

Learningguild Certificate in Reasoning and Expression

Report on the September 2008 examination

All four candidates were awarded the Certificate, two at the A grade, one at the lower level of the B, and one at the upper level of the C. It is our custom to name and congratulate people who attain the A grade in our examination. Those who achieved it on this paper were Michele Friend and Sarah Kuczynski. To the question “What do you need to do to get that grade?” there is one immediate answer, though more should, of course, be said. You normally need to get marks between A and AB (see the description of the marking system below) for at least three of the five sections, and make a reasonable effort elsewhere, not getting low marks. It is noteworthy that the two candidates gaining the A grade on this occasion both had marks in that grade for Sections 2 and 5: it is a good foundation to be able to punctuate aptly and write an essay of the kind required in the heading to Section 5. One of them had AB for Section 1, where the other had B+++ , and that other had AB for Section 4, where the first had B++?+. A very good initial aim would be to study Sections 1, 2 and 5 in this paper and report, and in the previous three (all on the web). The knowledge, understanding and skills gained thereby would certainly assist potential candidates in the other two sections as well, and later one could attend more specifically to them.

There are references in this report to the two books mentioned in the green leaflet concerning the exam, my own *Making up Sentences* (of which a new set of copies will soon be available from Learningguild, to be followed by a slightly revised third edition) and the Penguin Reference book *The Complete Plain Words* (3rd edition, 1987, but originally by Sir Ernest Gowers, and so I write just ‘Gowers’). Another book often mentioned is R.W.Burchfield’s *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, 1996. There are also abbreviations for two Oxford English dictionaries, the *Basic* and the *Advanced Learner’s*.

Our marking system may be described as follows. 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.

Section 1

The marks were AB, B+++ , B?- and BC. On the next page is a version in which the errors in the original have been corrected.

- a) Things are not looking as bad as many people are saying.
- b) No one rings a bell when the market is at its bottom, and so it's very difficult to predict the time to go back in.
- c) What is unknown, however, is when the volatility will cease.
- d) I simply asked her if the quality of the fabrics was top-notch.
- e) You can slide the rear seat back for passengers or forward for goods.
- f) The cost of a tyre [US: tire] is high, ranging from \$160 to \$190.
- g) Correct.
- h) What I'm saying as an engineer is that we should discover which procedures elderly people find difficult and then design things to make those procedures easier.
- i) Both lack of knowledge about mental illness and the stigma attached to it prevent some people from seeking assistance.
- j) No one was surprised when he took over as Premier: they would have been surprised if he hadn't done so.
- k) The athlete said that he wasn't just someone who turned up to race: he wanted to entertain the crowd.
- l) It is absurd to have the only body whose task is to maintain the student register exempt from the offence of unauthorized use.

I shall not explain or seek to justify all the changes made, partly because it is desirable that potential candidates think for themselves about such matters and either give immediately their own explanation of a change or discuss it with some competent person.

People wanting to learn what they can from these reports without looking up every reference are advised to make sure that they at least understand grammatical terms used, such as 'participle' and 'gerund'. No book is prescribed for the Learningguild exam, but the books cited, and of course others, would be useful (and certainly not just for Section 1, though especially for that). Looking up many of the references is recommended, mainly for the sake of the guidance there given but partly because it is very helpful in any area of life to become well acquainted with one or more sequential and generally reliable textbooks or reference books. As some of the following comments show, some grammatical explanations are more precise than others.

