

Preparing for the Cambridge Checkpoint Tests

The Cambridge Checkpoint English Tests assess your progress in using the English language. They are not an examination with a ‘pass’ or a ‘fail’. Instead you will receive a ‘profile’ which indicates how well you have done in various aspects of reading and writing. You and your teacher can use this to understand where your strengths and weaknesses lie and to help you as you move on to the next year of schooling.

There are two papers: Paper 1 tests your reading and writing of information texts; Paper 2 tests your reading and writing of fiction texts. This chapter will help you to prepare for these tests.

The reading sections of the tests

Here you will be expected to read one or two pieces of text such as:

- an information text
- someone writing about their experiences – e.g. travel writing
- someone writing about their opinions
- a piece of fiction.

You have to show that you can:

- understand what a text is about
- read between the lines
- express a view about a text
- justify your views with evidence
- explain how the writer made you think or feel as you did.

Remember to read the questions carefully as well as the text. Every word in them is there to guide you to the correct answer. However well you understand the passage, you will not gain marks if you do not answer exactly what has been asked. More information about what you need to do for each paper is given on page 113.

The writing sections of the tests

Here you may be asked to write:

| | |
|------------|------------------|
| • a story | • an article |
| • a letter | • a description. |

You have to show that you can:

- adapt your writing for a specific audience
- fit your content and ideas to the purpose
- express yourself clearly
- make your writing interesting and readable
- organise your writing effectively and coherently
- structure your sentences fluently and correctly
- use a range of vocabulary precisely
- use a range of punctuation correctly
- spell correctly.

Remember that the examiners are looking for **accuracy** and **range** in your use of language. Marks are awarded for spelling, sentence structure and punctuation. The basic essential is to be able to write correctly in the English language. However interesting your material and however brilliant your plot, if you cannot express them in correct English they will count for nothing. If you are not confident about the accuracy of your English, concentrate your preparation on that above all else.

Once you have mastered accuracy, then think about range. Use a wide vocabulary: you need more adjectives to describe something that you like than just 'nice' and 'awesome'. Be in the habit of being more precise – the TV programme was interesting, stimulating, fascinating, awe-inspiring; the roller-coaster ride was terrifying, exhilarating, stomach-churning; the haunted house was dingy, gloomy, claustrophobic, spine-chilling. Think about all the different conjunctions that can introduce subordinate clauses and use more than just 'as'. People shout, mutter, retort, growl, not just speak or say. While you are thinking, write suitable words in the planning box and then remember to use them as you fill out your story.

Reading

When answering reading questions, give yourself thinking time. You will avoid mistakes by thinking first. Take time to:

- Read the passage to get a general understanding.
- Read the questions. Work out what they want. Find key words in them.
- Read the text again, with the questions in mind.
- Underline, circle or highlight useful words to help you answer the questions.
- Notice which questions require you to use your own words. Use the length of the space provided for your answer to get an idea of how much you should write. You need to write more and allow longer for questions or groups of questions with more marks, less for questions with fewer marks.
- Only then write your answers.

Slow at reading?

Do you tend to run out of time in tests?

- ✓ Save time by *scanning* the passage the first time you read it. Don't read every word – just enough to get a general understanding.
- ✓ Read the questions carefully.
- ✓ Read the passage properly the second time and look for the answers as you go.

Annotating the text

- ✓ Find words and phrases you can use in your answers – underline or highlight them.
- ✓ Choose the quotations that best support your answers.
- ✓ When you spot something that will help with a question, write the number of the question next to it.
- ✓ Write words in the margin if you have ideas for your answers.

Paper 1 – Reading section

The texts that you read for your Paper 1 test will be examples of non-fiction – information texts. Answering questions about information texts is very similar to answering questions about stories, but there is more to say about the choice of information and how it is structured. The examiner is interested in what you have to say about:

- important details
- evidence
- how the evidence proves a point (expressed clearly)
- how the writer creates an effect, or persuades you.

Often you will be able to answer the question by selecting a phrase or sentence from the passage. But remember that not all the answers will be found word for word in the passage. Do not forget to use your own words where you are asked to do so. There is also likely to be at least one question which will require you to read between the lines, combine pieces from more than one place, or make a deduction.

Remember what to do

- ✓ Read the passage.
- ✓ Read the questions.
- ✓ Read the passage again, looking for useful details to answer the questions.
- ✓ Annotate the passage.
- ✓ Plan your time to pick up marks.
- ✓ Use evidence to support your points and express them clearly.
- ✓ Explain why your evidence proves the point.

