

Is your English up to scratch?

von Carsten Bösel

Find out if you are ready to study at an English-speaking institution

Answers and explanations

1 Correct answer: C

A university's mission is a concise statement of the organization's purpose, the reason(s) it exists. The passage mentions that underlying the creation of the three-tiered University of California system was "a commitment to the notion that all qualified Californians, whatever their economic status, were entitled to the benefits of a college education." That does not necessarily imply that university attendance should be completely free for all; rather, it suggests that whether or not someone can attend university should depend on their academic performance rather than their financial resources. The terms "college" and "university" are often used interchangeably in the United States.²

2 Correct answer: C

A bargain is a thing bought or offered for sale much more cheaply than is usual or expected.

3 Correct answer: D

The passage mentions a big increase in tuition fees, suggesting that studying at the University of California has become too expensive for many students. Although the passage does refer to "financial turmoil," there is nothing to suggest that that turmoil is related to the global financial crisis. Likewise, there is no statement indicating that the UC system is no longer viewed as a model of excellence by institutions abroad. It is now "one of the priciest" universities in the country, but not necessarily the single most expensive US university.

4 Correct answer: A

The expression "to play havoc with" means to completely disrupt or destroy.

5 Correct answer: D

The phrase "to have trouble" must be followed by the gerund, that is, the verb in its -ing form.

6 Correct answer: **C**

The present perfect tense must be used in combination with “since” or “for,” because these words are used to talk about actions that last for a period of time that continues to the present.

7 Correct answer: **B**

An adverb (–ly) is needed here because it is a verb (“has risen”) that is being modified.

8 Correct answer: **A**

Usually, the verb follows the subject in an English sentence, but sometimes this word order is reversed. This is called “inversion.” Inversion is used, for example, when we move adverbs or adverbial expressions with a negative or restrictive meaning (rarely, never, nowhere, hardly, not only, etc.) to the beginning of a sentence. This is the case here (“Only when ...”).

9 Correct answer: **D**

University representatives are human beings, so the relative pronoun must be “who,” not “which,” which refers to things. Sometimes “who” can be replaced by “that,” but only in the case of restrictive relative clauses. In non-restrictive relative clauses such as this one, separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma, “that” may not be used.

10 Correct answer: **B**

This sentence suffers from a lack of parallelism. Using parallel structures is a key feature of good writing, because parallelism puts the content of a sentence into a recognizable pattern, making it easier to understand. So if you compare two activities starting with an infinitive (“to ride”), the other activity should also be referred to in the infinitive (“to explain”): It is far easier to ride a bicycle than to explain in words exactly how a bicycle is ridden.

11 Correct answer: **C**

This sentence is worded in the past tense, so all verbs should be in the past tense: “she *sought* out the work of sculptors ...”

12 Correct answer: D

This sentence is a good example of what is called a “dangling participle.” Participles are a type of verbal form (ending in –ing and sometimes –ed) that modifies nouns. The antecedent—that is, the noun to which the participle refers—must be clear to the readers in order for them to understand what is being said. Otherwise, an action may be ascribed to the wrong player. That’s called a “dangling participle,” because it is left “hanging” without a clear antecedent. In our sentence, it appears that the antique store is doing the wandering, not the speaker. In English, modifiers are usually placed as close as possible to the words they describe, so this sentence should read: “During my most recent trip, wandering in the old quarter of the city, I came across a lovely antique store.”

13 Correct answer: E

Nothing wrong with this sentence.

14 Correct answer: C

This is an idiomatic error. The correct phrase is “either ... or,” not “either ... and.”

15 Correct answer: D

In this sentence, Jenny is comparing two kinds of paintings: her friend Aaron’s paintings and the other artists’ paintings. It is not necessary to repeat the word “paintings” the second time, but you still need the possessive form: “... her friend Aaron’s paintings, which she thought were more original than the other artists’.” Otherwise, you are comparing paintings and artists.