- a) ‘As + [adjective or adverb] + as’ is a combination suitable to many comparisons, and certainly suitable here. The first ‘as’ is an adverb and the second a conjunction, at least when it begins a clause. One could add ‘that they are’ at the end, but that is omissible. The choice of the word ‘everyone’ is incautious.
- b) ‘Making’ in the original is an unconnected (unattached) participle (*MS* 3:5.5; Gowers Ch.12, (ii) (b), pp.134-7). I have avoided ‘which makes it difficult’, because there is no clear antecedent for ‘which’ (*MS* 4:2.2; Gowers on pronouns (xv), p.120f; Burchfield on ‘which’, 3). One candidate made just the two changes from ‘rings’ to ‘ringing’ and from ‘making’ to ‘makes’. It would be better to make ‘ringing’ a gerund (3:5.6) by putting the possessive ‘No one’s’ in front of it, but better still to begin ‘The fact that no one rings a bell ...’.
- c) The adverb ‘however’ in mid-sentence should have a pair of commas around it, just as an initial ‘However’ should be followed by a comma. The exception in each case is its use followed by an adverb or adjective, as in *OBED*’s example ‘I never win, however hard I try’. The second meaning given there should not be explained by ‘but’ but by the adverbial ‘on the other hand’, which appears at p.175f. Three of the four candidates failed to correct ‘volatility’. The adjective ‘volatile’ is a useful one, well treated in the *OALD*.
- d) We often need (i) to consider the position of an adverb (*MS* 2:2.7; Gowers at the end of Ch. 9, pp. 95-7), and (ii) to identify the **main constituent** in the subject-locution (Sub-L) and make sure that the personed verb accompanying that Sub-L is singular or plural to match that main constituent (3:2.2; Gowers in Ch.12, on p.130f, under ‘Attraction’, though he uses, next to examples, the less precise term ‘main subject’; Burchfield at ‘agreement’, 8, though he uses the less precise ‘true subject’. It is odd that writers of grammar books have often failed to recognize first the difference (1:7.1) between the subject, in this case the **quality** here referred to, and the subject-locution, here the **words** ‘the quality of the fabrics’, and secondly that a subject-locution is very often, as here, a **set** of words, not just one word. Here ‘quality’, a singular noun, is the main constituent, so far as grammar is concerned, of the subject-locution ‘the quality of the fabrics’. The sentence as a whole is a statement, and so needs to end with a full stop (5:3.9). The adjective ‘top-notch’ requires a hyphen (2:1.5).
- e) ‘Depending’ makes this sentence longer than it needs to be, and is awkwardly followed by ‘if’. ‘Depending on whether’ would be an improvement, and better than one candidate’s ‘depending on if’, but ‘depending’, even with ‘on’, would be an unconnected participle (whereas ‘according to’ is a preposition). I have on this occasion made a major simplification by rejecting the choice of the words ‘depending if you need to carry’. In connection with a car it is more idiomatic to say ‘passengers ... goods’ than ‘people ... cargo’. The order of the original ‘people or cargo’ did not fit that of ‘forward or back’. In the proposed version ‘and’ could be used instead of ‘or’.
- f) The tyres are expensive, their cost is high. ‘Between’ requires ‘and’, not ‘or’ or ‘to’.

