

How to approach a Language Exam Paper

The most important hint of all ...

“Read the Instructions”



When you write your final language paper, it will be evaluated by someone other than your teacher and by following the instructions you make your work easier to mark. In this way you avoid annoying the person marking your paper, which can only benefit you in the long run.

The instructions are usually found at the very beginning of the exam paper and, although they may vary slightly, they usually look something like this:

1. Answer ALL the questions.
2. Start each section on a new page and rule off after each section.
[If you forget to do this after a particular question, don't panic; just remember to do it at the end of the next question. If you are in the habit of forgetting things like this, write a note to yourself at the end of each section – note: start a new page at the end of each section, not the end of each question.]
3. Number in the middle of the page. [Examiners seem to prefer this, so humour them!]
4. Leave a line open between your answers. [This makes your work look tidier. It's also very useful if you find a mistake in your answer and have to insert another answer or alter the first answer.]
5. Write each answer on a new line i.e. don't write more than one answer on one line. [Remember: make it easier for the marker to see and read your answers.]
6. Write neatly and legibly. [See Reminder at # 5]
7. Spelling and sentence construction will be taken into account.
[So ... work carefully and always check your work. You usually have a few minutes at the end – re-read your sentences and look for careless mistakes that do happen under exam pressure.]

***Throughout the paper, read the instructions
and follow them carefully.***

HOW TO APPROACH A WRITTEN COMPREHENSION

ATTITUDE IS VITAL: BE POSITIVE AND RECEPTIVE. CONCENTRATE!

The Passage

1. Read the whole passage. First skim to get an overview and then read again carefully, paying attention to detail.
2. As you read, try to identify the following:
 - ~ the source of the passage
 - ~ the meaning of the passage
 - ~ the writer's intention in the passage
 - ~ the feelings that lie behind the passage
 - ~ the tone or the register of the passage
 - ~ the style in which the passage has been written.

The Questions

3. Understanding the questions is as important as understanding the passage.
4. Identify the key words or phrases.
5. Test your understanding of the question by rephrasing it.

Your Answers

6. As far as possible do not use words from the passage.
7. Use properly constructed sentences, unless the question specifically instructs otherwise.
8. Pay careful attention to the mark allocation.
9. Do not 'waffle'. Elaborate only when asked to do so.

Questions to ask to help determine the style of a passage:



- ~ is it a narrative i.e. telling a story?
- ~ is the writing factual and objective?
- ~ is the language technical?
- ~ has the writer used figurative language?
- ~ are the words emotive?
- ~ is the level of vocabulary sophisticated or simple?
- ~ how are the sentences constructed – long or short?
- ~ is the passage written in the first or third person?
- ~ is the language formal or informal?

COMPLETING A SUMMARY QUESTION

A summary extracts the central argument of the passage, plus the major supporting points.
When writing a summary make sure you:

1. Read and understand the passage.
2. Study the instructions carefully. Sometimes you are required to extract information to serve another purpose e.g. write a speech or a report. Should the summary be in the form of a point form list or a paragraph of full sentences?
3. Use key facts only – omit examples and unnecessary details.
4. As far as possible, use your own words.
5. Express yourself as briefly as possible, i.e. leave out unnecessary words, condense ideas and write concise economically constructed sentences.
6. Make sure that nothing is repeated.
7. Write a rough draft then count the words.
8. Rewrite to get the style smooth and the correct word count.
9. At the end, indicate the exact number of words used.
10. Give your summary a title.



You've heard
it all before
... but it is
important!

LANGUAGE SECTION

Knowing all the various terms and language devices is vitally important in this section because the paper could include ANY ASPECT OF LANGUAGE you may have studied at school. This part of the exam paper usually includes the analysis of various texts from the media e.g. advertisements, cartoons etc. A question that focuses on the correct usage of language is also included. The best way to prepare for this section is to revise language structures and to complete past question papers.

When you are revising, keep a list of the terms you encounter and write down clear definitions, with examples. If you get a multiple-choice question, make sure that you understand the meaning of each term, not only the term that is in the answer. Building this 'reference library' for yourself means that you can process the questions and formulate answers more easily



It is essential to practise your comprehension, summary and language processing skills. Your brain becomes 'wired' to think in a specific way which makes writing your exam so much easier.

Good luck!

If you want to practise your language and comprehension skills, you can either use one of Macrat's language study manuals, or a resource pack that will provide plenty of practice,
<https://www.digital.macrat.co.za/product-category/pdf-resource-packs/language-2/>