plus 100-200 words) (15 mins)
5. Work on first (most obvious) task type (30 mins–2hrs [for MCQ])
6. Mark up further areas of text for suitable items (30 mins)
7. Work on further tasks – amending text as necessary (1hr-2hrs)
8. Print off and attempt tasks (30 mins-1hr)
9. Write answer key (10 mins)
10. Check length and prune if necessary (10 mins-1hr)
11. Review and proof read (10-30mins)

# The texts

based on authentic texts; taken from sources such as magazines, journals, books and newspapers; designed to present the candidate with materials similar to those which they might need to read on a university course

*IELTS website*



# Texts



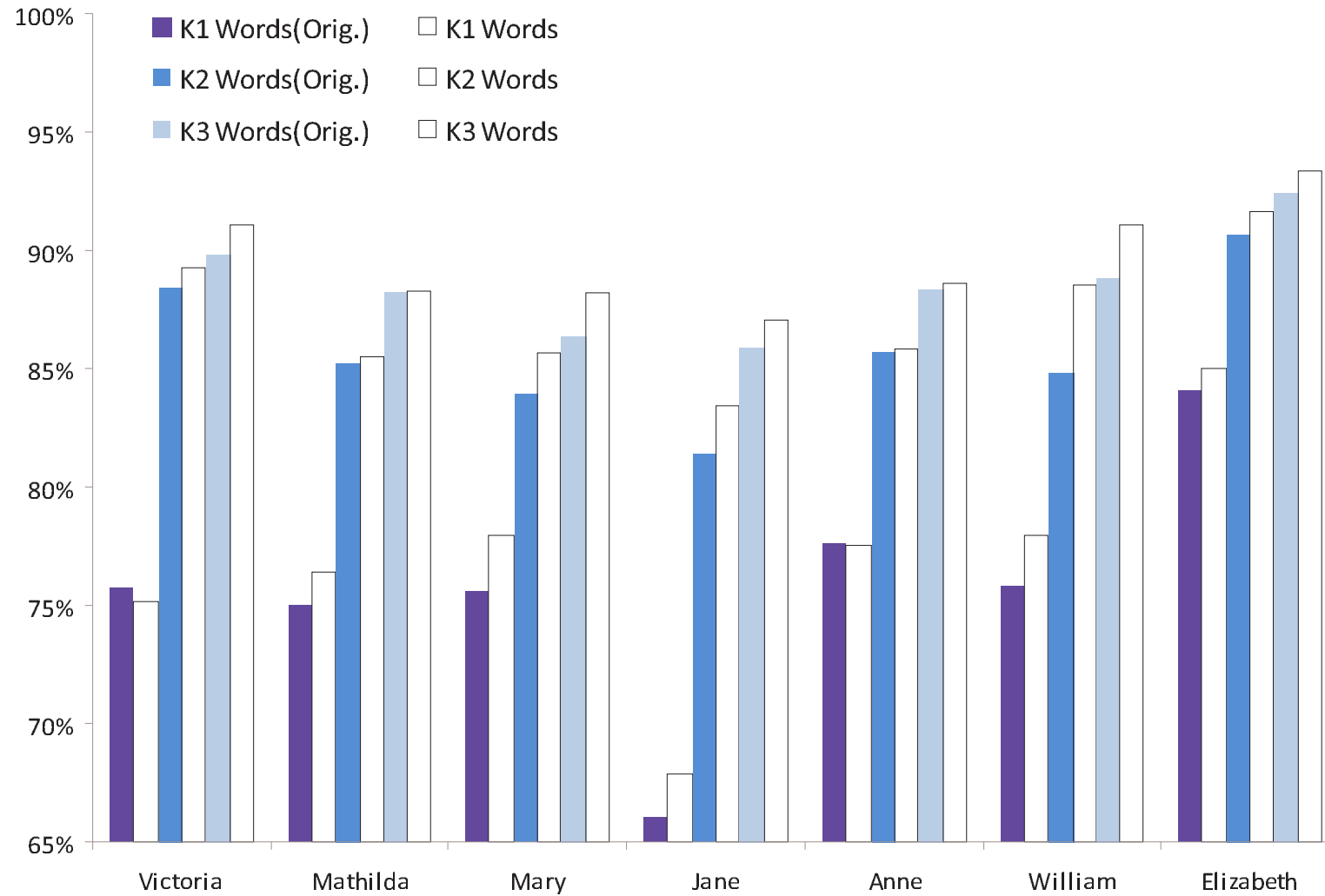
<i>Writer</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Source</i>
Victoria	The role of memory in dreams	<i>MSNBC website</i>
Mathilda	Environmentally sustainable developments	<i>Discover Magazine</i>
Mary	Human attitudes towards domestic robots	<i>New Scientist</i>
Jane	Robotic cameras used to observe wildlife	<i>Sensor Review</i>
Anne	The evolution of laughter	<i>BBC Focus</i>
William	The role of children in English literature	Book chapter
Elizabeth	Research into need for sleep	<i>New Scientist</i>

