

Learningguild Certificate in Reasoning and Expression

Report on the March 2008 examination

All four candidates were awarded the Certificate, all within the B grade, two at the upper level, one at the middle, and one at the lower.

The general approach recommended for preparation for the examination is set out in the introduction to the previous report (September 2007). It should be noted that some changes will be made to some pages of the book *Making up Sentences* for a third edition, to appear, it is hoped, early in 2009. The production of the guide and the answer-book mentioned in the previous report has not been possible in 2008, but the intention is to proceed with them next year, in relation to the third edition.

There are references in this report to *MS* (often simply in such a form as '1:5.6'), Gowers's *The Complete Plain Words*, R.W.Burchfield's *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED)*.

Here again is the explanation of the nature and rationale of our marking system:.

Marks in the A grade go from the very rare A and A?- down to A--- and AB. Upper Bs range down from BA and B+++ to B?+, and then, after B unqualified (a middle B), there are lower Bs from B?- to B-- and BC. There is a matching set of C marks, except that the lowest is C--. Fail marks are 'Just below C' and 'Below C'. One advantage of this traditional marking system is that it does not tempt markers to strike a simple average when what is most desirable is judgment of a kind that recognizes merit shown anywhere. Thus three marks in the A grade would get one an overall A if a serious effort had been made, without general disaster, in the other two sections.

Section 1

All the marks here were in the lower half of the B grade: two at B-, two at B-?-. To develop one's knowledge and understanding of grammatical principles and of common pitfalls to the point where one can get at least an upper B for this section will not only contribute in itself to the gaining of a higher level or grade, but make it likely that one will do better elsewhere, and of course make fewer mistakes in one's written work generally. *MS*, Gowers, Foster and Bryant (see *MS* Appendix B) and past papers and reports will all be found helpful. Plenty of sentence-correction needs to be done: it is not enough to read a grammar book, however good it may be.

Here is a version in which the errors in the original sentences have been corrected.

- a) Many parents are faced with the difficult question of where their children should be educated.
- b) Whatever you do, don't become one of those wretched losers who hang out only with their old high-school friends.
 [If one wished to write in a style to which 'losers' and 'hang out' were inappropriate, one could put '... those wretchedly unadventurous people whose spare time is spent ...'.]
- c) Are we going to become a country constricted by navel-gazing?
- d) The mere fact that something is different does not mean that you have to say the word 'No'.
- e) He said that the asylum-seekers might not have had the opportunity, before their claim was rejected, to put their case with confidence.
- f) If the King had married Mrs Simpson, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Stanley Bruce would have resigned and that would have led to a damaging general election.
- g) "What I'm interested in", said the judge, "is your answering the questions you're asked."
- h) Correct.
- i) Mark Nicholas is a man with a wonderful ability to find words under pressure and speak in sentences.
- j) The current events at Victoria Police are out in the open: twenty years ago such things were hidden.
- k) The judge remarked that, despite George Williams's many health problems, he had "managed quite well" to traffic in drugs.
 [Alternatively, 'despite the fact that George Williams had ...'.]
- l) There are several hurdles in the way of young people who want to save enough to buy their dream home.

Attention is invited to this section of the previous report, both for the initial advice and for the presentation of many basic points of grammar, punctuation, etc., grouped under such headings. (The reader will need to refer also to the original sentences in the September 2007 paper.) This report will concentrate for the most part on matters not arising there. Where no comment is made here on a change, it will be useful for readers to explain it for themselves, often with reference to a principle set out in those paragraphs under headings, or directly to a grammar book such as *MS*.

- a) A dilemma is a problem to which each of two solutions is unacceptable: hence we speak of being on the horns of a dilemma. What we have here is a difficult question, not necessarily a dilemma. It is odd to say of a school "I educated my children there". Since education is broader than what happens even at a good school, it would be preferable, if what was at issue was the choice of a school (rather than considering "homeschooling"), to write 'the difficult question in which school or schools their children should be enrolled'.

