

ENGLISH



PRACTICE QUESTIONS

UNSEEN PROSE: 16 PRACTICE QUESTIONS

SCORE

/

PERCENTAGE

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STEMUP

Unseen Prose 1

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

The Last Bus

The last bus to Harrowgate leaves at eleven forty, and I have been waiting for it since ten past. The shelter smells of wet dust and old chips. Somebody has scratched a name into the perspex, and somebody else has scratched it out, so that what remains is a wound the shape of a stranger.

I am not supposed to be here. My coat is the wrong coat for November; it was bought for a different, more optimistic person. Across the road the pub is shutting its doors one bolt at a time, and the laughter that spills from it seems to belong to a country I have only read about. A man in a hi-vis jacket looks at me, looks at the empty road, and looks away with the tact of someone who has also stood here at this hour for reasons of his own.

My phone buzzes. It is my sister: Did you get there ok? I type yes, and delete it, and type yes, fine, and delete that too. The screen goes dark and shows me my face, small and pale, floating in the black glass like something pressed in a book.

Then the headlights arrive, swinging round the corner like a slow, deliberate thought. The bus sighs and kneels. The driver does not look up as I tap my card; he is watching the clock, and I am a number to him, and I find that I am grateful for this. I choose a seat halfway down, beside a window, and press my forehead to the cold pane. The town begins to unreel behind us in orange stripes. Nobody knows where I have been tonight. Nobody knows where I am going. For the first time all week, this does not feel like a problem.

How does the writer vividly present the narrator's loneliness?

[25]

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How does the writer vividly present the setting at night?

[25]

Unseen Prose 2

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

The Greenhouse

Grandad's greenhouse had never been properly clear; the glass was green with algae on the outside and gold with condensation on the inside, so that the whole building looked like a lantern someone had forgotten to put out. Isaac pushed the warped door with his shoulder and the smell reached him first: tomato leaves, damp soil, creosote, and underneath it something sweeter, like the memory of summer kept in a jar.

‘Mind the hose,’ said his grandfather, without turning round.

He was kneeling between the grow-bags, his hands working at a plant as though he were untying a knot in a child's shoelace. Isaac had come to say something. He had rehearsed it on the bus: that he had not been picked for the team; that he did not want to talk about it; that he wanted, nevertheless, to talk about it. But the words dissolved in the warm air.

‘Hold that,’ said Grandad, and handed him a green cane, and Isaac held it while the old man tied the stem to it with a loop of string, gently, giving it room to grow. ‘You don't strangle them,’ he explained. ‘You just show them which way is up.’

They worked in silence for a while. A bee, trapped and furious, bumped against the roof. Isaac found that his shoulders had come down from around his ears. At last his grandfather sat back on his heels, and his knees cracked like kindling.

‘The first fruit are always rubbish, you know,’ he said, to nobody in particular. ‘Small and hard and sour. You wouldn't think it, to look at the plant later.’

Isaac laughed once, a short surprised sound, and picked up the next cane.

How does the writer vividly present the relationship between Isaac and his grandfather?

[25]

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Isaac laughed once, a short surprised sound, and picked up the next cane.

How does the writer vividly present the setting of the greenhouse?

[25]

Unseen Prose 3

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

Wash Day

Every other Saturday my mother and I carried the washing to the launderette on Mill Street in two bin bags, like burglars with an unusually dull haul. I was seven. I remember the doorbell, which was a real bell on a spring, and the wall of warm, soapy air that met us like a relative who was pleased to see us.

The machines stood in a line, round windows facing us like a row of astonished faces. My mother loaded ours with the efficiency of a woman who has done it for years and expects to go on doing it for years more. Then she would give me two coins for the sweet machine, and sit on the orange plastic chair with her magazine, and for forty minutes we were suspended.