# What do experienced writers do to source texts?

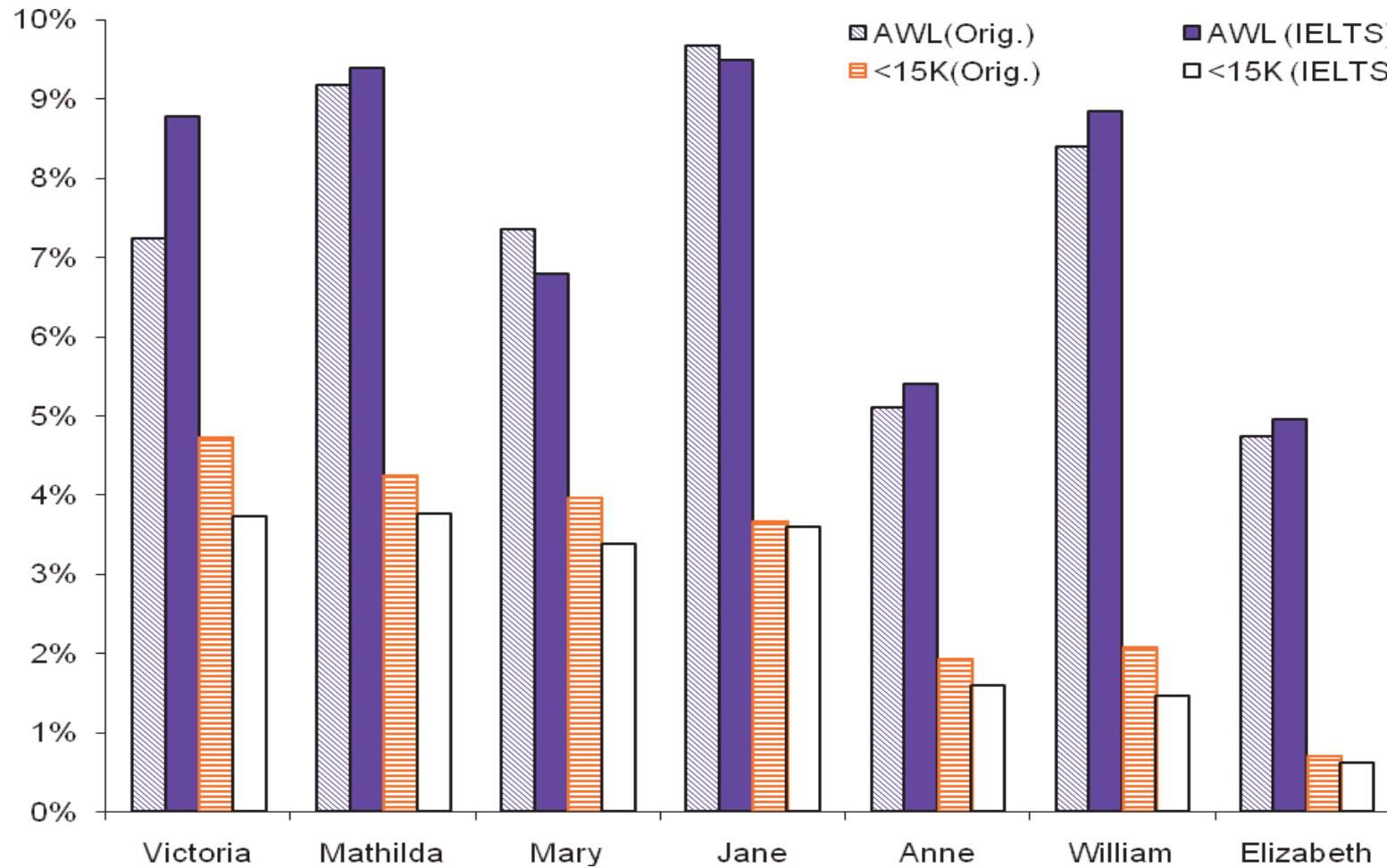


<i>Group</i>	<i>Writer</i>	<i>Original text</i>	<i>Edited text</i>	<i>Edits</i>
<b>Experienced</b>	Jane	1,870	937	43
<b>Experienced</b>	Anne	1,606	946	57
<b>Experienced</b>	William	2,518	909	65
<b>Experienced</b>	Elizabeth	1,592	664	54
<b>Untrained</b>	Victoria	897	941	77
<b>Untrained</b>	Mathilda	748	748	4
<b>Untrained</b>	Mary	1,094	920	30