Answering summary questions

When answering summary questions, remember to:

- ✓ Keep focused on the question when reading the passage.
- ✓ Highlight or underline all the sections that are relevant to the question.
- ✓ Do not write an introduction.
- ✓ Use your own words and be as concise as possible.

Be especially careful in the summary to think about the question. There will always be facts in the passage that are not relevant to what you have been asked to do and part of the skill of summarising is to discard material that is not needed. For example, if you are asked to summarise why some action would be helpful, you should not include the negative points. Doing so only wastes time and does not gain credit.

On the paper the summary will be in two parts. You will be asked first to pick out the relevant points and list them. Then separately you will be asked to combine them into a connected piece of writing in your own words.

Paper 2 – Reading section

The text that you read for your Paper 2 test will be an example of fiction – part of a story. There will be several questions to answer after you have read the text. You may be asked about:

- characters and why they do what they do
- the mood and how it is created
- things that are suggested but not stated
- how the writer makes you feel towards the people, events or place.

You may be asked to comment on:

- the writer's choice of words
- how the story is told
- the choice of details in a description.

Avoiding pitfalls

The most common mistakes in answers about fiction are:

- ✗ Retelling the story, and hoping the answer is obvious.
- ✗ Giving an opinion but not backing it up with evidence.
- ✗ Giving evidence, for example including a quotation, but not explaining how it proves the point.
- ✗ Talking about the characters as if they are real people, forgetting they have been created by the writer.

Answering questions using quotations

Be careful to give a quotation when one is asked for. Otherwise it is generally better to use your own words if you can.

- ✓ Keep the quotation short.
- ✓ Choose the most important words and details that make the point.
- ✓ If you are including the quotation in a sentence, put quotation marks before and after it.
- ✗ Do not write just the line number and expect the examiner to find it.
- ✗ Do not write just the first and last words of the sentence and expect the examiner to know which bit you are referring to.

Writing

Paper 1 – Writing information texts

You may find writing information texts easier than writing stories because you do not have to invent a plot, and the style is often more direct. The thing that is difficult is deciding how to organise your material. The question may give you some suggestions for what to write but you can choose whether or not to use them and should add other ideas of your own.

Use your planning time, and the planning box provided, to do three things:

- 1 Think of enough to say and make it relevant for your audience! That sounds obvious, but you do need to spend a little time making sure you have enough material. Jot down ideas as you think of them.
- 2 Group your ideas or information into clusters and decide on the order.
- 3 Think about how you are going to link the sections and create an opening line for each section.

As you write out the full version, remember that you will gain credit for **developing** the ideas in each section beyond the opening line. It is better in the restricted time of the test to stick to three or four main ideas and develop them, rather than write down everything you can think of in a list. Try to think of at least one more thing to say about each of your ideas: an example, perhaps, or a little more detail.

Here is an example of a plan for writing an answer on the topic ‘Should swimming be put on the timetable in every secondary school?’

| Should swimming be put on the timetable in every secondary school? | | |
|--|---|--|
| 1 Ideas or information to include: | Pros Reduces risk of drowning Healthy exercise Aids co-ordination | Cons Something else would have to go Not all schools have a pool Problems with people forgetting kit |
| 2 Group the ideas or information into clusters and decide on the order: | 1 Introduction – finding time for useful skills in packed curriculum 2 Pros 3 Cons 4 Conclusion – benefits outweigh problems | |
| 3 Think of links and create opening lines for each section: | 1 School is meant to prepare students for life ahead ... 2 It's hard to imagine a subject for which there is a better case for inclusion in the curriculum than swimming ... 3 Schools, however, face immediate problems when ... 4 To sum up, it seems clear that ... | |

Exercise 1: Planning an information text

Write a plan for writing an information text on one of these topics:

- Should children be paid for helping with the housework?
- Where would your class like to go on your next school trip and why?

Paper 2 – Writing fiction

Things that students usually do well when they write stories are:

- openings
- events
- action.

They tend to forget:

- paragraph breaks
- the importance of working towards an ending
- keeping the reader curious about what will happen next
- what the characters are thinking and feeling.

Tips for top marks

- ✓ Give insights into the minds of the characters and say what they are feeling.
- ✓ Plan an ending.
- ✓ Concentrate on using words and details that create setting, mood and character.

