

AMOREY GETHIN

HOW to SUCCEED

in
Cambridge
First
Certificate
in English

Key Examination Techniques

How to Succeed in Cambridge First Certificate in English

Amorey Gethin

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Introduction

It is important to make clear who this book is written for.

The examination authority, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, gives candidates one of five grades at the First Certificate examination: A for a very good pass, B for a good pass, C for a pass, D for a narrow fail, and E for a bad fail.

The advice I give here is not for those who, without much difficulty, will get a grade A “very good” pass. They have little or no need of it. All I think such lucky people need do is study three of the Examinations Syndicate’s publications. They are *Cambridge Examinations in English: Changes of Syllabus in 1975*; *First Certificate and Certificate of Proficiency in English: Report on the Work of Candidates in the Examinations of June and December 1975*; and *Cambridge Examinations in English: Changes in Syllabus in 1984*. These tell students, in outline, what is expected from them and what they should aim for. (More detailed reports on particular papers are published as well from time to time.)

But most candidates are in a very different situation. They know they will not get the highest marks. The important question for them is simply, “Can I pass?”

There are a number of simple practical things these candidates can do to get many more marks than they might otherwise get.

Moreover, in those parts of the examinations where there is some sort of composition work (Paper 2, and Paper 3 Section B – see the examination summary below) it is foolish for most candidates to try to write perfectly in every way the examiners ask for; they will probably meet with catastrophe if they do. It is much better for them if they can be realistic and use practical methods to write good English and give good answers, even if that English and those answers are not up to the ideal standard the Examinations Syndicate is asking for at the level of an A.

There is a truth about language examinations that one should never forget: one must show the examiner only what one knows, never what one does not know.

It is to help students to be practical in these various ways that I have written this guide. If you can follow my suggestions you will probably not get an A; but you will have a very good chance of getting a C, or even a B.

Unfortunately books are still being published specially for First Certificate that can make students think in completely the wrong way about the examination.

Firstly, they give the idea that there are types of question in the

examination which there are not.

Secondly, and this is even worse, such books may make many students feel discouraged and depressed about the exam, because they make them think that the First Certificate is much more difficult than it really is, and make them think that they are expected to do things which they feel they cannot learn to do well enough.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book begins with general guidance on preparing yourself for the examination. Following that, each paper is discussed in turn. At the beginning of each discussion you will find an example of the paper, which is like the one you will get in the real examination. The Reading Comprehension questions of Paper 1 have been tested to make sure they are of the same standard of difficulty as the Syndicate sets for that paper. The sample compositions of Paper 2 have been judged by examiners with long experience of marking such compositions for the Syndicate. My questions for the Use of English Paper 3 are based on a careful study of the Syndicate's papers over the last eight and a half years. The oral part of the examination, Papers 4 and 5, is the part that has been changed most for the new form of the examination (1984). My material for these papers is based on the specimen material published by the Syndicate in 1982. Even in this part, however, the basic principles of both examining and preparing for the examination are the same as they have been for many years.

The techniques for dealing with the different papers are explained, and model answers are suggested for them all. For Papers 1 and 3 I have added detailed notes to the answers to show candidates how to work on each individual point. I have also given a number of standard expressions that should be useful in the composition and oral parts of the examination (Papers 2 and 5). At the end of the book is a list of Classic Difficulties that worry many students of English.

EXAMINATION SUMMARY**Summary of the First Certificate in English examination**

<i>Name and length of paper</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Contents of paper</i>	<i>Approximate marks for each part of paper</i>	<i>Total marks for each paper</i>
<i>Paper 1</i> Reading Comprehension <i>1 hour</i>	A	25 sentences with multiple-choice blanks	18	40
	B	3 or more comprehension passages with 15 multiple-choice questions	22	
<i>Paper 2</i> Composition <i>1½ hours</i>		2 compositions (120–180 words each; 2 out of 5 topics to be chosen)	20 for each composition	40
<i>Paper 3</i> Use of English <i>2 hours</i>	A	1 A passage with blanks (single choice) 2 Re-forming sentences 3 Re-forming words in sentences 4 “Telegram” sentences or completing sentences (3 and 4 sometimes vary, but these are the most common types)	32	40
	B	Summarising information in a text (the type of test in Section B varies – this is the most common type)	8	
<i>Paper 4</i> Listening Comprehension (approx. 30 minutes in groups of up to 30 candidates)		3 or more recordings on tape with various questions		20

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<i>Name and length of paper</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Contents of paper</i>	<i>Approximate marks for each part of paper</i>	<i>Total marks for each paper</i>
<i>Paper 5</i> <i>Oral</i> <i>Interview</i> <i>(approx. 20 minutes)</i>	(i)	Photograph: description and discussion questions	}	40
	(ii)	Reading aloud a short passage		
	(iii)	Talking in a practical situation, or discussion		
Total possible marks in the examination				180

You should aim to get a total of about 108 to pass the whole examination.

