

MACMILLAN MASTER SERIES

MASTERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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language ['langwidʒ]
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S.H. BURTON

MASTERING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

S. H. BURTON

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PREFACE

All the English Language work tested in basic school and college examinations is covered in this book. It has been my aim to combine thoroughness of detail with practical applications of the skills required. I believe that the student who uses the book methodically will grow in confidence and competence as he prepares himself for the composition, practical writing, comprehension tests, and summary required of him in the examination. The step-by-step teaching comes to grips with the difficulties commonly experienced at this stage of English Language studies.

SH Burton

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COMPOSITION

1.1 DIFFERENT KINDS OF COMPOSITION

(a) Composition in the examination

All examining boards require candidates in English Language to write a composition, and most of them allot more marks to this than to any other question. The composition is sometimes called an 'essay', sometimes 'continuous writing'. Whatever name is given to it, the question requires the candidate to write in 50 to 60 minutes an answer consisting of two or three pages of prose.

Most examining boards include another kind of composition question. This is given various names, of which the most common are 'practical writing' and 'factual writing'. This kind of writing is tested in a separate question - sometimes in a separate paper - but, like the 'essay' question, it is primarily a test of the candidate's ability to write good English prose.

Those two kinds of writing are discussed in the first two chapters of this book, and the different demands that they make on the candidate are thoroughly explored.

Do not forget that, in your answers to both kinds of question, the examiners are looking for:

- correctness of grammar, punctuation, and spelling;
- well-made and varied sentences;
- a well-planned piece of writing, tidily set out.

Lively and imaginative work will always be given extra marks, but it is the candidate's ability to write well-organised, clear, and accurate English that is the examiners' first concern.

(b) Imaginative writing / Practical writing

Bearing in mind that the qualities of good English (as described in the paragraph you have just read) are required in all writing, it is useful to consider composition under the two headings:

- 'Imaginative' (or 'Creative');
- 'Practical' (or 'Factual').

Those terms describe the two different kinds of writing that the examiners are looking for. They also point to the different mental activities that the different kinds of question demand.

Here, for example, are two examination questions that illustrate the two different kinds of writing expected of candidates:

- 1 Write a story entitled 'A Narrow Escape'.
- 2 Write a description of how to mend a puncture in a bicycle tyre. Your description should be written for the benefit of a reader who has never performed that operation.

Clearly, Question 1 is a subject for imaginative or creative composition, while Question 2 is a subject for practical or factual composition.

In answering Question 1 the candidate must imagine or create the material that he uses in the composition. In answering Question 2 the candidate must draw on his knowledge of the facts and his practical experience of how the thing is done.

Another difference between the two is the degree of control that each question imposes on the candidate. Question 1 leaves the writer with a lot of freedom to make his own personal response to the subject. Question 2 defines the subject clearly and strictly and, by the way in which the instructions are worded, exercises considerable control over the writer's response to the subject that he has been given.

The examining boards emphasise the difference between imaginative or creative writing on the one hand and practical or factual writing on the other. Here are some quotations from the syllabus regulations of various boards that illustrate the different qualities that are tested by the two kinds of writing.

1 Candidates will be asked to choose two subjects for composition, one from Section A, one from Section B. Those in Section A will be factual . . . with the subjects clearly delimited, and will call for a controlled response. In Section B the subjects will normally be . . . imaginative, allowing a much freer response.

2 Candidates will be required to write (a) a composition chosen from a number of subjects . . . (b) an exercise designed to test ability in the more practical aspects of expression.

3 Section A will test the candidate's ability to communicate what is required in a practical situation indicated in given material. Section B will test the candidate's ability to express himself at greater length . . . and will provide opportunity for imaginative writing.

The essential difference between the two kinds of composition that the examiners demand can be summed up like this:

<i>Imaginative composition</i>	<i>Practical composition</i>
Free treatment of created material	Controlled treatment of factual material

It would, however, be a mistake to think that an imaginative composition does not demand careful planning or that a practical composition does not demand imagination. In this chapter and in the next we discuss the planning and the imaginative demands of both 'free' and 'controlled' writing of the kind that examination candidates are required to undertake in composition questions.

Test 1

Answers on page 169.

Which of the following composition subjects are imaginative (or creative) and which are practical (or factual)? Mark each with I or P to indicate your answer.

1 Describe a ballpoint pen. Assume that the reader of your description is not familiar with this kind of writing instrument. Do not exceed 250 words.