- b) Confusion of second person with third.
- c) Distinguish ‘naval’ and ‘navel’. ‘Crippled’ and ‘navel-gazing’ give us a mixed metaphor (CW/MM in Appendix A of *MS*).
- d) See *MS* 5:3.3 & 6, and, for noun clauses, 2:4.4. The comma after ‘different’ is an interrupting one (5:3.10).
- e) There is no need to split the infinitive in ‘to confidently put their case’. ‘Before’ is simpler and better than ‘prior to’. ‘Prior’ is an adjective, as in ‘I have a prior engagement.’
- f) This is a counterfactual conditional sentence concerning the past, and so requires the past perfect tense in the *if*-clause. (A common mistake by people whose first language is not English is to write ‘would have’ in such a clause instead of ‘had’.) Not the Cabinet but its resignation would have had the result described.
- g) Why ‘your answering’ and not ‘you answering’? It is clear that the judge wants to communicate his interest in the answering by the person, not the person as he gives the answers. Therefore it is better to use the gerund than the participle, and the gerund, a verbal noun, requires the possessive ‘your’. 3:5 distinguishes participles from gerunds, but does not include that final point. There are short discussions in Gowers (p.137f) and Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition (pp. 12f, 55f), and a long and interesting one in Burchfield (pp. 608-10). Since ‘your’ before ‘asked’ is obviously wrong, it is reasonable to take the words attributed to the judge as open to correction.
- h) The verb ‘mitigate’, which is used transitively, is sometimes wrongly used where the right verb is ‘militate’, always used intransitively with ‘against’. (On transitive and intransitive uses of verbs see 3:3.1.) Burchfield gives examples of the confusion at his entry for ‘mitigate’.
- i) There is a failure to provide parallelism here (3:5.5). ‘And who’ should not be used without a previous relative pronoun (4:2.8).
- j) If ‘twenty years ago’ is regarded as an acceptable noun-equivalent in the original, it should be prefaced by ‘in contrast with’ or ‘by contrast with’. (See Burchfield at ‘unlike’, and, in particular there, Fowler’s example (a).) In the version offered above it is an adverbial phrase.
- k) ‘Despite’ is a preposition, not a conjunction (such as ‘although’, which could be used to correct the original). The words ‘despite George Williams having’ are open to the same objection as ‘you answering’ at g. ‘Despite George Williams’s having’ is cumbersome. ‘Traffic’ is now the basic verb, not ‘traffick’, but it needs to have a *k* before the suffixes *-ing* and *-ed*. It seems likely that ‘quite well’ goes with ‘managed’ here: we often speak of “managing quite well”.
- l) ‘Several hurdles’ is the subject-locution (3:2.4). ‘Faced by’ would also be better than ‘to’. Notice that, in the version above, ‘who want ...’ is an identifying relative clause, not a commenting one (5:3.10).

Section 2

Two of the four candidates did well here, with upper B marks (both B+?+); the others were given B-?- and CB.

The value of this section as a test, and as a path of intellectual development, was explained in the September 2007 report.

The passage may be punctuated, and divided into two paragraphs, as follows.

Let's take seriously the question whether we should try to change the nature of election campaigns. Their ugly aspects can be summed up in four words: cost, debts, promises, rhetoric. Given all the urgent needs at home and abroad, how can all the millions poured into campaigns of the present sort be justified? Once elected, politicians enter upon office knowing that their wealthy supporters expect a pay-off. Unrealistic promises, amounting often to bribery, are thrown around. Candidates travel constantly to one meeting of the faithful – few others are interested – after another. They're cheered for their speeches but seldom properly challenged.

Those last two words offer a clue to what is needed. We should expect of candidates that they repeatedly submit to questions from panels of three or four people, including experts. As Plato's Socrates makes so clear, it is futile to be eloquent if you cannot deal with difficulties and give relevant answers to questions.

The four words are crucial to the construction of the passage. It is therefore unjustifiable to start a new paragraph, as one person did, with the sentence beginning 'Candidates'. Two divided it as above, one of them saying "the first para summarises the problem, whereas the next one offers a solution". The other, defensibly, ended a first short paragraph with the four words, seeing that as an introduction. There is no need here to put those words in inverted commas, because the writer is **using** them to describe the ugly aspects of campaigns. (See *MS* 1:3.2 on writing about words as against using them.) Commas suffice to separate the four; semi-colons are too heavy.

Only one person worked out that 'few others are interested' was an insertion, and he put a pair of commas around it, whereas a pair of dashes is needed. It is very important in this section to be ready for one or two points of real difficulty, the sign of which is often that what you first think of makes the sentence that you produce, and/or one that precedes or follows, impossible either grammatically or as an intelligent thing to say. So one of the other three made the sentence "Candidates travel constantly to one meeting of the faithful few others are interested." Another had the two sentences "Candidates travel constantly to one meeting of the faithful few. Others are interested after another."

Two went wrong in the sentence beginning 'Once elected', by putting a comma after 'office' rather than after 'elected'. A clause 'Once elected politicians enter upon office' would need to be followed by words including a personed and backbone verb

(see the references given at p.xxi of *MS*) for the sentence as a whole, such as ‘know’ would provide in ‘they know ...’. If we punctuate correctly, with a comma after ‘elected’, we have an elliptical clause (6:2.3), short for ‘Once they are elected’. In relation to the example “Once past the turnpike, the highway runs along an elevated ridge.”, I should call ‘Once’ a conjunction, not an adverb as it is there called in *SOED*.