MARKING

The Examinations Syndicate does not announce a fixed mark that a candidate must get in order to pass the examination. This is decided after each examination. I will try to explain why below.

As you will see from the examination summary above there is a maximum of 40 marks for each written paper and for Paper 5, and 20 for Paper 4. Very broadly, you should pass if you get about 108 marks on all the papers together, which is 60 per cent.

But remember that it is the *total* marks of all the papers together that decide whether you pass or not. So don't get too depressed if, when you do a paper for practice, you get less than 60 per cent for that one paper; you may get higher marks on other papers, so your total may be enough. On the other hand, don't get too pleased with yourself if you do well on just one paper in your practice. You might not do so well on the other papers.

In order to be fair, the Examinations Syndicate use different marking systems for different sorts of paper.

Paper 1 (Reading Comprehension) is what is called an "objective" test; there are definite right or wrong answers to each question, which are marked by computer; there is no personal judgement by an examiner. The level of marks that candidates are getting on Paper 1 is then compared with the marks each individual examiner is giving on Papers 2

or 3 (Composition or Use of English). The marks given by an examiner who is marking lower than the average marks candidates are getting on Paper 1 may be raised by a suitable amount; if an examiner's marking is higher than the Paper 1 marks, that examiner's marks may be lowered.

This method also of course helps the Syndicate deal with any problems of a whole examination or one particular paper being easier or more difficult than another examination or paper. It is obviously impossible to make sure that all questions are exactly equal in difficulty. Some set in June 1985, for example, may be either easier or more difficult than those in December 1984.

Furthermore, to overcome this second problem, the various papers are discussed carefully with the marking examiners, who are asked to say if they think a paper is especially hard, or if they find more candidates than usual are getting high marks on a certain paper, and so on. In this way the Syndicate can form a judgement about each paper; they can then decide what the pass mark (and the mark for the different grades) for the *whole* examination is to be.

As an example, let us imagine that for the December 1985 exam the total "pass mark" for grade C is 102, but that, when they come to June 1986, the examiners judge that Paper 2 is a good deal easier than the Paper 2 of December 1985, and that therefore a candidate ought to get more marks on that paper than she or he would have got in December 1985. The Syndicate might then decide that for June 1986 the pass mark for the whole examination will be 106 (compared to the 102 of December 1985).

This purely imaginary example is of course a simple one. The reality is more complicated. But it shows the principle, and I hope you can understand why the Syndicate cannot announce a fixed pass mark, or a fixed mark for the various grades.

General Guidance

To pass the examinations you need:

- 1 the right preparation before the examination
- 2 the right technique during the examination itself

There are many candidates with a good enough knowledge of English to pass who have failed because they have not prepared in the right way and because they have used the wrong technique, or no technique at all, in the examination itself. But there are also many students with less knowledge of English who have passed, through good preparation and good examination technique.

You may feel that what I am saying is that the best way to pass is by using tricks. But that is not really true. What I am saying is that you can do best by being systematic and self-disciplined. And I also believe that most of the things you should do to prepare for the examination and that you should do in the examination itself are the same things people should do in any case to learn a language well, even if they are not interested in examinations at all.

PREPARATION

Before anything else you must obviously know in outline what is going to be in each of the five papers in the examination, and I hope the examination summary above and the examples printed later in the book make this clear.

But this is only the beginning. It is essential to know too, in detail, exactly what sort of English the examiners will ask you to show you understand, what sort of subjects they will probably ask you to write about, and what sort of grammatical or vocabulary points they are likely to test you on. Later in this book you will find detailed studies of what has been tested in all the five different sorts of paper.

It is clear that you must be prepared for the sort of questions you will get, and clear that you must practise answering some of the same sort of questions. (You can do this with *Cambridge First Certificate: Examination Practice 1*, which is a set of tests, with cassettes, published by the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and Cambridge University Press; students preparing for the examination on their own should buy the *Teacher's Book* as well.)

But please do not make the mistake that, unfortunately, so many

students make. Do not believe that doing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of test questions, and discovering the answers, is the right way to prepare. Do not believe that if you do 600 questions and answers you will be twice as well prepared, will have learnt twice as much, as if you do only 300. Very often this sort of preparation just means going through automatic, mechanical motions without thought: "Ah! So that's the answer, is it! Next question please!"