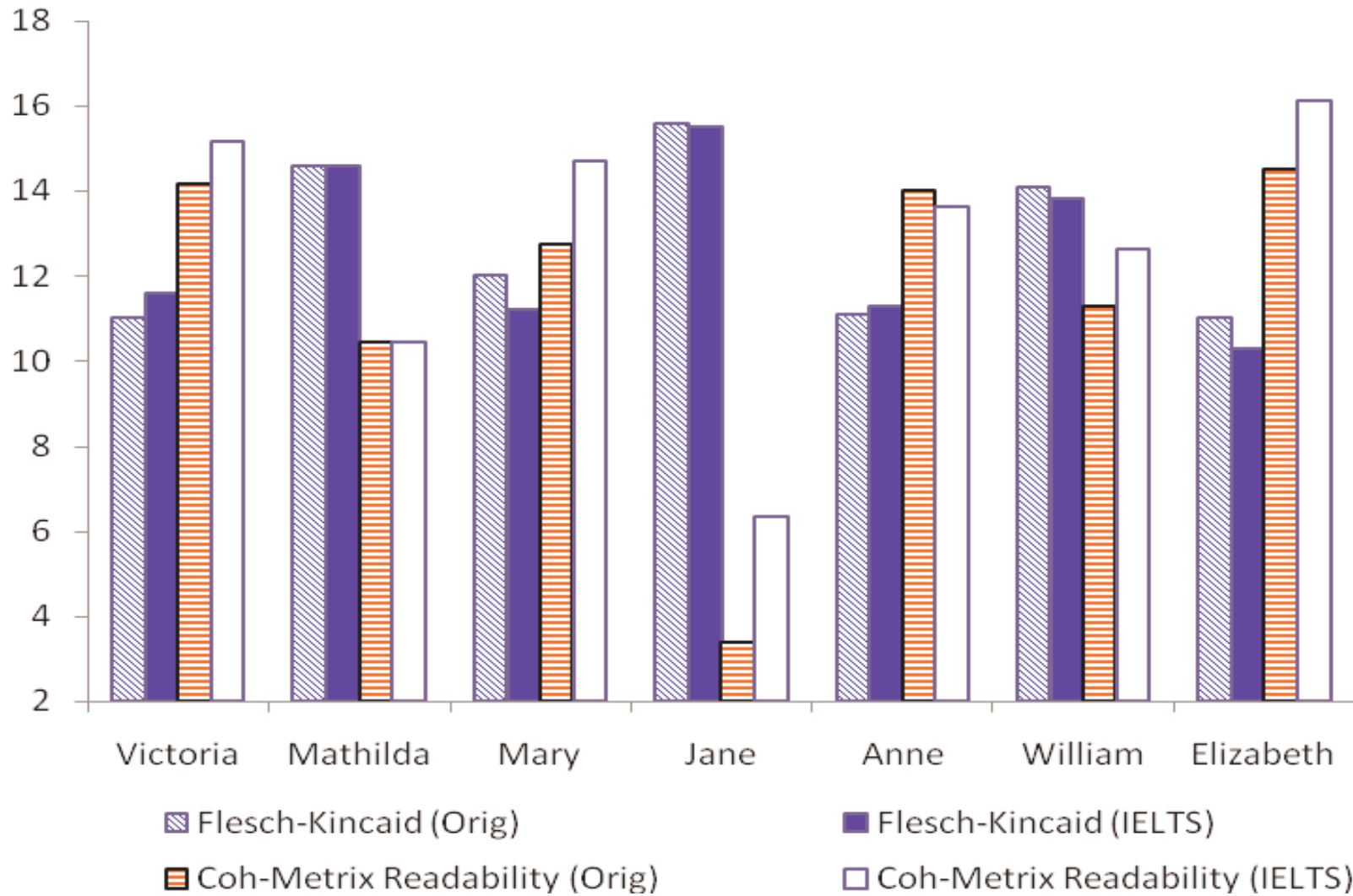
# Frequent vocabulary



# Academic and technical vocabulary



# Readability



# What do experienced writers do to source texts?



- **Cut journalistic elements (e.g. attention grabbers, conversational reader-writer relationship):**
  - *Here's a date for your diary, Sunday fourth May, World Laughter Day. Described by its founder, Dr Madan Kataria, as a very auspicious day for the whole planet, it will be marked by groups of people the world over getting together for a good giggle.*
- **Cut/ rephrase technical vocabulary:**
  - *metabolic syndrome; thorax (chest); double knock drummings*
- **Cut/ rephrase colloquialisms:**
  - *chortle (laugh); shut-eye (sleep) – but 'snooze' retained*

