
Treasures from the Archives

18th in a series

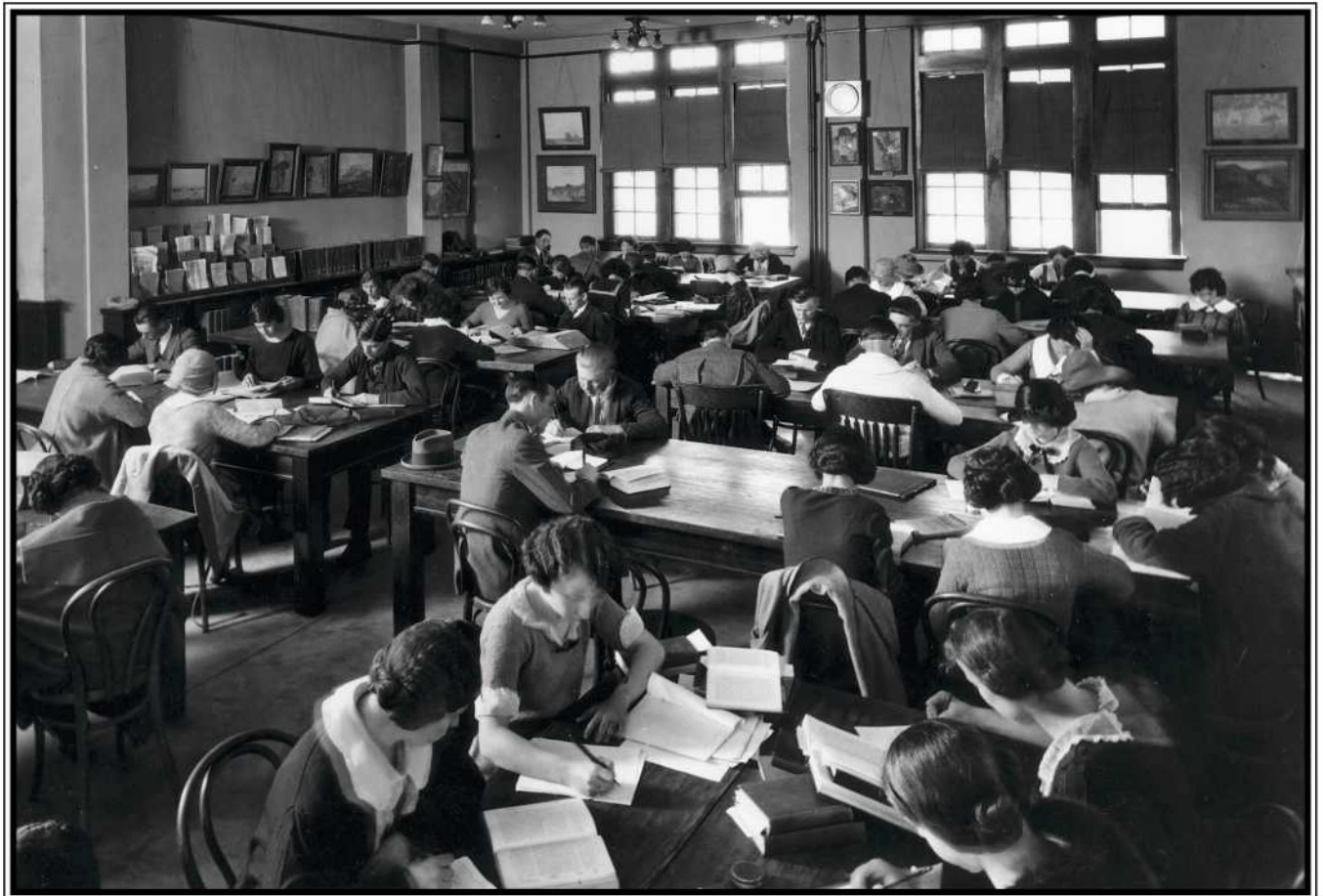
The English Placement Test for 1937

**“To Require that Students Shall Be Careful
in the Use of English . . .”**

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Sam K. Viersen Jr. Presidential Professor

PHOTOS: OU WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTIONS



Long before the ACT and SAT defined academic preparedness, freshmen entering the University of Oklahoma were required to pass the infamous English Placement Test, lest they be consigned to the “awkward squad” of the non-credit English 0 until they could “make good their deficiencies” and give a better accounting of themselves.