- g) It is true that it is more idiomatic to say ‘where I got that information’, but ‘whence I received’ is not wrong, even it is formal. Its use here suggests an emphasis on the source of the information. ‘From where’, given by one candidate, is less idiomatic than ‘where’ or ‘from whom’ or ‘from what source’. Two candidates, not understanding the meaning of ‘whence’, changed it to an expression of time: one had ‘when I received’ and another ‘until I have received’. Surprisingly, Burchfield is readier to regard ‘whither’ as still current than to take that view of ‘whence’.
- h) A noun clause beginning with ‘that’ (*MS* 2:4.4) is often the best way to express or sum up the content of an assertion (the proposition: 1:7.6). I put at first ‘them’ instead of ‘those procedures’, but that might suggest that ‘things’ is the intended antecedent (*MS* 4:2.2f; Gowers Ch.11 (ii), pp. 111-3). ‘Functionality’ is a word of little usefulness, presumably meaning the quality of serving a function.
- i) ‘Literacy’ is misused in the original, and it is clumsy to use ‘mental health’ (twice) as an adjectival phrase in front of a noun. ‘As to’ is often better avoided than used (see Gowers on “Verbosity in prepositions” at pp. 54-7 and Burchfield on ‘as’, 12), and ‘as to why’ is unjustifiable after ‘barriers’. The use of ‘barriers’ suggests something more external than lack of understanding.
- No candidate handled this sentence well: two wrote ‘Correct’, one put ‘Stigma and’ first and changed ‘low’ to ‘poor’, and the other did not realize that ‘low mental health literacy’ was intended to indicate a lack of knowledge about mental illness, and wrote ‘Low mental health, literacy and stigma’. It is quite unnecessary to use the word ‘literacy’ here.
- j) A conditional statement about the past, if it is counterfactual (i.e. presenting a case which is known or supposed not to be the actual one) requires ‘had’ in the ‘if’-clause. I have written ‘if he hadn’t done so’ (the candidate given the mark AB used the elegant ‘had he not done so’); the reason for ‘done so’ is that what we have in the first clause is ‘took’, not the past participle ‘taken’, and ‘if he hadn’t’ or ‘had he not’ does not fit ‘took’. See *MS* 3:7.12 and Gowers Ch. 12 (v), where the locution ‘the main part of the verb’ is preferable to ‘the main verb’ (*MS* 1:7.4f).
- Only one candidate left the comma uncorrected: it is an inadequate one (Appendix A, P/C Inad). Here a colon was the best replacement.
- k) There is anacoluthon here (*MS* 5:3.3). In the version I have given I have kept the original’s words ‘he wasn’t just someone who turned up to race’, with their implication of superiority to those who did turn up just to race. We can usefully call that set of words a statementile locution (i.e., one capable of being used to make a statement). To secure parallelism (5:3.5) we need to match it with another: ‘he wanted to entertain the crowd’. Two candidates wrote ‘and that’, but the colon makes for conciseness and introduces an explanation.
- l) ‘Encumbered’ is a poorly chosen participle to indicate having been given (charged with) some responsibility: it is like ‘loaded down’. It is unclear what the writer meant if he or she actually wrote the ungrammatical words ‘the offence dealing unauthorized use’. Was the idea one that can be expressed by ‘dealing

in', or by 'dealing with'? (See the *OALD*.) One might possibly say 'the offence of dealing in unauthorized use(s)', though 'the offence of unauthorized use' would be preferable, or 'the clause dealing with unauthorized use'. Two candidates failed to grasp that the sentence concerned a body with the responsibility to administer the student register. One wrote 'person' instead of 'body', and the other had things the wrong way round: 'It is absurd to have the only body dealing with unauthorized uses, and itself exempt from the offence, being burdened with administering the student register.' If that expressed what the original writer meant, the sentence put here for correction would have been different.

Section 2

The difference in marks here was striking: two candidates had the marks A-- and A---, and two "Just below C". Section 2 is first and foremost a test of comprehension and of sentence-construction: the candidate's aim must be that all the words are placed within sentences all of which make sense.

When the passage is a reported conversation, one has to decide which parts to assign to particular speakers and which to any narrator there may be. The two candidates given "Just below C" did not, on the whole, succeed in doing that. Mary is the speaker most of the time, and Ron's contribution is "But the prestige!" and then the words, yielding two sentences, from 'Isn't Jamaica' to 'you prefer'. The narrator's words are 'asked Mary', 'replied Ron', and 'said Mary eagerly'.

Sometimes a set of words may make reasonable sense, or something close to it, as with the set, in the last third of the passage, from 'They would experience' to 'the friendships', and yet what follows does not make sense at all. The candidate who made that set a sentence finished with 'They can promote hospitality; would be provided ...'.

Practice makes a great difference to one's ability to deal with unpunctuated passages. One can find them in our previous papers, and there are numerous reports. Copies of other passages and exercises will be provided on request.

One candidate had 'There could, in any country, be, say, ...' (a plethora of commas), and made the later 'yes' into a one-word response from Ron. The word is much more likely to be part of a transition to a special feature that Mary wanted to emphasize: so, after a comma, 'yes, but also compete with others ...'. Another candidate began a new sentence from Mary with the 'Yes'; that sentence, however, is abnormal (having no subject-locution and no personed verb) without any good reason (*MS* 3:1.7f). There is a good reason for such sentences on each side of 'said Mary eagerly': the words 'I would prefer' can readily be "understood", given that she is answering the question 'What would you prefer?'