# What do experienced writers do to source texts?



- **Cut or gloss culturally specific content**
- **Cut unsuitable content to make the text inoffensive**

*The concept of the child's nature which informed the work of Blake, Wordsworth and Dickens was of **original innocence**. Stemming most forcefully from Rousseau, and in contradiction to the long Christian tradition of **original sin**.*

*The concept of the child's nature which informed the work of Blake and Wordsworth was that children were **naturally innocent**, and were slowly corrupted by the society in which they lived – in contradiction to the long Christian tradition [long held belief] **that everyone, child and adult alike, is sinful** [wicked/ guilty].*

- **Narrow the scope of the text**

- Jane's IELTS text is an account of the application of remote cameras in wildlife research (problem-solution): loses attention given to the attributes of the equipment (description/ elaboration)
- Anne's IELTS text is an account of laughter as a phenomenon: loses the thesis of role of laughter as an indicator of the evolution of socialisation - wider significance for psychology
- William's edited version is an account of the treatment of childhood in literature: loses discussion of specific works and arguments supporting the broader thesis of literature as an expression of social change and crisis



# The items

Candidates are tested on their ability to identify main ideas, supporting ideas, writer's opinions and specific information.

*IELTS website*

# IELTS item types



Task Types	Anne	Jane	Elizabeth	William	Victoria	Mathilda	Mary
Type 1 Multiple Choice			✓		✓	✓	✓
Type 2 Short-answer questions		✓			✓		
Type 3 Sentence Completion							
Type 4 Notes/ Summary/ Table Completion	✓	✓	✓				✓
Type 5 Labelling a Diagram							
Type 6 Choosing Headings for Paragraphs							
Type 7 Locating Information	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Type 8 Identification of Information in a Text	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Type 9 Classification							
Type 10 Matching				✓			✓

# The items

Notes completion



- **Items and text edited in tandem**

...the results were analysed at CLO to pick out any new recordings that were **a match** to the known vocalisations of the ivory-billed woodpecker.

*results analysed to identify sounds that were a: 9.....*

...the results were analysed at CLO to pick out any new recordings that were **matches** to the known vocalisations of the ivory-billed woodpecker.

*results analysed to identify any 9..... with original recordings*

# The items



Variation between writers in relationships between texts and items

- Direct word/ phrase matches, synonyms, antonyms
- Role of inferencing
- Single or multiple clues in the text

Not clear to non-experienced IWs which reading skills are intended to be addressed by each item type

Little discussion among experienced IWs of implications of changing an item on the nature of the task/ reading skills being tested

## True-False-Not Given

Mathilda



- In London, a large part of carbon emissions is caused by motor traffic.
- In 2006 **London** produced eight percent of the United Kingdom's 560.6 million tons of **carbon emissions**, **70 percent of *it* from residential sources**.

## True-False-Not Given

Jane



- Those examining the data on target species would benefit from further training.
- ‘data’ (3 times) in paragraph 1, ‘target species’ in paragraph 1, no ref to ‘benefit’ or ‘training’
- Paragraph 3: The project started in 2005 with over 20 trained field biologists taking part in the search team, and volunteers also being recruited. They had to become familiar with the use of GPS, digital video cameras and microphones, and cell phone technologies

## True-False-Not Given

William



- A number of writers identified the industrial revolution as a major cause of social problems.
- The securities of the eighteenth-century peace dissolved in the era of **revolution**, leading to **social** and political ferment. The **social**, political, and, more especially, the intellectual **problems** arising from the French and **Industrial Revolutions** found no resolution.

# Conclusions



- Non-experienced group able to reproduce IELTS-like texts, but less successful with items
- More information needed on the IELTS reading construct: teachers may lack understanding of which skills are being tested
- Clearer specification for IWs of the nature and balance of the reading skills to be targeted: require (again) IWs to specify intended focus of each item?
- Comparison between item writer intentions and test taker strategies