Ten thousand test questions will be useless to you unless you study the *method* needed to answer, and the *method* needed to prepare. If you doubt what I say, remind yourself of the fact that you will almost certainly never get exactly the same question again. You should spend the time studying how to be ready for questions you have never seen before. It is much better (for both student and teacher) to spend an hour thinking carefully about how to do five questions, than to spend an hour doing fifty questions and answers without thinking about them. I cannot emphasise too much that the question the candidate should constantly ask is "*How?*" In this way you can build up confidence that you can deal with almost any problem.

This point about dealing with problems leads on to what is probably the most important piece of advice I have to offer. It is important not only for people taking examinations; it is a basic principle for the learning of foreign languages.

PERSONAL WEAKNESSES

You must learn about yourself. You must discover what your own special needs are in English.

There is no need to "learn" the whole of English "equally", so to speak – spending equal time and effort on each part. This is a waste. You should pick out what makes English different from your own language and concentrate on those parts. And then, above all, you should pick out your own personal weaknesses in English, pick out your own special problems, find out what mistakes you most often make.

Make a list of them.

It will be best if, in your preparation, you can practise doing the various sorts of work you will be asked to do in the examination; in particular you should practise compositions. You should then make a careful note of any mistakes you make more than once. Count up how many times you make each mistake, and the mistake you make most often should be at the top of your list, the next most common in second place, and so on.

For instance, if your own language is Japanese or Persian, you may

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find that the problem of articles (**a, the**) comes at the top of your list. If you speak German, you may find **if** is your biggest problem. If your mother tongue is French you may find you are always having trouble with **since**. And if Spanish or Italian is your language, you may constantly forget to use **it** when you should.

But these are only examples of mistakes typical of certain languages. They may or may not be your particular personal mistakes. As I say, these *personal* ones are the most important of all to discover.

It is surprising that so few students organise their studies and their examination preparations in this way, for the logic of the method is so clear and so simple:

★ Find out your problems, and deal with them.

This is connected with another important truth, which can be expressed by a slogan:

The problem is not remembering the answer; the problem is remembering the problem.

An example of what I mean is given by the many thousands, perhaps millions, of German speaking students of English who repeatedly make the mistake of using **would** with **if**: "If I would do that . . ." etc. Most of them, if you asked them how one uses **if** in English, would give a correct answer, I think. They *know* how **if** should be used. But they constantly forget the *problem*, and so, unthinking, fall into the same trap again and again. You have probably had the experience where the teacher points at something you have written and says "What's wrong with that?" and you hit your head and say "Oh no! How terrible!", because you immediately recognise the mistake and *already know* it is wrong.

But even when they do not already know what is right, most students will find that if they constantly keep their particular problems in mind, they will very soon and very easily and naturally learn the "answer", learn the correct English, simply because they are so often in contact with the point.

This is a much better and more pleasant method of learning than spending hours and hours trying to learn rules by heart. That nearly always fails. The student spends, let us say, a week learning some rules about the past tense. Six weeks later she (or he) has probably forgotten most of what she has learnt – because she has not reminded herself constantly that there is such a problem in English. But if you keep looking up a problem in your grammar book, or, even better, keep looking out for it in your reading material, you will very quickly learn how to say it right – without boring learning. You must of course understand. But learn rules by heart – no!

So the key is:

Find out and remember your problems!

At the end of the book you will find a list of about 280 words – Classic Difficulties. The words are many of those that are often used wrongly in some way. The idea is that these words should act like red warning lights in your mind. So it is a good plan, shortly before the examination, to try to fix in your mind as many of these words as possible: then you have them there as reminders of possible dangers.

READING

In practice, reading is probably what most people learn most from when they are learning a new language. You should do as much of it as you can. Reading and listening to a language – in other words, observing it – are in the end the only way you *can* learn it.

It is obviously sensible to prepare for the examinations by reading the sort of English you will find in the various papers and the sort of English you will need to use yourself in those papers.

For the First Certificate examination the detective stories of Agatha Christie are some of the best things you can read. They are full of practical, everyday English. English translations of Simenon's Maigret stories are excellent for the same reason.

