

## 2 Comprehension

### 2.1 WHAT IS COMPREHENSION?

A frightening word? It needn't be, because it refers to something you practise daily. For instance:

You travel to school or to work by bus. One day the bus takes a different route. Why? Before realizing that you are doing it, your mind starts listing possible reasons—road repairs? accident? new pick-up points? a driver unfamiliar with the road? The evidence for each in turn will be considered by you (e.g. 'Oh yes, I remember, Oak Road was being dug up yesterday'), and after checking and perhaps comparing your ideas with others, you arrive at conclusions.

At the end of such thoughts you may say to yourself, 'Ah, now I understand.' You have successfully completed an exercise in comprehension.

To **comprehend** a situation, or a piece of writing, means to **understand** it fully, to grasp the essential points.

Let's look at the stages of this particular instance:

- I **Observation** You notice the bus is taking a different route. (If you'd been asleep, or reading, or fooling about, you probably wouldn't have.)
- II **Comparison** You compare what is happening with what normally happens, the less familiar with the more familiar, the unknown with the known.
- III **Reflection** You think of all possible reasons for the change. Here your memory can be particularly helpful.
- IV **Selection** You choose reasons that fit the facts best, comparing one with another, rejecting those that seem improbable or inappropriate.
- V **Conclusion** You draw conclusions, arrive at certain decisions based on the facts you have observed and your thoughts about them.

In English studies what you are asked to comprehend is usually a piece of writing. (Occasionally it may be a diagram or a picture, or a set of statistics. Where these need special skills we shall look at them separately.) Writing usually deals with more than one idea or situation at a time, so needs closer attention than you might give to a changed bus route. But you will think in a similar way to the one we have described when you answer a comprehension question. The examiner setting the question is like the person who, in the situation we have described above, might ask you why you are later than usual.

Now let us apply all this to your English comprehension test, which usually consists of several questions based on a written passage:

#### **Observation**

Your first reading will tell you what the passage is about. You may be asked to set out the **argument**, i.e. the line of thought or reasoning, to show how one point depends on another. Sometimes particular points may be dealt with in separate questions, to see whether you have noticed them.

### Comparison

Your full understanding of the passage will involve comparing things. The commonest and most useful kind of comparison will concern the actual words used, the writer's **vocabulary**. Words you have used before, or seen used in your reading, provide you with meanings to compare with the ones you are asked about. Even when a word seems quite new to you, you can compare the way it is used with expressions, sentences, contexts familiar to you. Many comprehension questions test your word skill, often by asking you to put the words in sentences of your own — an active comparison, so to speak —, or to provide synonyms (i.e. words closely similar in meaning).

### Reflection

This gets to the heart of comprehension. When we are dealing with writing it includes **drawing inferences**. (see p. 54) (In the example used earlier the passenger might have correctly inferred the reason for the change by linking his observation of the change with his recollection of the road under repair.) Thinking about writing takes us further. We may be expected to notice the way something is written, and relate it to the writer. Is he being serious here? Does he mean just what he says? What kind of person is he? Or what kind of person is he describing?

### Selection

Many comprehension questions test your ability to select the appropriate points. From your close reading and observation of the passage you will be able to select the features that illustrate different aspects of the subject written about, or of the writer's methods.

### Conclusion

Once the preliminary work has been done you can draw conclusions about the passage as a whole, what it is aiming at, and the way it is written.

### Two words of warning . . .

1 A comprehension exercise is also a writing exercise *for you*. You must not only answer the questions correctly but also write your answers in clear, careful English, paying attention to spelling and punctuation. Above all, be concise. The person who wanted to know why you were late wouldn't want to know all your speculations about the route change, nor what the shops were selling *en route*. An important part of any comprehension exercise is **KEEPING TO THE POINT**.

2 'Own words' — When a question instructs you to write 'in your own words' you must *not* include in your answer key words and phrases from the passage. Obviously unimportant words like 'and', 'if', 'the', etc. do not matter, nor do common words like 'space' for which there are no satisfactory substitutes. But no credit will be given to an answer which merely repeats phrases and important words from the passage. (This useful warning is included in the instructions on certain English Language papers.)

### 2.2 TYPES OF COMPREHENSION QUESTION

Let us now relate the general points discussed above to the kind of questions you will face in an English examination after reading the passage set for comprehension. The following model questions are all based on ones that have been set in recent examinations (see also Self-test units 11-15 and Section V):

### Type I (Observation)

- (i) Summarize in 4 words the argument of the second paragraph.
- (ii) Basing your answer on information given in the passage, state what different occupations A has.
- (iii) Mention briefly the *four* ways in which . . .
- (iv) Explain the meaning of ' . . . ' on line x.
- (v) List three ways in which, according to the author, . . .

Questions of this type are all testing your powers of intelligent observation of what you have just read. Keep a clear head, and all the material for your answers is there in front of you.

### Type II (Comparison)

- (i) Explain why the word ' . . . ' is used on line x.
- (ii) Give the meaning of *five* of the following words as used in the passage . . .
- (iii) Express in your own words ' . . . ' (line x).
- (iv) Give one word or one short phrase meaning the same as each of the following as used in the passage: . . .

In this type of question you are often reminded that the meaning you are to give is the one used in the passage. This is because words take much of their meaning from the context they are used in. You may be allowed a dictionary in your English examination — many CSE examinations allow them — but will still need your own powers of comparison and selection to catch precisely the meaning required. Small dictionaries may even be a hindrance, misleading you in your answers. For instance: in the passage starting on page 50 the word 'usurp' is used (line 24). A small dictionary will give just one meaning — 'seize wrongfully', but the right meaning here is 'take over' or 'adopt', because the word is being used metaphorically.