The words ‘makes so clear’ render it unlikely that the following words are a quotation. On the futility of mere rhetoric in the circumstance described, readers may like to read Plato’s *Meno* (especially to 80), *Protagoras* (to 335), and *Gorgias* (to 462).

It is very important to know where **not** to use commas. (See the entries for commas in the punctuation section of Appendix A in *MS*; more advanced students would benefit from nearly six pages on ‘Incorrect uses’ [of commas] in Gowers’s chapter “Punctuation”. The misused comma, called interrupting (5:3.10 and Gowers’s subsection vi), is often put between a lengthy subject-locution and a verb: so one candidate put a comma after ‘the millions poured into campaigns of the present sort’ and after ‘bribery’ (without making a commenting phrase, as in the version above, by putting one also after ‘promises’).

Section 3

The marks were all at or near the middle of the B range: three at B+ and a B-.

The rationale for this section, and the value of studying it in past papers, were explained in the September 2007 report.

i. Although ‘radical’, used as an adjective, is derived from the Latin ‘*radix*’, meaning a root, and so might suggest going to the root of a matter, it has come, like the noun, to suggest an outright rejection of a view or practice associated with conservatives, or the adoption of one that is quite “out of the ordinary”, as one candidate put it. (See the entry in *SOED*.)

One candidate answered the question about ‘deterministic’ and ‘determination’, in spite of having already given an answer about ‘radical’. The words themselves need to be the focus, and of course the second question should not be left out. ‘Deterministic’ is here equivalent to ‘based on the belief that people’s behaviour is largely caused by their circumstances’ and ‘determination’ to ‘unswerving resolve to get something done’. The two words have in common the idea of a limit (cf. the Latin ‘*terminus*’), even though the kinds of limiting are quite different.

ii. One candidate wrote a delightfully concise, perceptive and original first sentence: “Being left on the island on your own, moving to a different country, changing jobs or even marrying, are all border-crossing experiences.” [‘And’ instead of ‘or’, and no comma after ‘marrying’ because all the previous words make up the subject-locution of ‘are’: see the last paragraph of Section 2 above.] Otherwise answers failed to meet the request in “and illustrate”. Often the test of one’s understanding or experience of some matter, or one’s capacity to explain it, is whether one can produce, preferably for oneself, an apt and, where appropriate, vivid illustration.

iii. There was little sympathy, and there should have been some, for the view expressed. A person may rightly fear that conventional interviewers may be prejudiced against him or her because of nationality, accent, etc., and want the focus to be on “skills and references”, and perhaps qualifications and capacity to do the job. However, as the candidate quoted in the previous subsection saw, it is a valuable guide to look at previous experiences “and most importantly responses to those experiences”. (Cf. the last two sentences of the second paragraph of the extract.) The prospective interviewee ought not to be afraid of describing some of his responses: they are indicative of his or her intelligence and/or character.

Conciseness matters, and not only in exams. I leave the reader to decide how to achieve it in revising this sentence: “In my opinion it depends on the job as to the degree personal experience is important to successfully performing its requirements.”

Section 4

[This part of the report is from Dr John Williams and me: we both marked this section and I thank him for joining me again in that marking and the reporting. JH]

The marks were B+?+, B?-, B- and C. The C mark was given to an answer that was too personally hostile in the first part (e.g., “His only credibility comes from him [his] being a sports journalist”: it is reasonable to assume that he is a professional and experienced one, though not on that account justified in his view of the matter he writes on here); it did not engage coolly and carefully with particular arguments; and the second part was concerned more with violent fans than with personal abuse by players. Another candidate also made that last mistake, whereas a third person pointed out that allowing abuse by players “allows [would increase the prevalence of] abuse amongst fans”. The best answer, though in the first part it did not cover enough ground, included the point that there is no indication of “what type of verbal abuse, or frequency, or context he is talking about” when Fred asserts that abuse will be character-forming, and in the second part it drew valuably upon the writer’s acquaintance with cricket. She argued for “very explicit rules” concerning verbal abuse by players of other players, saying:

... cricket experiences the unpleasant nature of verbal abuse at the amateur level all the way through to the professional level. Recent media coverage has shown that racist taunts and personalized attacks damage the competition between teams. It has a wider effect than insulting [hurting and angering?] one player – it causes division among teams, supporters and even countries.

It would have been valuable if candidates had considered what rules there should be, and how they would be applied (initially, of course, by referees or umpires).

Candidates sitting the Learningguild examination are given half an hour “for reading the paper **and making notes upon it**”. During that time they should carefully read the specific questions asked or tasks set in each component of the examination, paying close attention to all “key words” and, we suggest, underlining or highlighting them. So what is written at i and ii might be treated thus, with a view to ensuring that one would in the answers do what was asked:

Discuss some of Fred's particular arguments, saying why you do or do not regard them as providing good reasons for a negative answer to the question he presents in P1.