2 Describe the sounds of early morning either in the country or in the town. Your composition should be about 500 words in length.

3 Write, in not more than 250 words, instructions to enable a stranger to find his way from your college or your school to your home.

4 Give an account of a television programme that you have enjoyed and describe those qualities of the programme that you found especially pleasing. You are allowed up to 400 words.

5 In not more than 500 words write a composition entitled 'The Treasure of the Sea'.

Test 2

When you have thought out your answers to the questions in this test turn to page 169 where you will find some ideas that may help you to take your own answers a little further. Study these composition subjects and then answer the questions.

(i) Write a story entitled 'A Narrow Escape'.

(ii) Write a description of how to mend a puncture in a bicycle tyre.

Your description should be written for the benefit of a reader who has never performed that operation.

Questions

1 Suppose that you are a candidate in the examination room and you are considering the best ways of writing those two compositions. You realise that an imaginative composition is expected as an answer to the first question. Which seem to you to be the 'key words' in the instructions? ('Key words' are the words that tell you what the examiner is looking for. They contain the clues that enable you to decide what you must do to satisfy the requirements of the question.)

2 Having decided on the key words in Question (i) jot down notes of ideas that would be useful if you were making a detailed plan for your composition. (We shall be discussing composition plans later in this chapter.)

3 Which are the key words in Question (ii)?

4 Which of those key words in Question (ii) tell you that you must use your imagination when writing your answer even though this is a practical composition?

1.2 PLANNING YOUR TIME IN THE COMPOSITION QUESTION

Many examining boards allow one hour for the composition question. Some allow 50 minutes. You must find out how much time your own board allows and then practise writing compositions within the specified time limit.

When an hour is allowed a composition of from two to three sides of examination paper is expected. When 50 minutes is allowed a slightly shorter composition is looked for, but it is inadvisable to write much less than two sides.

You will find it helpful to think in terms of a composition consisting of five or six paragraphs. You can then keep this useful structure in mind as you plan your composition:

Introduction: Paragraph 1

Body of composition: Paragraphs 2, 3, 4 (and 5)

Conclusion: Paragraph 5 (or 6)

Do not aim to spend all your time in writing the composition. To do so would be to invite failure. There are other stages in the production of a good answer that are as vital to success as the actual writing. These stages are selection, planning, and revision.

The reasons for spending time on selection, planning, and revision lie in the syllabus requirements for success in the composition question. The

various boards word those requirements differently, but the sense of them all is the same:

- plan your composition carefully, so that it has unity;
- paragraph clearly, so that your material is presented in a logical sequence;
- write in a style appropriate to your subject;
- be accurate in punctuation, spelling, and grammar;
- remember that marks are given for quality, not quantity – provided that you write a composition of the minimum length, as stipulated.

Each of those requirements is discussed in later sections of this chapter and in later chapters of this book.

For the moment we will look at the effect of those requirements on the way in which the candidate must divide up his time in the composition question.

When answering a question for which one hour is allowed the time allocation should be of this order:

- reading through the instructions at the head of the paper and making sure that you know exactly what you have to do – one or two minutes;
- reading through all the questions and making your choice – not more than five minutes;
- finding your material, selecting your ‘angle of attack’, planning your composition – not less than ten minutes;
- writing your composition – about 40 minutes;
- reading through your composition and correcting careless slips – not more than five minutes.

If your board allows less than one hour for the composition question it is the writing time that should be reduced, since in that case a shorter composition will be expected. The other stages described above are as important for success in a 50-minute question as in a 60-minute question *and they must not be skimped*.

Time allocations and planning in the practical writing question are discussed in Chapter 2.

1.3 IMAGINATIVE OR CREATIVE COMPOSITIONS

(a) The personal element in imaginative writing

You may have found the answer to Question 4 in Test 1 (Section 1.1) surprising. The instruction ‘Give an account of a television programme’ seems to suggest that a factual composition is expected. If a witness of a road accident were asked to give an account of what he saw a factual answer would certainly be expected. The question, however, introduced

a personal element. The full instructions were: 'Give an account of a television programme *that you have enjoyed* and describe those qualities *that you found especially pleasing.*' The words in italics show you that the material for the composition is to be found in a personal experience.

Consider these instructions:

- 1 Give an account of how a television programme is produced.
- 2 Give an account of how a television programme is transmitted.
- 3 Give an account of a television programme that you have enjoyed.