The other reading I recommend most strongly at this level is women's magazines. A few men students may think this a surprising, shocking or stupid suggestion, and refuse even to look at such things. But magazines like *Woman*, or *Woman's Own*, contain some of the most varied material you will find anywhere. Nearly all other magazines are "specialist", are in some way limited in their subject matter, and so, of course, limited in their English. But a woman's magazine does not contain matters of interest only to women. Certainly you will find cooking and knitting, and babies' nappies; but, even more, you will find discussion of every sort of social question, information about famous women and men, sport, pop groups, travel, history, practical do-it-yourself hints and hobbies of many kinds, all written in a popular style and vocabulary that is just right for the First Certificate level. And of course there are the romantic novellettes and short stories. Don't look down on them. They are indeed "bad literature" if you judge by the standard of Tolstoy. They are made of clichés – conventional expressions, conventional thoughts, conventional feelings. But if you are trying to learn English, this is just what you need. First learn the way most people talk and write (this, after all, is what you did with your own language when you were learning *that*) and when you

have this foundation then you can, if you want, start trying to be original. Don't forget that you can only be original if you know the conventions.

GRAMMAR BOOKS

As regards grammar (and many other things as well) you will find practically all you need for the First Certificate level in *The Student's Book of English* (Blackwell, 1981). Many students may also find Naylor and Hagger: *First Certificate Handbook* (Hulton, 1979) very useful. As I have suggested above, you should not try to learn the material in these books by heart. That is the sure way to boredom and frustration without any real progress. You should read through the whole book as soon as you can. There is no more harmful idea in language learning than the idea that there is some fixed natural order in which grammatical points or constructions should be learnt; as if, for instance, the present tense "comes before" the past, or the other way round. Language expresses life, and in life all sorts of different things usually come together at more or less the same time. We can't wait till Saturday (and certainly not till next March) before we need **can** or the **-ing** form.

So find out about all the main characteristics of the language as quickly as possible, and continually refer to them, again and again, noticing them in what you read, and looking them up in the grammar books if you need to. In this way you will make the grammar a part of yourself in a more natural way – always seeing it in a context – and you will spare yourself a lot of boredom.

The grammar books mentioned above will be most useful to you if you think of them as constantly *reminding* you of the special problems of English.

There is also a very immediate practical reason for reading the whole book without delay: this will show you what is in the book, and it is only when you know this that it will be as useful to you as it should be. In particular, notice and use the list of verb patterns in *The Student's Book of English*. Once again, do not try to learn them by heart. It is horrible even to *think* of doing such a thing. But every time you are in the smallest doubt about how to use a verb, look it up in the list. If you really do that every time you are not absolutely sure, you will learn very fast indeed.

EXAMINATION TECHNIQUE

Timing

You need to time yourself very carefully in all three of the written papers. Many people find the time they are given much too short. I think they are

right about this, but I am afraid this shortage of time is a characteristic of examinations in England. The only thing to do is to plan the time you are going to spend on each question and then keep to this plan exactly.

The first rule to remember is that you must try to finish the paper. You cannot get marks for parts that you do not do. If, for example, you miss the last 25 per cent of a paper, you cannot get more than 75 per cent even if you get full marks, the maximum, for everything you *have* written. It is like starting a race with only one leg. You have lost marks even before the examiner begins to look at your paper.

You will find it much easier to finish if you follow a timetable. Some people say that it isn't practical to keep looking at their watches, or that it makes them nervous. But it is much better to have a lot of little panics, when you can still do something about the situation, than to have one very big panic when it is too late to do anything at all about it!

If you have a problem with time, but just go on writing without looking at the clock, you will get further and further behind, and very possibly end up managing to do only half the paper, or even less. Instead, you must have strength of mind, and *stop immediately* you get to the end of the time you have decided on for each section. You must stop whether you have finished that section or not. It is useless having a timetable unless you keep to it. Once you start falling behind you will never catch up again.

This method has two advantages. First, you will make sure that you do at least part of every section of the paper. And second, if you *are* behind, you will realise this at a very early stage, and realise that you will have to go faster.

But your timetable should, at least in Papers 2 and 3, provide for quite a long period at the end. In later sections I shall suggest detailed timetables for each separate paper; these will include such a period.

This time at the end should first be used to *finish* the paper, if you haven't already. Keeping to a strict timetable acts as a kind of safety net. As we saw above, it will make sure that you keep up a good speed. But then at the end you have that extra time which you can use to prevent any catastrophes.

However, if you have to use that end period for finishing, you should finish as quickly as possible, because there is something else just as important you must do, and that is *checking*.

As your timing is so important for both finishing and checking you ought to get an opportunity to practise with a few old examination papers (at least one of each sort) in order to make sure your timetable is about right, and to train yourself to keep to it exactly.