Here is a version with punctuation etc.:

"Isn't the winning of medals at the Olympics overvalued?" asked Mary. "Look at the consequences: many medals are won if not through drugs then by an artificial life-style. The winners, often living far from their own country, have minimal influence there

upon sport or community health.” “But the prestige!” replied Ron. “Isn’t Jamaica more prominent now because of Bolt and others? Anyway, what would you prefer?” “Festivals!” said Mary eagerly. “Festivals concentrating on particular sports, such as athletics. There could in any country be, say, a week in which people of a wide variety of ages and levels from that country and elsewhere could watch the champions, yes, but also compete with others similar to themselves. They would experience, and others hear about, the delights of the activities and the health and vigour, and the friendships, they can promote. Hospitality would be provided, ideally, in people’s homes, rather in those miscalled “villages”.

Section 3

The marks here, B++, B, B-- and C?+, were within a range lower than that for any other section. Many candidates find Section 3 difficult because it requires responses to specific questions related to a passage whose expression and even subject-matter may be more or less unfamiliar to them. The study of such passages and of questions about them, from previous papers and in books providing comprehension exercises, does much to widen horizons and effective vocabulary.

Just as in Sections 4 and 5, it is crucial to understand what one is asked to do and to do just that, as some of the following comments illustrate. In particular, if there are two or more parts to a question, one must seek to answer both or all. It may be useful to put numerals, where they have not been provided, beside a question that has parts.

i. Fairly short answers were appropriate. One candidate wrote far too much, and therefore lost time better devoted to other parts of the paper. Another wrote this as the first of her two sentences:

The noun ‘administrators’ as used in the first part of the essay The Art of the Soluble refers to people who have previously worked as scientists, mainly in research, but then have decided to make the move and become administrators – people who mainly work in bureaucracies with paperwork.

No more credit could be given to that, as part of an answer to the first question, than if she had written the short sentence ‘Administrators are people who mainly work in bureaucracies with paperwork.’ Sometimes a kind of nervousness leads candidates to repeat what is in the question or the passage when there is no need to do so. The sentence just quoted also has the error of writing of the noun ‘administrators’ that it was “used in the first paragraph of the essay The Art of the Soluble”, whereas that title was stated to belong to Medawar’s collection of essays, and the question was about the use of the word in the first of the two paragraphs provided from Brenner’s review of that collection.

A good answer concerning ‘administrators’ as used here would be:

The word ‘administrators’ here means officials whose duties are to make and record arrangements for those who actually do the scientific

work, to keep files, to maintain contact with government departments, and so on.

One candidate wrote that ‘romantic’ had the meaning of ‘distorted to emphasise the heroic, adventurous or exciting’ and that it was therefore “used in a pejorative sense”. With that trio of adjectives she certainly caught the main idea (one might add ‘larger-than-life’), but the question “could science do without it?” suggests that this romanticism is regarded by Brenner as fruitful, not really harmful. Similarly, to say, as another candidate did, that these views held by scientists of themselves are “unrealistic” catches something of the word ‘romantic’ but takes it too negatively

ii. One candidate did well in two sentences of her explanation of Brenner’s remark “Science is news of the world”:

Science describes, explains, and discovers ways in which the world works. [Brenner] does not intend to use this statement as a definition but rather as an emphasis on the importance of science.

One might better say “but rather to emphasize the importance of science”. Another candidate criticized the remark as “a very limited definition of science” without considering whether it was meant to be a definition. It was not: Brenner’s point was that science tells us how the world is, and that we need the information it supplies.

A third candidate wrote that Brenner meant “Science tells us about the world around us”, and said that she would be happy with that way of putting the matter. It would be better, because more modest as well as more precise, to say “Science gives us facts, theories and hypotheses about the nature and behaviour of physical objects”.

The other candidate was influenced too much by the references to means-to-ends views of science which were on each side of the remark. It is not true of the phrase ‘news of the world’ that it “serve[s] ... as a depiction of Brenner’s rather cynical view of society’s attitude toward scientific research”. The candidate did not see that the news Brenner had in mind concerned how we should understand our world, and not what would lead to some obvious improvement.

iii. Only one of the four candidates addressed the question “how you can determine what [Brenner’s attitude] is from the context”, and she dealt only with the (certainly significant) words ‘they say’. (She exaggerated the prominence of “distancing” words such as ‘they’ in the passage.) Another candidate was confused by some of the statements mentioned (but not made) by Brenner into attributing to him the view that “science has conceptual limits. That is some science is hard to quantify such as the differentiation between the mind and brain.” It is very important, in contexts where disagreement is being noted, to work out which statements the writer is making and which he is reporting, not always with clear flags such as “My opponents say”. (Section 3 of the March 1992 examination paper, and of the report, illustrate this need well in relation to a passage from Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*.)