You can see that 3 introduces a personal element that is not present in 1 and 2, both of which require factual, *objective* treatment. You would need to know a lot of technical facts to write on those subjects, and *you would be expected to confine your answer to those facts.*

When writing about 3, on the other hand, a personal approach is required. You would not be able to carry out the instructions without stating what it was that *you* enjoyed and describing the various ways in which the programme had given *you* pleasure: the excitement of the plot, or the quality of the acting, or the interest of the subject, or the delight of the humour – and so on, according to the kind of programme that *you* had chosen to describe and *your own reactions* to it.

In other words, 3 requires a mainly *subjective* treatment, whereas 1 and 2 require *objective* treatment. That contrast is fundamental to the distinction between imaginative or creative composition on the one hand and practical or factual writing on the other. The imaginative composition always demands that the writer *puts something of himself* into his writing.

(b) Different kinds of imaginative composition

Examination syllabuses refer to different kinds of imaginative compositions. Here are some examples: 'The subjects will normally be narrative, descriptive, or discursive.' 'The subjects may be descriptive, narrative, or controversial.' 'There will be opportunities to write a narrative, descriptive, discursive, or argumentative composition.' 'Dramatic, impressionistic, narrative, and discursive subjects will be included.'

Analysis of all the syllabuses and of past papers shows that the subjects set for composition may be classified under these headings:

- 1 Narrative
- 2 Descriptive
- 3 Discursive or argumentative or controversial
- 4 Dramatic or conversational
- 5 Impressionistic

The alternative names in common use are given in 3 and 4, above.

The requirements of each kind of imaginative composition are discussed,

each in a separate section of this chapter. Before that, however, we will study a typical English Language Composition Paper.

English Language

Ordinary Level

COMPOSITION

Time: one hour

Write on one of the following subjects. Pay careful attention to punctuation, spelling, grammar, and handwriting.

- 1 Write a story entitled 'A Narrow Escape'.
- 2 Describe the sounds of early morning, either in the country or in the town.
- 3 Describe a visit that relatives or friends have paid to your home.
- 4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of the motor-car?
- 5 Magic.
- 6 An employer and one of his employees have had a disagreement. Outline the circumstances. Then write a conversation between the two in which they settle their differences.
- 7 What do the following lines suggest to you?

And hushed they were, no noise of words
 In those bright cities ever rang;
 Only their thoughts, like golden birds,
 About their chambers thrilled and sang.

- 8 Write a composition about the ideas that this photograph brings to your mind.

(Candidates are supplied with a photograph - which may be a real life scene or a reproduction of a painting or a drawing - to enable them to answer Question 8.)

How do you decide which of those subjects to choose? You will recognise that different kinds of writing are called for by the different subjects set - narrative, descriptive, discursive, etc. - and in preparing yourself to take the examination you will probably have discovered that you are better at some kinds of writing than others. Even so, it would not be wise to choose, say, the discursive subject (4) just because you have generally gained good marks for discursive writing. Consider all the subjects carefully before you make your choice. It may be that you have

no very clear ideas about this particular discursive subject and you may do better to choose, say, one of the descriptive subjects.

Remember, the prerequisite for a successful composition is to have a lively interest in your subject. You will do good work if you have personal experience of your chosen topic. Your imagination will then work on that experience to round it out into full and lively material which can be shaped into a well-planned piece of writing.

Test 3

Answers on page 169.

Identify the kind of writing – descriptive, discursive, etc. – that each subject in that examination paper calls for.

As your answers to Test 3 will have shown, some subjects can profitably be given a mixed treatment. The important thing is to think hard about each topic and to decide on your ‘angle of attack’ in the light of the subject-matter and the way in which the question is worded (see Section 1.4).

1.4 NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS

(a) Having a story to tell – and telling it well

Everybody has the material for dozens of stories – life sees to that. True, but what a mess most people make of telling their stories! Everyday conversations afford abundant proof that few people are natural storytellers. ‘I should have explained that Tom’s letter arrived after Jill saw Meg. That made all the difference.’ ‘Of course, you really have to know my uncle to see how funny that was.’ ‘No, wait a minute . . . I’m forgetting. It was in July, just *before* we went away.’

In the time that the examination allows, and in the space permitted, it is a difficult task to write a successful story. Even professional writers of fiction recognise that a short story is hard to write – and they are not tied down so firmly by time and length limitations. Nor do they have either a title or some other such rigid constraint laid upon them as the examination candidate does.