Preferably with some reference to one or more sports and countries with which you are familiar, give and defend your own answer to that question.

A candidate needed here, then, to understand, and to show that he or she understood, what the question asked of Fred was, and that his arguments were intended to support a negative answer. He or she had then to identify the separate arguments, and discuss the worth of, in this case, "some" (three or more out of five?). Then, separately, one's own answer had to be given and defended, preferably with the reference stated.

One of Fred's words in P2, 'wimp', is highly emotive, and perhaps somewhat insulting to a sensitive but not overly-sensitive person. Would the Islamic member of the Essendon AFL team be properly called a wimp if he found derogatory comments on his religious affiliation and that religion's practices not only offensive but upsetting to the point of affecting his goal-kicking ability? Indeed, would a person making such comments be merely a "loud-mouth"? The offended player may well find that he learns to ignore such comments and to regard the person making them with a measure of compassion, and thus the comments may be "character-forming", but how does Fred know that this is likely to be the case? He offers no evidence, as candidates pointed out. (It is often important to consider what kinds of evidence would be valuable.) He asserts that "after a while, the persistent abusers will realize that they're not acting sensibly", but is this generally the case? Might not their verbal behaviour, if not excluded by rules, be adopted by fellow team-members or members of other teams?

Is it the case that "words will never hurt" a reasonable person? The words 'You're guilty', even if uttered outside a courtroom, might hurt and hurt mightily a person falsely accused of a crime. A writer, to take another example, would be hurt, emotionally and perhaps professionally, if false or ill-informed derogatory claims were made about his or her personal history. There was not, in general, the criticism of P3 that one could reasonably expect.

Fred puts the rhetorical question (P4) "Where do you draw the line?" He gives no consideration to any proposals that might be thought practicable. The best answer in this section included the remark "it may be easier to define what is not verbal abuse first".

Keep a critical eye on the sort of language used in a passage set in Section 4. Is it abusive (characterized by pejorative words), as in 'weaklings who can't take abuse', or, at least in the context, unduly sympathetic or myopic, as in 'fallible people under great pressure', and so "loaded" in one way or another? Consider also whether the writer is saying or implying that there are only two alternative views, and, if so, whether there is some other that merits consideration.

Section 5

The marks were B++ (for topic T), B?+ (for topic B), B (for G), and B-?- (for L).

The writer on T gave a clear account of a holiday (in an Asian country) in which there was a combination of backpacking and staying in comfort with a resident. It was relevant to give some description of the country concerned, but not too much, as the topic asked for “some aspects of youth hostelling or backpacking as you have experienced them”, not for an account of a holiday in which one or other was involved. There were excellent paragraphs on the value of “living rough” for a while and on the conformity in fact exhibited by many supposedly “independent” backpackers. The essay would have been better if more aspects of backpacking had been examined, for example, matters of privacy or the lack of it, the danger of anonymity and the pleasure of really good conversation (if you had it). The writer ended well with a reference to the desirability of “flashpacking”, explained as “backpacking but done in a little less frugal way”.

There were spelling mistakes and omission of apostrophes in what was otherwise well written. I invite readers to find a neat way to avoid the two juxtaposed *froms* in

My friend and I laughed as we could predict even what country
someone was from from their type of bag.

In the essay on topic B, teaching concerning truthfulness, courage and respect for persons was well related to “bring[ing] up children to be honest”. The writer noted the need not to commend honesty as “the [policy] most beneficial for personal interests”. The essay was a bit too short at about 400 words, and did not answer the question what it is to be honest.

The mark for the essay on G could not be above B mainly because it was written as though the topic had been “In what ways can a CEO, focusing on profit and single-minded about it, achieve his or her end?” In fact it invited one to consider whether there were great dangers about being single-minded, especially in relation to profit, as though it were all-important rather than indispensable and usually needing to be increased. Single-minded people (consider Midas in the famous myth) may defeat their own ends (plural) by not recognizing what they really want or need.

The person who wrote on topic L chose “a computer[-]animated cartoon called ‘Kungfu Panda’”, and gave a balanced response to it, comparing it unfavourably with *Finding Nemo*. It would probably have been better to choose a performance or film about which one would have more to say. The adjective ‘great’, like ‘nice’, is often used to express approval where a more specific word should be preferred.

It is worth repeating the advice given in the previous section, that candidates should ensure that they understand and actually do what is asked for (unless there is a really good reason, carefully explained, for not doing so). “The question, the whole question, and nothing but the question” is usually a good motto.

John Howes