The University of Oklahoma's *Bulletin* for 1937 contains a grave admonition to the faculty and an ominous warning to entering freshmen. Under the heading "CORRECT ENGLISH REQUIREMENTS," the *Bulletin* states that: "It is the duty of each member of the teaching staff to require that students shall be careful in the use of English and to give due weight in making up grades to the student's use of English, and also to report promptly . . . the names of all students whose English is seriously defective, submitting evidence of this deficiency." When the *Bulletin* gets around to listing English courses for the coming year, it cautions entering students that "a placement test in English is given to all freshmen at the time of registration. Those who fail to pass this test are required to take English 0 before they enter English 1. No college credit is given for English 0."

Printed below is the English Placement Test that was given to incoming freshmen on September 16, 1937. I strongly suspect that if this test were given to freshmen today not more than a couple of dozen of them would be able to pass it. Among the commonest complaints of the faculty—and particularly among those of us who have reached a certain age—is that clear and correct writing is fast becoming a lost art in the United States, comparable in that respect to blacksmithing or good table manners and almost as rare in modern American culture as trudging barefoot to school through the snow or intelligent voting or self-doubt.

A glance at the test will show what English teachers of the 1930s valued and how they measured a student's readiness to enter upon college-level instruction in his or her native tongue. The rules of grammar, the parts of speech, proper punctuation and spelling, the structure of sentences and paragraphs are stressed. Those in charge of encouraging good writing quietly and unquestioningly assumed that the mastery of these things would lead automatically to clean, correct, and effective writing. That had always been assumed at the University.

Three decades before the nervous freshmen of 1937 filed in to take their exam, the founder of the school's English department, Vernon L. Parrington—himself a remarkably gifted writer—had prepared a *Handbook to English*. It contained chapters on "The Paragraph" and "The Sentence," and Parrington insisted, ". . . members of the course who are deficient in elementary training will be placed in a separate division for special training—out of regular hours—in the first essentials. They will be required to continue their extra work until they have made good their deficiencies." One of Professor Parrington's students recalled, "He applied the rules in a fascinating way, but he was never hazy about requirements."

Today, specialists in the teaching of writing are much less certain about the assumption that learning the rules leads students to become good writers. In 1963, an important survey of research in the field was quite unequivocal: "In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing." A more recent survey by one of the leaders of the field, George Hillocks, Jr., reached a similar conclusion: "One of the strongest findings of this study," he writes, ". . . is that grammar study has little or no effect on the improvement of writing. The same is true for emphasis on mechanics and correctness in writing. In fact, some studies indicate that when correctness is heavily emphasized in marking papers, the quality of student writing diminishes significantly."

Whether memorizing the parts of speech, learning the mysteries of the apostrophe and the semicolon, mastering the intricacies of subject-verb agreement, and recognizing the differences between dependent and independent clauses actually helps to make students into better writers is likely to remain a controversial matter. (For an indication that there had been a long history of controversy over proper methodology, see the 1984 study by James A. Berlin, *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*.) Perhaps we can agree that if some of the assumed certainties of 1937 seem now less absolute, there also remain significant doubts about the wisdom of abandoning entirely the traditional emphasis on formal grammar, and significant doubts that the embrace of newer methods of instruction in the high schools has led to improved writing among college freshmen.

The test printed here was taken by 1,131 freshmen. Grading it required the labors of every teacher in the English department augmented by five from the Library and three more from the Modern Languages department. It was also necessary to hire seven "helpers" who were each paid \$4.50 for 12 hours of labor. (The blue-books set the University back another \$14.00, and \$2.00 was expended on red pencils for the graders.)