That is what I remember most: the suspension. At home my mother was always moving, in the kitchen, at the sink, at the ironing board with its small furious steam. Here she was, for once, made to sit. Her shoulders loosened. Sometimes she would read me a line from the horoscopes, in a voice that made even bad news sound like a treat. I pressed my nose to the glass and watched our clothes tumble, my school jumper chasing my father's shirt in endless circles, and I decided, with a seven-year-old's certainty, that this was what being rich must feel like: to have nowhere to be, and someone beside you who was not in a hurry.

I did not know then that she was tired. I know it now. But when I smell fabric softener in a stranger's house, I am carried back to that bright box on Mill Street, and I think, not of the tiredness, but of the chair, and the warmth, and her laughing.

How does the writer vividly present the narrator's relationship with her mother?

[25]

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How does the writer vividly present how the past is remembered?

[25]

Unseen Prose 4

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

The Market at Closing Time

By five o'clock the market has started to take itself apart. The stallholders work with the cheerful violence of people who have done this ten thousand times: poles clang, tarpaulins snap like sails in a gale, and crates are tossed from hand to hand in a long, careless relay. Where an hour ago there was a street of colour, there is now a street of skeletons, scaffolding and shadows.

The air is dense with the smells of the day's end. Bruised oranges, sharp and sweet, cling to the cobbles. The fishmonger hoses down his slab and the water runs silver between the stones, carrying scales that glitter like spilled sequins before the drain swallows them. Somewhere a radio plays an old song, and a woman sings along with it flat, without embarrassment.

The light is turning. It comes in low between the buildings, honey-coloured, catching the dust that rises from the swept ground until the whole street seems to be breathing gold. A boy of about ten, sent to help, drags a crate of cabbages that is almost his own size. He stops to rest, and a stallholder, without a word, lifts the other end.

Then the last van doors slam. Engines cough. The cobbles, left to themselves, give back the day's heat in a long exhalation. A pigeon walks the length of the empty square with the air of an inspector, pecking at what remains: a split lemon, a scatter of rice, a single glove. By six, the street belongs to the evening, to the pigeons, and to the quiet that settles like a lid. Tomorrow, before dawn, it will all be built again.

How does the writer vividly present the atmosphere of the market?

[25]

Unseen Prose 4

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How does the writer vividly present the use of the senses?

[25]

Unseen Prose 5

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

Paper One

The hall smelled of floor polish and fear. Maya found her desk, number 214, and sat down with the carefulness of someone lowering herself into cold water. Around her, a hundred and fifty pens clicked, scratched and rolled; a hundred and fifty plastic bottles were placed with ceremony beside a hundred and fifty identical rulers. The clock above the stage ticked as if it were being paid by the second.

‘You may turn over your papers.’

It was a sound like a flock of birds taking off. Maya did not move. For a moment she looked at the back of the paper, at the blank cream rectangle, and she felt it all drain out of her: the dates, the diagrams, the equations she had chanted on the bus. Her mind was a white room with the lights off. The boy in front of her was already writing, hunched, fast, a tiny knot of certainty. She hated him, briefly and with her whole heart.

Then she turned the page.

The first question was ordinary. That was the astonishing thing. It was a plain question wearing plain clothes, and she knew it; she knew its name. Her hand began to move before she had quite decided to let it. The first sentence was clumsy. The second was better. By the third, the white room had a lamp in it, and then a window, and she was writing steadily, with the particular joy of a person who has discovered that the floor is, after all, solid.

Somewhere behind her, a girl began to cry quietly. Maya did not look round. But she slid her spare tissue to the edge of the desk, where the invigilator, passing, might carry it to someone who needed it more.

How does the writer vividly present Maya's anxiety and how it changes?

[25]

Unseen Prose 5

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How does the writer vividly present the atmosphere of the exam hall?

[25]

Unseen Prose 6

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

The Deep End

I was eleven before I put my face in water, and fourteen before I did it willingly. My mother had been afraid of the sea, and her fear came to me the way a surname does: unchosen, handed down, impossible to explain. At the public baths on Dalton Road I stood on the tiled edge in a pair of trunks that did not fit and watched the other children thrash and shriek, wondering how they could not know that water was the enemy.

