

The Winter Olympics: Sport, Power & Prestige

Cambridge C1/C2



Speaking Warm-up: Setting the Scene

Discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.

1. What winter sports do you associate most strongly with the Olympic Games?
2. Why do you think some countries invest heavily in winter sports, while others barely compete?
3. In your opinion, are the Olympic Games mainly about sport, politics, money, or national image?
4. Would you like your country to host the Olympic Games? Why / Why not?

Brainstorming task:

Make a list of as many Winter Olympic sports as you can in 90 seconds. Then compare with another group.

Pre-Use of English: True / False

Read the sentences about Milano-Cortina 2026. Decide if they are True (T) or False (F).

1. The Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics will be held ____ a single city to reduce costs.
2. The 2026 Winter Olympics will include ski mountaineering for ____ first time.
3. Over 90 countries ____ expected to take part in the Milano-Cortina Games.
4. Hosting the Olympic Games is mainly about winning ____ many medals as possible

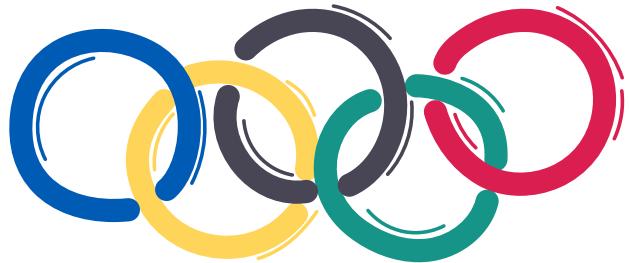
Now look again at the sentences. One word in each sentence has been removed. What kind of word is missing?

Exam tip box

In Open Cloze tasks, the missing word is usually grammatical, not a “topic word” (like a noun).

Use of English – Open Cloze (Olympics 2026 Context)

Read the text and complete the gaps (1–8) with **ONE word in each gap.**



The Winter Olympic Games Milano-Cortina 2026 will take place in Italy, marking the country's third time hosting the Winter Games. Unlike many previous editions, the events will be spread (1) _____ several regions, with Milan hosting most indoor ice sports, (2) _____ Cortina d'Ampezzo and surrounding Alpine areas provide the setting for snow and sliding events.

The Games will run (3) _____ 6 February to 22 February 2026, followed by the Paralympic Winter Games the next month. Over 3,500 athletes from (4) _____ than 90 countries are expected to compete, making the event not only a sporting competition (5) _____ also a global media spectacle.

In (6) _____ to traditional disciplines, 2026 will see the Olympic debut of ski mountaineering, which combines endurance, speed and technical skill. New mixed-gender events have also been introduced, reflecting the International Olympic Committee's aim of promoting equality, even (7) _____ critics argue that political and commercial interests still play a major role in how the Games are organised.

Ultimately, hosting the Olympics is about (8) _____ more than medals: it is a statement of ambition, identity and global relevance.

Tic-Tac-Toe (Word Building Game)

Work in pairs. Choose a square and **transform the word** to complete a **correct sentence about the Olympics**. If the sentence is correct, you win the square. First team to get **three in a row** wins.

TRANSPARENT	COMPETE	PRESTIGE
INVEST	POLITICS	QUALIFY
ORGANISE	EQUAL	SUCCESS

Rules

- You must change the form of the word.
- The sentence must be grammatically correct and Olympic-related



Example

She was transparently disappointed when she only got a bronze medal.

Use of English – Word Formation (Advanced)

Complete the text with the correct form of the word given in capitals.

The Olympic Games are often presented as a celebration of unity and fair competition, yet the process of selecting host cities has been accused of lack of political (1) _____ (TRANSPARENT).

Bidding nations must demonstrate not only their sporting infrastructure but also their economic (2) _____ (STABLE) and long-term planning capacity.

Critics argue that the enormous financial burden placed on host cities can lead to public (3) _____ (CONTENT), particularly when promised benefits fail to materialise.

Meanwhile, athletes themselves face increasing pressure, as Olympic success often means you become nationally (4) _____ (PRESTIGE) and gain international influence.

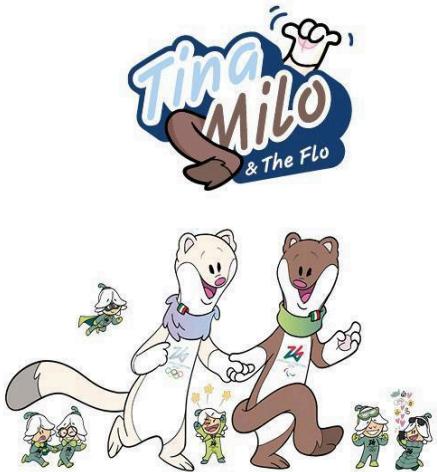
Paraphrasing Practice: Fun Facts

Here are some fun facts about the 2026 Olympics!