16 Correct answer: No

The writer claims the opposite. He does so, however, by means of a double negative construction (two forms of negation in the same sentence): “That’s not to say the world’s oldest underground rail network isn’t showing its age.” The two negatives cancel one another, producing an affirmative sense: The rail network is indeed showing its age.

17 Correct answer: Yes

Claiming that the rail network “is estimated to be running at almost 50 percent over capacity”—that is, carrying 50 percent more passengers than originally expected—is just another way of saying that the system is heavily overburdened.

18 Correct answer: **Not given**

The writer does mention that multiple private companies used to run the railways “during its first 70 years of life”—that is, until 1933—implying that something changed in that year, but he does not give any information about the nature of that change.

19 Correct answer: **Yes**

The writer claims that many of the rail network’s problems are “a legacy of the Tube’s venerable heritage,” meaning a consequence of its great history. He goes on to give an example of the historical circumstances that account for current problems, namely that there was a lack of coordination when the first lines were built.

20 Correct answer: **C**

Square 3 is where the sentence fits best: “Trains and stations are rammed at peak periods, making travel an ordeal of forced intimacy with strangers. In summer, when air conditioning systems struggle against rising temperatures, it is far worse.” Overcrowded trains are one thing, but when it’s hot and everybody is sweating, the situation is even less comfortable.

21 Correct answer: **C**

“(Being) rammed” is an informal, chiefly British way of saying that a place is very crowded.

22 Correct answer: **C**

“Haphazard” means lacking any obvious principle of organization. Possible synonyms include random, unplanned, or unsystematic.

23 Correct answer: **B**

This little dialogue contains many slang expressions frequently used by US college students. Don’t worry, you won’t be expected to know slang terms on any of the standardized English tests such as TOEFL or IELTS. Here’s a translation into standard English:

To cram for a test: If you “cram,” it means you study a lot in a short period of time.

Government: “Government” is a subject at school and university and largely the same as “political science.” Not a slang term.

Final: Final examination at the end of a semester

To ace a test: To “ace a test” is to get a very good grade.

To slack off: If you “slack off,” it means that you get lazy and don’t work hard.

To flunk: To “flunk” a test or a class is to fail.

To hit the books: To “hit the books” is to study.

To pull an all-nighter: If you “pull an all-nighter,” it means you stay awake the whole night, usually studying.

To cut class: If you “cut class,” it means you don’t go to class.

Frat house: “Frat” is short for “fraternity,” which is a social organization of male college students. These organizations are often called by Greek letters, like Alpha Theta Chi or Kappa Delta, and members are called “brothers.” A “frat house” is the building where members of a fraternity live, study, hang out, or hold meetings.

Steve has to “cram for his government final,” meaning he has to study hard for his final examination in political science.

24 Correct answer: **C**

Initially, Dan believes that Steve will do very well on his final exam. But when Steve admits that he has been lazy recently and will have to stay up all night to study as hard as he can for the exam, Dan agrees it will be better for him to hit the books than to party.

Understand your score: Are you ready to study at an English-speaking institution?

19–24 correct answers

Congratulations! You read very well in English. You have an advanced understanding of grammar and style, an extensive vocabulary, and the ability to handle complex language and detailed reasoning. In other words, it seems you are ready to do challenging academic work in an English-speaking environment. Go out and get an official TOEFL or IELTS score to prove it!

10–18 correct answers

Good job! Your score indicates solid English reading skills, which however may not be quite sufficient for university-level studies at this point. To enhance your skills, try reading as much and as often as possible, preferably academic texts on a variety of topics. Continually practice using new words you encounter while speaking and writing, and review some of the most common grammar errors.

0–9 correct answers

Okay, let's face it: Your English is probably good enough to help you get by as a tourist, but when it comes to advanced academic reading, you still have a long way to go. If your plan is to apply to an English-speaking university, you better grab that grammar book now, subscribe to a major English newspaper such as *The International New York Times*, and take some extra lessons at your high school or university language center.