

Exam Questions Assembly

The ability to question is at the heart of a happy life; Some people think that the ability to answer questions is at the heart of a successful education; I am pretty sure that the key ability is not to answer questions, but to ask the right ones. Asking and answering questions remains the way we test academic progress and performance. As students at this school, you all must be experts at answering exam questions. If that were not true, you would not be here. The same is true of the staff – they have passed innumerable exams and qualifications to be able to work here, and are now experts in helping others negotiate exam conditions. Obviously, exams can be stressful things. But they are hard to write, as well as hard to answer. Perhaps we should also spare a thought for those who have to write and mark the exam questions. There is a marvellously funny novel called *Changing Places*, written by David Lodge. David Lodge has spent his life working as an English professor at Birmingham University. In his book, he created a character called Philip Swallow, who has a particular talent for exam questions: “His exam papers were works of art on which he laboured with loving care for many hours, tinkering and polishing, weighing every word, deftly manipulating *eithers* and *ors*, judiciously balancing difficult questions on popular authors with easy questions on obscure ones, inviting candidates to consider, illustrate, comment on, analyse, respond to, make discriminating assessments of or (last resort) discuss brilliant epigrams of his own invention, disguised as quotations from anonymous critics.”

Seen in this light, the creation of exam questions can be a sort of work of art. However, few have gathered up exam questions and offered them for reflection. Inspired to do my own research, I asked for some examples of exam questions from teachers at this school.

Perhaps inevitably, philosophers have come up with questions that linger in the mind:

- *Is the statue identical to the clay it is made of?*

This suggests a thought about aesthetics – the philosophy of beauty. When an object is deemed to be art does that change it? It certainly affects the price. The Mona Lisa in terms of raw materials is worth no more than a few pounds. To buy it would cost about £700m.

- *Can something be both red and unobservable?*

If something, by definition, cannot be seen, can it be said to have a colour? Seen by who or what? Do we mean the experience of actually seeing red, or just that light bounces off the object in a certain wavelength?

- *Are things true because they are useful or useful because they are true?*

The first suggests a practical, pragmatic approach to truth, the second a more absolutist approach.

What about this gem, a three hour History question answered by a friend of mine at Cambridge in the early 1980's: *Why, in general, have the English never eaten their horses?*

At about the same time, I took my finals and avoided this one, from the Critical Theory paper – *‘The owl of hermeneutics flies mainly in the twilight of criticism.’ Discuss.*

Henry Mount, writing in the Spectator, found a few more: The entrance exam for Westminster in 1984 had this: *Translate into Greek, ‘Who will say that it is easy to learn the Greek language?’ and ‘Let us send away all the children to an island.’* All Souls College at Oxford has a Fellowship exam held over two days in late September, with two papers of three hours each per day. It has been described as the hardest exam in the world. It used to have a single word essay question. Candidates had to write a full response to just one word – which has been variously, ‘miracles’, ‘chaos’, ‘possessions’ and ‘mercy’. Mercy indeed. But All Souls have now dropped this question in favour of an easier format. This year they asked: *Would you rather be a vampire or a zombie?* That seems to me a question hardly worth asking, as the answer is so obvious. Who wouldn’t rather be a vampire?

There is one further exam to consider, as high-stakes as all of those which we have considered so far, but one which I suspect most people in this room will never have to take. I refer to the British Citizenship Test. It is a tough test, and only 61% achieve the passmark. That is no surprise, as those taking the test face questions which can be based on any one of an estimated 3,000 facts and 278 dates contained in the government handbook, *Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents*. David Cameron was asked a question from the test – *Who wrote ‘Rule Britannia?’* Like a fool, he went for Edward Elgar, when of course we all know it was Thomas Arne. Or do we? How would you fare if asked these questions, which I lifted from real British Citizenship Tests? See how you do – to pass, you need to get more than 75% right.

- *Who is the patron Saint of Scotland?*
- *The Bill of Rights of 1689 confirmed the right to vote for all adult men. True or false?*
- *Which of the following territories is a Crown dependency but is NOT part of the UK? You have a choice of Northern Ireland, Wales, The Channel Islands or Scotland.*
- *Who wrote ‘The Daffodils’?*
- *When did the first farmers come to Britain? Was it 15,000 years ago, 10,000 years ago, 6,000 years ago or 2,000 years ago?*
- *What medal did Mary Peters win in the 1972 Olympics?*

How do you like that? How do you think you did? Do you think these exam questions have captured the essence of Britishness, and present knowledge that every Brit should be expected to know? I doubt it.

But that is the problem with all exam questions – whether they really accurately determine your true level of understanding, and further, whether the way they are asked carves up reality and bodies of knowledge in an unnatural and artificial way? Sadly, that is what we have, and that is what we have to make the best of.

But the real truth in all this is the one we started with – that you are more likely to do better, understand more and achieve wisdom, not by *answering* questions well, but by *asking* the right questions. We should never stop asking questions.

And here is a final exam question for you to carry away and ponder, perhaps from a History exam 50 years in the future:

Consider the Brexit crisis in the light of this quotation from Shakespeare's Measure for Measure:

"...but man, proud man,

Dressed in a little brief authority,

Most ignorant of what he is most assur'd

His glassy essence, like an angry ape

Plays fantastic tricks before high heaven

As makes the angels weep..."