

Testing the Test

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Artist's Note:

Did you ever used to love reading, but then you didn't? I remember my avid childhood reading days, but I also remember how standardized English tests never let me look at a literary passage the same way again. Reading a passage for a test does not require any reflection; as a test-taker, one is concerned with what hoops to jump through and that is all—the time per question, employing strategies and identifying keywords, memorizing vocabulary, and more. Testing sucked dry much of the enjoyment I had in reading, and the more time we spent testing in class, the further disillusioned I became. Even “reading for pleasure” was difficult because I was programmed to think of reading as a game.

Perhaps more detrimental is the singular perspective upheld by the test-makers. Consider that every person reads and perceives a text in a different way, and even this perception changes every day. Yet the test-makers have the power to declare one perspective as “correct” and the rest as “wrong.” This is especially concerning when the test is poorly designed, such as having multiple arguably correct answers or using unnecessarily tricky questions. The standardized testing industry is the largest holder of this power, and its pervasiveness and economic presence leave it relatively unchallenged.

To challenge the standardized testing industry, I've devised a satirical portion of a fake reading exam modelled after the SAT Reading sections, which I consider the epitome of reading exams. The format is designed to closely resemble that of the SAT in order to invoke the same mindset one employs when confronted with a test. In my performance I included the official SAT instructions read by a computer and a countdown timer that deceptively doubled in speed every minute. Upon closer examination, my test will seem sarcastic in comparison. The questions are almost exactly adapted from legitimate SAT questions, yet the answers are crafted to emphasize the problems with multiple choice assessments of reading passages. Many invoke the same strategies of official exams—including logically deliberating answer choices, intentionally confusing wordplay, and ambiguous interpretation—but turn them on their heads while still making sense within the context of the passage. The question about “main purpose” even quotes official SAT learning objectives.

The passage was also chosen carefully. The text comes from education philosopher John Dewey's *Art as Experience* in his chapter "Criticism and Perception", where Dewey highlights the dangers of those who judge and their authority, which I liken to the test-makers. When he asserts "an audience that is itself habituated to being told, rather than schooled in thoughtful inquiry, likes to be told", I could not help but think of the millions of students who take these tests, especially in struggling schools where teachers must "teach to the test," effectively destroying any critical thought against the elitist interpretation of the test-makers. The unfortunate irony is that the text's placement in this high-stakes, sterile exam devalues it, as students dismiss its meaning to efficiently answer the test questions. In this way, one can argue that such a "reading comprehension" section can barely live up to its name.

Procedure:

The exam is passed out to all members of the audience; this should be done in silence as to remove any humanity from the performance. The modified electronic timer is clearly displayed. The timer begins when prompted by the following text, as read by a computer:

Good morning. Today you are going to take the SAT. This is your chance to show how prepared you are for college and career. Do not begin work until I tell you to. If you finish before time is called, you may NOT turn to any other section. Turn to Section 1 of your answer sheet. Keep your answer sheet, test book and translated test directions (if applicable) flat on your desk. You are not allowed to use a calculator on this section. Please keep your calculator under your desk. Now, open your test book to Section 1, read the directions, and begin work.

Test begins on the next page.

Questions 35-40, Read the following passage carefully before you choose your answers.

The judge—in the judicial sense—occupies a seat of social authority. His sentence determines the fate of an individual, perhaps of a cause, and upon occasion it settles the legitimacy of future courses of action. Desire for authority (and desire to be looked up to) animates the human breast. Much of our existence is keyed to the note of praise and blame, exculpation and disapproval. Hence there has emerged in theory, reflecting a widespread tendency in practice, a disposition to erect criticism into something “judicial.” One cannot read widely in the outgivings of this school of criticism without seeing that much of it is of the compensatory type—the fact which has given rise to the gibe that critics are those who have failed in creation. Much criticism of the legalistic sort proceeds from subconscious self-distrust and a consequent appeal to authority for protection. Perception is obstructed and cut short by memory of an influential rule, and by the substitution of precedent and prestige for direct experience. Desire for authoritative standing leads the critic to speak as if he were the attorney for established principles having unquestionable sovereignty.

Unfortunately such activities have infected the very conception of criticism. Judgment that is final, that settles a matter, is more congenial to unregenerate human nature than is the judgment that is a development in thought of a deeply realized perception. The original adequate experience is not easy to attain; its achievement is a test of native sensitiveness and of experience matured through wide contacts. A judgment as an act of controlled inquiry demands a rich background and a disciplined insight. It is much easier to “tell” people what they should believe than to discriminate and unify. And an audience that is itself habituated to being told, rather than schooled in thoughtful inquiry, likes to be told.

(1934)

35. The main purpose of the passage is to

- (A) The student will determine the main or most likely purpose of a text or of a particular part of a text (typically, one or more paragraphs).
- (B) The student will determine the meaning of words and phrases in context.
- (C) The student will extrapolate in a reasonable way from the information and ideas in a text or apply information and ideas in a text to a new, analogous situation.
- (D) The student will determine how the selection of specific words and phrases or the use of patterns and phrases shapes meaning and tone in text
- (E) The student will analyze the relationship between a particular part of a text (e.g., a sentence) and the whole text.

36. In the context of the passage, the first sentence of the second paragraph is best viewed as

- (A) a transition from a discussion of the “judicial” to how it is corrupted in practice
- (B) a continuation of a discussion of the nature of criticism
- (C) both A and B
- (D) none of the above
- (E) all of the above

37. In the σεχονδ paragraph, the φυδγεμεντ is portrayed as being

- (A) διδ ψου αχτυαλλψ βοτηερ
- (B) το τρανσλατε τηισ μεσσαγε
- (C) ωηατ ωιλλ ψου δο
- (D) φυστ το γετ
- (E) τηε ριγητ ανσωερ

38. It can be inferred from the passage that the author

- (A) is critical of criticism, which is both hypocritical and hypercritical
- (B) has experience as a critic
- (C) has experience receiving criticism
- (D) views criticism as hopelessly corrupted by influential social power
- (E) views the problems of criticism emerging from natural human tendencies

39. In the section of the essay that immediately follows this passage, the speaker probably does which of the following?

- (A) whatever the author says it is
- (B) whatever society at large interprets it as
- (C) whatever the reader perceives it as at a given time and place
- (D) the passage is an inanimate object and alone has no purpose
- (E) whatever the correct answer is

40. In line 21, “the critic” is best understood to mean

- (A) attorneys
- (B) art critics and scholars
- (C) anyone who makes a judgement
- (D) students
- (E) the writers of these questions in the standardized testing industry

STOP

**If you finish before time is called, you may check your work on this section only.
Do not turn to any other section in the test.**