In the last part of the question, candidates were asked, with bold type, “**how** [they] **would begin** considering” what view to take of Statement A, and one looked there for something fresh and thoughtful. I offer an answer to **ii** that is a model at least in its length and in allocating adequate space to each part of the question.

Brenner rejects Statement A with scorn. We can tell that from what precedes and what follows. After declaring that de Chardin’s writings are “nonsense”, and also “a caricature [i.e., an extreme version] of

what many people believe to be true”, Brenner has three consecutive expressions of what “they” believe, of which A is the third. Then there is the contrast with scientists, who are “determined to unmake mystery”, and of whom Brenner obviously approves: they, it is implied, would not accept A.

I should begin my consideration of A by recognizing, on the one hand, that in human beings there is no mind without a brain, that a defective brain produces mental defects, and that the study of the anatomy and physiology of the brain is likely to throw light on our mental processes. On the other, I should take seriously the fact that when we say of someone that his or her thoughts on some matter are profound, we are not talking about his or her brain processes; and that to understand the nature and potential of the human being we need much more than what are called the sciences.

Section 4

The marks were AB, B++?+, B-?-, and C-. I first answer the questions “What made the answer given AB better than the others?” and “Why was one answer given a low C mark?” and then state and illustrate two features of a good answer to the kind of task set in **i**.

The writer of the answer given the mark AB noted and commented upon **several** points raised by Joe. She gave some credit to the mentions of weight and clutter; pointed out that not all the news, in newspapers, that one might want occurred first, or immediately, or at all, on the web; said that the statement that most people wanted news, not views, was mere assertion on Joe’s part; and contrasted what might be put on blogs, which are not “tightly screened for quality”, with “considered and expert opinion[s]” in “editorials ... written by staff members of the newspaper”. This candidate’s answer to **ii**, though not the best, took a particular paper and asked for more editorials and for footnotes that cited sources. Other responses at Sec. 4 had less range and/or showed some confusion.

Two answers to **ii** had the defect of not focusing on any one newspaper. The weaker of them was not specific enough, expressing a commendable desire for “clarity and brevity” and opposing the inclusion of many articles in the one area. The writer, in her answer to **i**, became preoccupied with a charge against Joe of inconsistency, taking P4 to be “suggesting that newspapers should improve editorials”, whereas Joe had said in P2 that most people want news, not views. In fact, taking P4 as a whole, we can say that Joe’s view is that editors and columnists should go for “survival and attractiveness”, and stop thinking that their views, traditionally put in “powerful editorials”, deserved particular attention. Thus he is asking not for more attractive editorials but for less emphasis on editorials and more on attractiveness in features, articles, etc.

In assessing a piece of argument, it is desirable, where one can, to combine some general (and fair) comment, which “picks up” some overall tendency in the passage, with perceptive comment on particular remarks. Thus one might first say here that Joe shows no awareness of the strengths of the best newspapers. Then one might include such comments as these: “Joe does not recognize in P1 that it is ourselves rather than

the newspapers that we should blame for clutter. He fails in P2 and P3 to appreciate the value of the collocation of different views. He uses colourful language such as ‘competing for space in half a page of a newspaper’, when in fact room is often found for many good letters, and ‘pontificating’, when that is not the tone of many editorials.”

Section 5

Two candidates chose topic Q, and their marks were A-- and B-; one took topic A and had the mark AB; and the other’s topic was E and her essay was marked at B (a middle B). On this occasion, in this section of the report, I shall print some of my concluding comments on the essays, in the hope that these will be found thought-provoking and, as a set, serve as a guide to the criteria applied to essays in the Learningguild exam. Of course different topics can call for different virtues, but the ones asked for in the heading to Section 5 are desirable whenever one is responding to a topic. (A **topic**, if well-worded, is always narrower than a **subject** within which it falls.)