### Type III (Reflection)

- (i) Describe the tone in which A speaks.
- (ii) Say why B thinks it would be better if he did grumble?
- (iii) Describe the relationship of C and D as demonstrated by the passage.
- (iv) What does the expression ' . . . ' (line x) tell us about the general public's attitude to B?
- (v) How does the writer indicate to us that A has not been seen before?
- (vi) (This question is a combination of Types I and III.) Explain the meaning, and comment on the effectiveness of . . .

Questions of this type are often set on extracts from stories or novels.

### Type IV (Selection)

- (i) Select two statements in the passage which indicate . . .
- (ii) Quote three sentences or phrases which mean the same as . . .
- (iii) What details suggest that E has been carefully prepared and might be dangerous?

### Type V (Conclusion)

- (i) Summarize A's and B's attitudes to writing novels. (on a passage portraying two contrasting approaches to writing)

- (ii) Say whether you think the author is right.  
(iii) Is . . . necessarily true? Explain why or why not.

A little practice will make it possible for you to recognise what kind of question you are being asked—an important step towards answering it properly.

Most passages given for comprehension will either be from a fictional work (story or novel) or set out a discussion or argument, often including a good deal of 'evidence' in the form of factual statement. Here is a piece of the second kind. It comes from a book about serious music—how it is written, what effects it can create, and so on. You may not have much interest in music, but if you concentrate you should be able to follow the writer's argument. Some of the less familiar words are explained at the end of the passage.\*

#### Passage A

There are three ways in which music can represent physical objects. First, by *direct imitation* of something which emits a sound of definite pitch, such as a cuckoo, a shepherd's pipe, or a hunting horn. Here the parallel with painting is almost exact: the painter can represent the visual but not the aural aspect of the object, the composer the aural but not the visual. 5

The second way is by *approximate imitation* of something which emits a sound of indefinite pitch, such as a thunderstorm, a rippling brook, or rustling branches. Here the composer's representation is inevitably less faithful than the painter's; a painting of a storm strikes the eye as a more or less exact reproduction of the appearance of a storm, but a musical representation of a storm strikes the ear as only an approximate reproduction of the sound of a storm. The definite sounds of music are different from the indefinite sounds of nature: rolls on the timpani do not sound exactly like thunder, nor chromatic scales on the violins exactly like the wind. Nevertheless, even here, the composer has a certain compensatory advantage: he can reproduce the sensation of physical movement which the painter can only suggest. 10 15

The third way in which music can represent physical objects is by the *suggestion* or *symbolisation* of a purely visual thing, such as lightning, clouds or mountains, using sounds which have an effect on the ear similar to that which the appearance of the object has on the eye. Here music at once approaches closest to painting, and recedes farthest from it. In its attempt to stimulate the visual faculty, it seeks to usurp the very function of painting; but in so far as it lacks the power of direct communication—being unable to represent the object so that it can be immediately identified without recourse to an explanatory title—it is less analogous to painting than when it confines itself to the imitation of aural phenomena. Knowing, as we do, that the first of Debussy's 'Three Nocturnes' is entitled *Nuages* (clouds) we are persuaded into interpreting the shifting patterns of sound in terms of the visual imagination—shifting patterns of light, such as we experience from the movement of clouds. But if Debussy had not given the Nocturne its title, we should have been uncertain what the composer intended to represent, if anything at all. 20 25 30

Frequently, music's three methods of tone-painting are fused, or superimposed on one another, in a single composition. In Beethoven's 35

*Pastoral Symphony*, for example, the direct imitation of bird-calls (cuckoo and quail) interrupt the approximate imitation of a murmuring brook, while the third bird-call (nightingale) is only approximately imitated; the thunder in the storm movement is approximate, the lightning and rain are suggested, and these are followed by the direct imitation of a shepherd's pipe.

40

Derek Cooke, from *The Language of Music*, reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

\*pitch—place (of a note or sound) within the total range of audible sound; inevitably—necessarily; tempo—drums; chromatic scales—string all the notes, moving up or down in semitones; analogous to—like; comparable with; tone-painting—using musical sounds to convey pictures.

This is factual. It tells us certain facts about music. Obviously some examination candidates will know more about music than others. Don't worry if you have no special knowledge of the subject-matter; the examiners know this, and will not expect you to know anything about the subject beyond what they think should be general knowledge. (Warning If you do have special knowledge of a topic dealt with in a comprehension passage, don't be tempted to show it off: it may lead to inaccurate or over-long answers.)

Here are some questions that an examiner might ask about this passage:  
Q.1 *In your own words explain briefly the three kinds of descriptive music referred to.* This is straightforward observation (Type 1). The passage is set out so logically that it is easy to see the answer. It may be less easy to use your own words. Remember the rule: do not include key words from the passage unless there is no alternative. Thus the italicized phrases *direct imitation*, *approximate imitation*, *suggestion* or *symbolisation* must not appear in your answer. A possible answer might be:

Ans. The first kind of music copies natural sounds very closely, for example a cuckoo's call. The second kind gives a general musical representation of less exact sounds, like wind or water. The third kind uses music to convey an impression in sound that we recognize to be like something we see, lightning for instance.

This answer has avoided using the three main key words and phrases, as well as others like *definite*, *indefinite pitch*, *visual/aural*, to *stimulate the visual faculty*, the *imitation of natural phenomena*, *tone-painting*.

Q.2 *Give words or short phrases as close as possible in meaning to: (i) faithful (line 10); (ii) compensatory advantage (1.17); (iii) recedes (1.23); (iv) usurp (1.24); (v) fazed (1.35).*

This question does not need full sentence answers. If the words are lettered or numbered (as they are here), don't waste time writing them out again. A good answer might look like this:

Ans. (i) close to the original  
(ii) ways of making up (for being less exact)  
(iii) goes away  
(iv) take over  
(v) closely combined