**Paraphrase each sentence using different words,
but keep the meaning the same.**

1. Tina, a white stoat, has been chosen as the official mascot of the Winter Olympic Games

Paraphrase:



Possible paraphrases:

- The Winter Olympics will be officially represented by a white stoat named Tina.
- The organisers have appointed Tina, a white stoat, as the official Olympic symbol.

Doing this will help you think about the sentences in a different way for the rephrasing!

Now try some other sentences about the Winter Olympics:

2. While Tina represents the Olympics, her darker-furred brother Milo has been selected as the mascot of the Paralympic Winter Games.	Paraphrase:
3. Several new events will appear in the programme, including women's doubles in luge and mixed-team skeleton	
4. Norway is widely expected to dominate the medal table, with athletes such as Johannes Høsflot Klæbo among the favourites for gold	



Use of English – Key Word Transformations

Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first. Use 3–8 words, including the word given.

1. The government said that political factors hadn't influenced which city would host.
ROLE

The government denied that politics _____ the choice of host city.

2. Athletes are selected only after years of competing in strict qualification events.
HAVE

Athletes are not selected _____ several strict qualification events.

3. Countries usually expect hosting the Olympics to cost less than it actually does.
TENDS

Hosting the Olympics _____ than countries initially expect.

4. Very few athletes are able to compete more than once in the Olympic Games.
SUCCEED

Most athletes _____ more than one Olympic Games.

Reading: The Olympic Games Beyond Sport



Gapped Text (Reading and Use of English Part 7)

Read the text below. Six paragraphs have been removed from the text. Choose from paragraphs A-F the one which fits each gap (17-22). There is one extra paragraph which you do not need

The Olympic Games are often described as the pinnacle of athletic achievement, bringing together elite competitors from around the world. Iconic moments, such as Usain Bolt's dominance in sprinting at the London 2012 Summer Games or Mikaela Shiffrin's success on the Alpine slopes, have helped shape the Olympics as a global cultural event. However, behind these individual achievements lies a complex system influenced by politics, economics and global power structures.

(17)

The selection of host cities is officially based on factors such as infrastructure, sustainability and organisational capacity. In practice, however, the bidding process has become increasingly political. The Beijing 2008 and 2022 Games, for example, were widely seen as opportunities for China to project international influence, while recent European bids have faced strong public opposition.

(18)

Athlete selection is another area where inequality becomes visible. Although qualification systems are designed to reward performance, access to elite coaching, technology and international competition varies significantly. Athletes from countries such as Norway or Germany, which consistently dominate Winter Olympic medal tables, benefit from long-term investment that is unavailable in many developing nations.

(19)

The Olympic programme itself continues to evolve. New sports are added to reflect changing interests, while others are reduced or removed. At Milano-Cortina 2026, ski mountaineering will make its Olympic debut, echoing similar efforts to modernise the Games seen with skateboarding and sport climbing in Tokyo 2020.

(20)

Despite increasing criticism, the emotional appeal of the Olympics remains powerful. Moments such as the Jamaican bobsleigh team's appearance at Calgary 1988 or athletes competing despite injury continue to resonate with audiences. These stories reinforce the idea of the Olympics as more than a commercial event.

(21)

Ultimately, the Olympic Games exist in a space where idealism and reality collide. They are shaped by political decisions and financial interests, yet driven by human ambition and dedication. Understanding this tension helps explain why the Olympics remain both controversial and compelling in the modern world.

Paragraphs

- A. In recent years, public resistance has increased, with citizens questioning whether the financial burden placed on host cities is justified once the spotlight fades. Large-scale infrastructure projects often leave behind stadiums that are rarely used after the Games end. As a result, taxpayers are left to deal with long-term costs that can last for decades.
- B. This global exposure helps explain why bidding processes are so competitive and why hosting rights are often seen as a strategic prize rather than a purely sporting honour. Governments view the Olympics as an opportunity to reshape international perceptions and boost national prestige. Consequently, political influence frequently plays a role behind the scenes.
- C. Wealthier nations are able to invest heavily in youth development programmes, sports science and international competition schedules. These advantages allow athletes to gain experience and support long before they reach elite level. In contrast, competitors from poorer countries often face financial and logistical barriers.
- D. As a result, debates about fairness, representation and access have become central to discussions about the future of the Games. Critics argue that reforms are necessary to ensure a more level playing field for athletes worldwide. Supporters, however, claim that excellence will always require unequal investment.
- E. Broadcasters and sponsors also influence which sports receive prominence, shaping public interest and Olympic priorities. Events that attract higher viewing figures are more likely to be promoted or expanded. This commercial pressure can affect decisions about which disciplines remain part of the Olympic programme.
- F. This is often cited by organisers as justification for continuing to invest in the Olympic model. Iconic moments of triumph and perseverance help maintain public enthusiasm. For many supporters, these shared experiences outweigh concerns about cost and politics



Do you think it's possible for the Olympics to be a fair competition?