So, think hard before you choose a narrative composition in the examination. I am not saying that you should never attempt the story question. The examiners are not setting an impossible task, nor do they expect an impossibly high standard. They do not expect the candidate to reveal the talents of a professional. An interesting, well-planned story told in correct English will get a good mark. Just remember that a narrative composition is not an easy option.

(b) Finding the material

Obviously, the first requirement of a story composition is that it must interest the reader. This is true, of course, of the other kinds of composition. The candidate who bores the examiner is not making things easy for himself, whatever kind of composition he chooses; but a story is associated with leisure reading – with reading for pleasure. By choosing to write a story the candidate promises his reader an entertaining experience. The examiner will not be pleased if he is bored by the other kinds of composition, but he will not feel quite so disappointed – so let down – as by reading a boring story.

We saw in Section 1.3 that the essence of the imaginative composition is that the writer puts something of himself into his writing. This is particularly true of the narrative composition.

Consider the narrative question in the paper on page 7: 'Write a story entitled "A Narrow Escape".' It is the sort of title that seems so easy to tackle that many candidates rush at it, basing their stories on half-recalled newspaper reports of last-minute goals that were/were not scored, or vague memories of television spy/detective series full of close shaves. Such material results in poor quality 'formula writing', and the unfortunate examiner is condemned to an unvaried diet of stale, secondhand stuff.

An interesting story has originality; and originality does not depend on the frantic invention of far-fetched episodes and improbable details. Nor is it present in pale imitations of professionally written 'formula pieces'. Originality is achieved when the writer puts something of himself into his composition.

So, when you are considering 'A Narrow Escape' as a possible composition subject ask yourself, 'What personal experience can I put into this story?' That does not mean that all the details of the plot or the characters in your story must have a factual basis – power of invention is rightly valued by the reader. It *does* mean that the idea for your story should spring out of your *own* experience, not somebody else's. Your imagination should be working on material that means something to you. If not, your story cannot come alive.

Test 4

There are no right or wrong answers for this Test. I suggest that you work out some ideas, making notes, and then discuss them with another student who is working for the same examination.

1 Think of ways in which you might be able to use these real life happenings (some of which you will have experienced) as the basis for a story composition called 'A Narrow Escape'.

- you nearly miss a train or a bus
- the passmark in a test is 42 per cent; your mark is 43

- on the point of buying a present for a relative you discover by chance that he/she has a strong dislike of that particular thing
- in conversation with a newly made acquaintance at a social gathering you have begun to reveal to him/her your disapproval of a third party also present when your acquaintance mentions that this person is a friend/relative – you have to do some quick talking to extricate yourself from an embarrassing situation
- you are being interviewed for a job and in the course of the interview you realise how little you like the prospect of working for the person who is interviewing you and who seems to be favourably impressed with you as a candidate

2 Sketch out the details of a situation that you have experienced (not one of those outlined in 1, above) that would provide the basis for a story called ‘A Narrow Escape’.

(c) Stories need plots, people, and atmosphere

A lot of planning is needed to turn the raw material for a story into a successful narrative. The writer can start work on his plan when he is sure that his material

- interests him and, therefore, stands a chance of interesting his reader
- is rooted in his own experience (i.e. is firsthand and fresh, not secondhand and stale)
- is capable of being used for a story of the kind asked for.

The first step in planning is to work out a *plot* for the story. This need not be elaborate. The examiner does not expect the examination candidate to be a professional writer of stories. But any story – if it is to be a story – must have a ‘story line’. It cannot be static. It must move towards a conclusion. The situation depicted at the beginning must change into a different situation as the story unfolds.

The need for progression in the narrative is particularly important in the writing of ‘puzzle stories’ of the kind so often set in examination. Typical instructions for the writing of such stories are: ‘Write a story ending with this sentence, “She was thankful that she had not won that prize”’ or ‘Write a story ending with this sentence, “I never did discover the name of the girl on the bus.”’

Unless you have a gift for clever plotting such puzzle stories present you with a difficult task. Even simpler ‘story lines’ (those suited to the kind of story called for in ‘A Narrow Escape’) need to be worked out with care and planned in detail before you start writing. It is no use discovering half-way through that the story is not going to work out. There is not time in the examination to scrap half your work and start again.