The best essay showed a wide vocabulary, drew on acquaintance with one marriage and what the writer had heard of another, and argued that the economic consequences of combined finances sometimes led married couples to stay together when it would be better to part. My general comments began:

This is deeply felt and, for the most part, very well expressed.Your essay obviously deserves a high mark.

Then I added:

There are two dangers that can threaten clear thinking in any area, & you have not avoided them here:

- i. undue generalization. (Is lifelong marriage right for some couples? If so, on what criteria?)
- ii. not being aware of, or forgetting, the importance for human beings of the point made by the Latin proverb “*Abusus non tollit usum*”, i.e., “The abuse of something does not show that it has no proper or valuable use.” That may apply to marriage, just as it applies to sport and to examinations.

The writer of the other essay on Q used up valuable time by repeating the statement one was asked to discuss, and then sought to explain the high rate of divorce in recent times. I commented as follows, seeking to show how important it was to write **relevantly** to the topic one chose:

You have quite reasonably (and with good explanation) put the view that the main factor in the high rate of divorce has been the possibility of independence for women. However, you have wrongly allowed the exposition of that view to dominate your essay on topic Q, which required you primarily to consider whether the old ideal of marriage is or is not unrealistic (rather than to assume without argument at the end of your essay that it is not, and that what is needed is “re-education”), and then to give at least some attention to whether the increasing lifespan makes any difference at all to this question. (You might well argue that it doesn’t, and that people who still wanted to be together at 60 [would] usually want to go on being together.)

Skill in ensuring relevance, balance, & an appropriate range of factors and considerations (see the heading to sec. 5) takes a lot of acquiring

(I went on to suggest plenty of thinking about topics, some writing of essays as practice, and attention to comments made by some competent person.)

The essay on topic A received a mark just on the A side of the A/B borderline. It was thoughtful, mostly well-written, and invited attention to the unclarity of the set of words 'live close to nature'. In this case my main comments were:

You have made some interesting points about what 'nature' can mean and what the statement might mean, but you've left yourself too little space, in proportion to the length of your essay, to deal with what city-dwellers can do about getting – fairly often, if they can – wider and deeper exposure to "nature", & whether they need to do so. You get to the first (only the first) of those two matters only at the end.

It is very important in one's writing of anything (of any length) ... to get the proportions right, and not to spend too long in introduction.

To the writer of the essay on topic E I made these two comments among others:

You have some good ideas here, along with some confusion and some awkwardness in expression. Look for books about grammar, choice and extension of vocabulary, & good writing generally.

She began with the sentence

'Exploration' includes 'education' but cannot be restricted to that definition.

If the word 'includes' is to be used, it would be better to say, thus doing justice to both Amy and Tom:

Education includes exploration but cannot be restricted to it.

We are not dealing here with definition, or with explaining the meaning of words, but rather with what is desirable. Amy wants to replace the word 'education' by 'exploration'. There is no need in the candidate's opening sentence for inverted commas, but if they are used they had better be double, to show that the words are being quoted from Amy.

A common error was made in the sentence "'Education' inherently infers that someone is teaching another." Not 'infers', but 'implies'. **People** infer, when they draw conclusions, especially when the conclusion is necessitated by the premises; words and statements have implications and they and their users or makers imply this or that (for example, if you say that someone is eloquent, your use of the word 'eloquent' implies that he or she speaks clearly, but not *vice versa*). Burchfield at 'infer' has a long entry with a splendid range of examples of correct and incorrect uses of each verb; Gowers treats the matter succinctly on p.235f.

I end by quoting and commenting on an excellent remark by the candidate: again I have removed unnecessary inverted commas around the topic's key nouns.

... by widening the view of education to exploration you are teaching students to want to know more.

Without eager and persevering exploration, study is seldom very educative. A large part of the value of our Learningguild examination is that it is not tied to any course: it rewards and encourages candidates who have explored for themselves, not only on our website and in earlier papers and reports but also in their own wide and intelligent reading elsewhere, and through their own thinking, accompanied, preferably, by discussion.

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