In the test, you will need to spend a few minutes planning your story. It needs a beginning, middle and end. It needs characters to do things and a setting where the events happen. Remember that the question you are answering may already have given you some of these – and note that it is important to plan your ending **before** you get carried away by the middle!

If you can think of a complete plot with a proper ending that you can write in the time of the test, that is great. But do not worry if you cannot. Look carefully at what you are asked to do. Suppose it is to describe a visit to a haunted house. You could include why you thought it was haunted, why you went, who you were with, how you got there, what the house looked like as you approached it, what made you so nervous – and end with: ‘And then the door opened of its own accord.’ Your piece needs a storyline running through it (in this case the journey to the house) and you should always end with some sort of climax (which you need to plan), but it does not need to be the end of the story as a whole. You will gain credit for the quality of your description and the way you build up the

tension to the climax of the door opening. An approach like this can often produce a better piece of writing than trying to cram in multiple twists in a plot with ‘and then ... and then ... and then’.

Use this outline to help you:

| | | Examples for ‘A visit to a haunted house’ | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Basic story | 1 Who are the people? How many? | A group of friends? A family? Will you write in the first person or third person? | Me and my two best friends First person |
| | 2 Where to begin | Are you going to tell the story chronologically, i.e. from beginning to end? Or start in the middle and use a flashback? | It all started when I saw the magazine article describing the old house in the woods. OR We were halfway there when I felt something touch my shoulder. We had set out ... |
| | 3 Where to end | Real end of story or cliffhanger? | Thank goodness we all got home safely. OR And then the door opened. |
| | 4 What happens in the middle | The storyline. Make something happen that will upset the way things are – something interesting, so that readers want to see how the characters will deal with it. | Setting out from home; going the wrong way; getting lost in the wood; eventually finding the house. |
| Filling out the details | 5 Setting and atmosphere | Description and detail of place, weather, mood | Sky became very dark. Couldn’t see. Trees crowded close together. House appeared suddenly through mist. Dark, gloomy, depressing. |
| | 6 Feelings | All the same? (Some scared, some not?) Change over time? Reactions to happenings and/or atmosphere? | Tom got frightened and I tried to reassure him. But when we saw ... |

Exercise 2: Planning stories

1 Try finishing this story plan. The first three rows have been filled in for you. Create and complete a grid for the other three.

| A story to illustrate the importance of paying attention | | |
|--|--------------------------|--|
| Basic story | Who | My family and me |
| | Beginning | We are on holiday at the seaside. |
| | Ending | My brother is brought back safely by rescuers. |
| | Storyline – what happens | |
| Filling it out | Description and detail | |
| | Feelings – mine and his | |

2 Here is another story plan. This time a different two rows have been filled in for you. Copy and complete the other four rows of the grid.

| An argument that should never have happened | | |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| Basic story | Who | |
| | Beginning | |
| | Ending | But something has changed: I have new friends, and a better attitude. |
| | Storyline – what happens | |
| Filling it out | Description and detail | |
| | Feelings | I realise that some of my friends are only interested in me for my looks, and that some people I never noticed before are actually quite nice. |

3 Now use the grid to plan a story of your own on one of these topics:

- An unusual friendship
- My pet can talk!

Final tips for the test

1 **Accuracy** first! You know the mistakes you always make. Think of a way of remembering them and write it at the top of your test paper in pencil. This will remind you to check.

2 Learn the spellings you think you might need.

3 Remember to use full stops to separate sentences, not commas.

4 Remember to start a new paragraph when:

- you start a new topic
- you move to a different time
- you shift to a new place
- someone else starts to speak.

5 Then remember **range**! Vary your sentences. Try the following:

- Begin a sentence with an adverb ending in *-ly*, e.g. ‘*Carefully*, she looked round the corner.’
- Embed a subordinate clause, e.g. ‘The man, *who had been lurking in the shadows*, sidled away.’
- Begin with a preposition, e.g. ‘*Through* a gap in the fence, we could see a dog digging furiously.’
- Use an occasional short sentence, e.g. ‘It stopped.’ This is especially effective if the short sentence follows a number of long ones.

6 Vary your vocabulary. Try to:

- Avoid very common words, such as ‘nice’ or ‘get/got’, and words that you use more in conversation with your own friends than to adults, such as ‘awesome’.

7 Leave time to check your work. Proofread what you have written and correct mistakes.