Those evaluating the exam were told to avoid excessive harshness. In 1938, for example, the evaluators were instructed to "grade the theme, remembering that these are high school students, not college freshmen yet." But they were also told to read each of the student essays with an eye toward "mechanics, such as spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, division of material into paragraphs, interest, care in writing, etc." About a quarter of the

“Those who fail to pass this test are required to take English 0 before they enter English 1. No college credit is given for English 0.”

students taking the exam failed it and were consigned to "the awkward squad" of English 0 until they could (in the long-gone Professor Parrington's stern phrase) "make good their deficiencies" and give a better accounting of themselves.

Hardy readers of this magazine who wish to try their luck will find, printed on Page 32, the "Key" that the English department handed to the graders as they set about their solemn task.

* * * *

ENGLISH
PLACEMENT TEST
September 16, 1937

I

Theme 100%

Time: 40 minutes

Read entirely through the following assignment: First, mentally select some part of the subject "How I have used or will use the writing of English." Second, determine in your mind one central idea you wish to emphasize about this selected part. Third, write an original title of not more than five words indicating this idea. Fourth, write a theme developing this idea. Unity and coherent organization are important. Write 200 to 250 words.

II

Grammar 100%

Time: 40 minutes

1-20. Diagram or analyze completely the following sentence; be definite and thorough:

Lindbergh, an American, is the world's most famous aviator.

Write the sentence in the blue-book.

21-25. Select the correct pronoun. Write the sentence in the blue-book.

1. She is a stenographer (who, whom) we know is efficient.
2. Ten of (us, we) boys took the physical examination yesterday.
3. Why not tell the secret to Mary and (I, me)?
4. . Smith is a man (who, whom) I believe can be trusted.
5. Jack Grower is the boy (who, whom) they have elected president.

26-35. Select the correct verb. Write the sentence in the blue-book.

1. The speaker's choice of words (was, were) excellent.
2. Several errors (was, were) found in the paragraph.
3. The cook was (setting, sitting) the plates out in rows.



Vernon L. Parrington,
circa 1904

4. The football players or the coach (take, takes) time to do some careful advertising.
5. The second speaker moved that the business (was, were, is, be) tabled.
6. The officer looked as though he (was, were) decidedly suspicious.
7. How I wish I (was, were) at home!
8. This (will, shall) be all that is necessary.
9. You (will, shall) do it! I command you.
10. (Lay, lie) the book on the table.

36-45. Write the sentence correctly in the blue-book, if there is an error.

1. Dozing in my eight o'clock, my instructor called on me.
2. We went hunting yesterday and shot six of them.
3. The policemen found him laying unconscious in the gutter.
4. The whole program was poorly planned, so it was a failure.
5. The snake shifted it's sinuous coils.

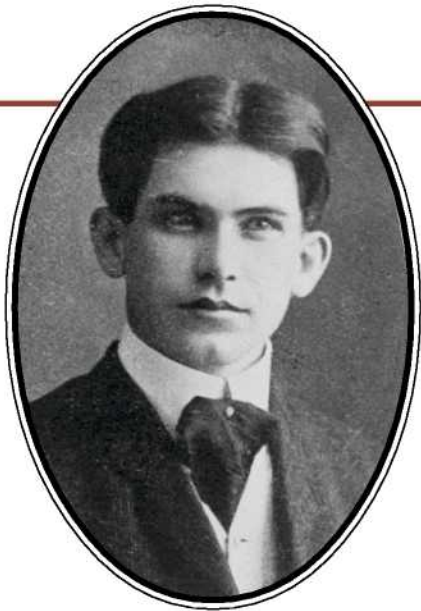
46. Write in the blue-book an original sentence using a semicolon.

47. Write in the blue-book an original sentence using a direct quotation.

48-52. By saying Yes or No, tell whether each of the following groups of words is a complete sentence. Write the sentence in the blue-book then say Yes or No.