The baths themselves were beautiful, though I did not see it then. High above the pool ran a glass roof, green-stained, through which the light came down in wobbling nets. The air tasted of chlorine and chips. Every sound, the slap of feet, the whistle, the cry of a child, was swallowed and returned a second later, so the building seemed to talk to itself.

My instructor was called Mr Pell, a large, patient man with a whistle he never blew. He did not tell me not to be afraid. He said, 'Fear's all right. Just don't let it drive.' Then he held a float under my belly and walked beside me along the length of the pool, and I kicked, furious, humiliated, certain I would sink.

I do not remember the moment he let go. That is the strange thing. I remember only that at some point I looked up and saw him standing at the far end, arms folded, and understood that I had crossed the water alone. I did not cheer. I swallowed half the pool and coughed, and then I laughed, and the roof gave the laugh back to me, brighter than I had sent it.

How does the writer vividly present the narrator's fear and how it is overcome?

[25]

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How does the writer vividly present the role of Mr Pell?

[25]

Unseen Prose 7

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

Storm over the Estuary

The storm builds all afternoon, slowly, like an argument in another room. By four the sky over the estuary has turned the colour of an old bruise, yellow at the edges, purple at the centre, and the light has a strange, underwater quality, so that every reed and gatepost seems cut out and placed on the land with great care. The birds have gone quiet. The air presses on the skin.

Then the wind arrives all at once. It flattens the grass in long, silvery waves, and tugs at the washing lines, and sets the halyards ringing against the masts of the moored boats, a thousand tiny bells played by an impatient child. The water, which had been smooth as pewter, begins to crawl and wrinkle. White lines appear on it and race one another toward the shore.

The first drops are heavy and separate, each one striking the jetty with the sound of a coin. Within a minute they have become a curtain. The far bank vanishes; the church tower on the hill dissolves; the world shrinks to a few grey metres of mud, rain and reeds. Thunder walks across the sky above, rolling like furniture being dragged through some huge, empty house.

And then, without ceremony, it begins to ease. The rain thins to a hiss. A crack of light opens in the west, and through it comes the sun, low and copper, laying a bright road across the water. The mud steams. Somewhere a curlew calls, tentative, one rising note, and the whole estuary holds still, rinsed and shining, as if it had never been anything but calm.

How does the writer vividly present how the storm is built up and released?

[25]

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How does the writer vividly present the use of imagery and personification?

[25]

Unseen Prose 8

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows. You are advised to spend about 20 minutes reading the passage and planning your answer.

The Empty House

The house had been empty for eleven years, yet when Clara pushed open the front door, the hall was warm. She stood on the threshold with the estate agent's key still in her hand and told herself it was the sun on the slates. The staircase rose ahead of her into shadow, its banister polished, as though a hand had worn it smooth that very morning.

She went through the rooms in a systematic way, as she did everything: clipboard, tape measure, the camera on her phone. The drawing room held its furniture under dust sheets like a congregation of patient ghosts. The kitchen tap, when she turned it, coughed once and gave a thin brown trickle, then clear water. On the window sill sat a teacup. It was clean.

'Hello?' she said, and felt foolish, because the word did not echo. The house swallowed it.

Upstairs, a door was ajar at the end of the landing. Behind it she found a child's bedroom: a small iron bed, a rocking horse with one glass eye, wallpaper patterned with swallows. The swallows, she noticed, all faced the window. She crossed the floorboards, which did not creak, and looked out. The garden below was a drowned jungle, except for one neat square of earth by the wall where somebody had recently planted something.

She was still looking when the front door closed, softly, downstairs. Not slammed. Closed, the way one closes a door on a sleeping child.

Clara found that she was holding her breath. She was aware, with great clarity, of the tape measure in her hand, of her pulse, of the long, polite silence waiting for her to come down.

How does the writer vividly present how tension and mystery are created?

[25]

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How does the writer vividly present Clara's character and reactions?

[25]