Refer to examples mentioned in the text to support your opinion

Speaking: Cambridge-Style Collaborative Task (C1/C2)

Task: Discuss the following issues

- How host cities should be selected
- Whether new sports should replace traditional ones
- How to make athlete selection fairer
- Whether the Olympics should be smaller or larger in scale

You should:

- compare ideas
- justify opinions
- react to your partner's views
- reach a conclusion

Aim to speak for 3–4 minutes

Do you agree? The Olympics reflect not just how we compete, but how we choose to represent ourselves to the world.



Olympic Quick Exit Quiz (no writing)

1. Name one new sport or event at Milano-Cortina 2026
2. Name one reason countries want to host
3. Name one criticism of the Olympic model
4. Name one benefit for athletes
5. Name one risk for host cities



Answer Key

Pre-Use of English

True / False	Gapped words and part of speech
1. False – events are spread across regions 2. True 3. True 4. False – the Olympics are also about identity, prestige, politics	1. in (preposition) 2. the (article) 3. are (auxiliary verb) 4. as (adverb)

Open Cloze

1. **across**
→ *spread across several regions* (fixed collocation)
2. **while / whereas**
→ contrast between Milan and Cortina
3. **from**
→ *from 6 February to 22 February*
4. **more**
→ *more than 90 countries*
5. **but**
→ *not only ... but also* (fixed structure)
6. **addition**
→ *in addition to* (fixed expression)
7. **though**
→ contrast between aims and criticism
8. **far/much**
→ *far more than medals* (colloquial expression)

Word Formation (Advanced)

1. **transparency**
(**TRANSPARENT** → **TRANSPARENCY**)
→ *lack of political transparency*
2. **stability**
(**STABLE** → **STABILITY**)
3. **discontent**
(**CONTENT** → **DISCONTENT**)
4. **prestigious**
(**PRESTIGE** → **PRESTIGIOUS**)
→ *adjective needed after become nationally...*

Paraphrasing Practice – Possible Answer Key

2. Original:

While Tina represents the Olympics, her darker-furred brother Milo has been selected as the mascot of the Paralympic Winter Games.

Possible paraphrases:

- Unlike Tina, who represents the Olympics, Milo is the official mascot of the Paralympic Games.
- Milo, Tina's younger brother, has been chosen to symbolise the Paralympics rather than the Olympics.
- The Paralympic Winter Games will be represented by Milo, who has darker fur than his sister Tina.

3. Original:

Several new events will appear in the programme, including women's doubles in luge and mixed-team skeleton.

Possible paraphrases:

- The Olympic programme has been expanded to include new disciplines such as women's doubles luge.
- Events like mixed-team skeleton are among the new additions to this year's Games.
- This edition of the Olympics introduces a number of new competitions, including women's doubles luge.

4. Original:

Norway is widely expected to dominate the medal table, with athletes such as Johannes Høsflot Klæbo among the favourites for gold.

Possible paraphrases:

- Norway is predicted to top the medal rankings, largely thanks to athletes like Johannes Høsflot Klæbo.
- With competitors such as Klæbo, Norway is considered the strongest contender for the most gold medals.
- Many expect Norway to outperform other nations, as several of its athletes are leading gold-medal candidates.

Key Word Transformations

1. ROLE

had played a role in

✓ *The government denied that politics had played a role in the choice of host city.*

2. HAVE

until (after) they have competed in

✓ *Athletes are not selected until after they have competed in several strict qualification events.*

3. TENDS

tends to cost more

✓ *Hosting the Olympics tends to cost more than countries initially expect.*

(Other acceptable variant: *tends to be more expensive*)

4. SUCCEED

don't succeed in competing in

✓ *Most athletes don't succeed in competing in more than one Olympic Games.*

Reading Answer Key – Gapped Text

The Olympic Games Beyond Sport

Gap	Correct Paragraph
17	B
18	A
19	C
20	E
21	F
	D (extra paragraph – NOT USED)

Exit Quiz – Answer Key

Possible answers (accept variations):

1. One new sport or event
→ Ski mountaineering / mixed-gender events
2. One reason countries want to host
→ International prestige / global visibility / political influence
3. One criticism of the Olympic model
→ High cost / public opposition / inequality / commercial pressure
4. One benefit for athletes
→ Global exposure / funding / national recognition
5. One risk for host cities
→ Debt / unused venues / taxpayer burden / public discontent