1. When he arrived no one knew.
2. Learning the jack-knife dive is no easy task.
3. To see clearly what others think.
4. A wall of hatred and isolation shutting out every interest and every friendly gesture.
5. A cheap book, not the kind which will remain in one's memory long.

53-57. Name the part of speech of each underscored



Sardis Roy Hadsell,
circa 1904

About a quarter of the students taking the exam failed it and were consigned to “the awkward squad” of English 0 until they could “make good their deficiencies.”

word. Write the sentence in the blue-book, and name the part of speech.

1. Call loudly!
2. Before the fire lay a dozing hound.
3. If you will grant me an interview, I shall come at once.
4. The Incas pastured their llamas on high uplands.
5. No man is truly free.

58-62. Write the sentence in the blue-book, and identify each underscored clause as to its use in the sentence (i.e. as adjective, as adverb, as noun):

1. As they grew older, they grew sturdier.
2. I have read the book which you gave me.
3. I thought at first that the sound was the drone of a bullet.
4. It is no longer as easy as it once was to establish a home.
5. That truth conquers has long been a maxim of conduct.

63-72. Give the principal parts of the following verbs: (infinitive, present tense, past tense, past participle).

- | | | |
|--------|----------|----------------------|
| 1. lie | 3. raise | |
| 2. lay | 4. see | 5. hang (to execute) |

73-76. Identify the structure of each of the following sentences (i.e. simple, complex, compound, compound-complex): Write the sentence, and say whether it is simple, compound, compound-complex.

1. I dare say they all have their poor little secrets and worries.
2. Drawing him aside from the crowd, I peered into his face and began to question him.
3. Half of what you hear were better forgotten; with much of the remainder you will probably disagree.
4. Man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present.

77-86. Answer yes or no. Write the sentence in the blue-book, and then give the answer yes or no.

1. May parallelism be used in compound sentences?
2. Is a dangling modifier correct?
3. Should the salutation of a business letter be followed by a colon?
4. Are single quotation marks ever correct?
5. Due to is an adjectival modifier?
6. Should an outline be made before a theme is written?
7. Is and a coordinating conjunction?
8. Must a pronoun agree with its antecedent in case?
9. Should appositive modifiers be set off by semicolons?
10. May an adverb clause modify a noun?

87-100. Read the following paragraph carefully (The sentences are numbered for convenience): (1) The writers of history seem to entertain an aristocratical contempt for the writers of memoirs. (2) They think it beneath the dignity of men who describe the revolutions of nations to dwell on the details which constitute the charm of biography. (3) They have imposed on themselves a code of conventional decencies as absurd as that which has been the bane of the French drama. (4) The most characteristic and interesting circumstances are omitted or softened down, because, as we are told, they are too trivial for the majesty of history. (5) The majesty of history seems to resemble the majesty of the poor King of Spain, who died a martyr to ceremony because the proper dignitaries were not at hand to render him assistance. (From Macaulay's essay on History.)

1. State the topic of the paragraph.
2. Make one comment on the length of the sentences.
3. What kind of a sentence is number 4?
4. Where does parallel structure appear in the paragraph?
5. What sentence contains an illustration?
6. Is the topic repeated anywhere?
7. Is the paragraph clear?
8. Is the paragraph a unit, or will it divide?
9. In sentences 4 and 5 what phrase is repeated as a means of transition?
10. What is the difference between “history” and “memoirs”?

Answers on Page 32

Letters

Continued from Page 3

very institution being honored!

A person's accomplishments are just what they are—not what he gave to church, schools, medical research, the betterment of any and all mankind. Hopefully his accomplishments are rewarded by promotions, pay increases and bonuses, or the success of his own business plus peer recognition. The correct place for his name is etched in the minds of his peers, his business associates, improvement in technology and the like, his patents, his thank you notes.

I am very grateful for Mr. (Curtis) Mewbourne and his wonderful gift. There are many, many ways to say we all appreciate his gift—but not by changing the name of our school—because it is still the same school it was the day it began. Each day it merely became better and better . . .

*D M Best, '37 B.S.
Houston, Texas*

Editor's Note: While understandably unsettling to their graduates, institutions often change the names of academic divisions, sometimes to reflect changes in the discipline—and, yes, in appreciation of private endowments. Alumnus Curtis Mewbourne's \$6 million gift to the School of Petroleum Engineering was so recognized, joining the recently endowed Price College of Business and Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communications. The natural history museum has had four names, one of which was Stovall from 1953-87. The drive leading to the new Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History and its Preservation Center, containing all the collections not on exhibit, both bear Stovall's name.

How About that Sheriff!

Your article on Bob Stoops ("New Sheriff in Town," Summer 2000) was excellent. Coach Stoops will indeed bring back the same level of performance both Coach Wilkinson and Coach Switzer achieved. We'll have many years of outstanding football to look forward to with Coach Stoops at the helm. Thanks for the article.

*Robert Cox, '76 B.B.A.
Norman, Oklahoma*

English Placement Test of 1937 (Continued from Page 23)

KEY

Use a red pencil. Underline, or check in red, each error. Mark your grade on the outside of blue-book. Thus:

T[heme].	70
G[rammar]	80
Av. 2	150
	75

I. Theme. Has the student followed the directions 1 to 4? Is the theme neat, orderly, legible, intelligible? Is it interesting? Is it literate? Spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, word usage. Does the student divide his material properly or show that he knows how to construct a paragraph?

II. 1-20 Diagram

Lindbergh (American) is \ aviator

Analysis:

Lindbergh	sub. nom.	world's	modifies aviator
American	nom. in apposition with Lindbergh	the	modifies world's
An	modifies American	famous	modifies aviator
Is	predicate verb	most	modifies famous
Aviator	predicate noun-nom. after is		

- 21-25 1. who subject of verb is
 2. us object of preposition of
 3. me object of preposition to
 4. who subject of verb can be trusted
 5. whom object of verb have elected.
- 26-35 1. was
 2. were
 3. setting
 4. takes
 5. be
 6. were
 7. were
 8. will
 9. shall
 10. lay
- 36-45 1. dangling modifier (participle)
 2. lack of pronominal antecedent
 3. use of transitive for intransitive verb
 5. use of verbal contraction for possessive pronoun
- 46-47 1. yes
 48-52 2. yes
 3. no
 4. no
 5. no
- 53-57 1. adverb
 2. preposition
 3. conjunction
 4. verb
 5. adjective
- 58-62 1. adverb
 2. adjective
 3. noun
 4. adverb
 5. noun
- 63-72 lie—lay—lain
 lay—laid—laid
 raise—raised—raised
 hang—hanged—hanged
- 73-76 1. complex
 2. simple
 3. complex-compound
 4. compound
- 77-86 1. yes
 2. no
 3. yes
 4. yes
 5. yes
 6. yes
 7. yes
 8. no
 9. no
 10. no
- 87-100 1. The topic is the first sentence.
 2. average or medium
 3. complex
 4. In sentences 2 and 3. They think—they have imposed, etc.
 5. 3 or 5
 6. No
 7. Yes
 8. It is a unit; it will not divide; it sticks to one point
 9. "The majesty of history".
 10. History may deal with national events; memoirs may deal with the details of biography.

[Source: Sardis Roy Hadsell Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Box 1. The Hadsell Papers contain several versions of the Placement Test from the late 1930s and other material relating to them—their cost, the rate of passing and failing, an analysis of the kinds of writing errors students made, etc. The observations regarding Parrington were also made by Professor Hadsell, a student of Parrington's and a long-time English professor at the University. The author wishes to thank Professor David Mair, the present director of the First-Year Composition Program, and Professors Susan Kates and Ronald Schleifer for their help in preparing this piece.]