

Almost always, since 1987, a twice-yearly and repeatable exam, not tied to any course, has been set and taken for the

Learningguild Certificate in Reasoning and Expression.

The chief examiner is Dr John Howes, who is a Victorian Rhodes Scholar and has been a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Melbourne and Professor at Cape Town. He is the President of Learningguild, the international educational and social movement, which is based in the city of Melbourne.

Professor Peter Singer of Melbourne and Princeton has written: “I recommend both to students and to report-writers that they visit the Learningguild website and take up the challenge of this exam.” Read more from him, and from Professor Sir Keith Thomas of Oxford, and the late Dr John Silber, President Emeritus of Boston University, and find plenty of detailed guidance, at learningguild.org.au/Certificate.

Here are answers to twelve questions related to this exam.

What is it for? Two questions there! It’s for the Certificate just named, which is awarded with three grades A, B and C, and upper, middle and lower levels for grades B and C, and provides good testing and reliable evidence of one’s abilities. It’s also for remedying longstanding deficiencies in secondary English syllabuses in Australia, the UK, and the USA.

What does it cost? \$A90.

What have people gained by taking it? It was taken three times in the 1990s, when he was a manager at BDO, by **Mr Christopher Wookey**, now Principal at Deloitte Private, Melbourne. He has written:

I was delighted to progress from a B grade at my first attempt to an A at my third. My ability to analyse and interpret legislation, and to explain its implications to clients, has measurably improved.

He adds that he highly recommends

the stimulus, guidance and repeatable testing offered by Learningguild.

What individual guidance is now available? See column 5.

What guidance is offered in print? There are 58 previous papers, and informative and constructive reports on many of the exams. Go to the five recent pairs on the website (see column 1), and ask, if you wish, for such earlier ones as those for 2004 (\$5 each pair, \$7 in stamps by post).

There is plenty to be learnt about reasoning and English expression from those documents alone, but these others are especially recommended:

- an article by Dr Howes called “Questions and principles for sentence-construction”, which appears in *Learningguild Letter* 2.2015, is available there on the website, and is related to the following book;
- Rebecca Gowers’s *Plain Words* (Penguin, 2015), an updated version of the classic *The Complete Plain Words* by her great-grandfather Sir Ernest Gowers, and an excellent guide;
- Dr Howes’s booklet *Reasoning* (2004), which includes extracts from a paper and report (\$3, \$5 in stamps by post).

What’s in the exam? There are five sections:

1. sentence-correction
2. insertion of punctuation etc.
3. explanation and comment
4. critical appraisal of an imagined case advanced for some view
5. essay-writing, on any one of twenty topics.

Candidates have half an hour to read the paper and make notes on its pages, and 2½ hours to write their answers. They are advised to check those answers.

Who should take it? Both native and non-native speakers of English. Native speakers can judge how ready they are for it. On the one hand, an Australian girl at the end of her Year 12 gained an A at her first attempt. On the other, some university students would not get a lower C without preparatory work. Non-native speakers should not be below the advanced level in English as a further language. This repeatable exam has proved very suitable for people in administration or business who have to write letters and reports.

Outside Australia, what has been said about it? Dr John Silber of Boston described our exam papers as “extraordinarily clear, wide-ranging and thought-provoking”, and said “They are the best tools for developing writing skills that I have seen”; Sir Keith Thomas of Oxford has remarked about the exam “Indeed there is a great deal to be said in favour of its adoption at a national level in English-speaking countries”. [Full texts on the website.]

What does Dr Howes do besides leading an examining team? For 35 years in Melbourne, he has helped people individually towards better writing and speaking of English, guiding them to books, booklets and CDs or DVDs (some but certainly not all by him) likely to be just right for the particular person. He especially recommends the intelligent use of the *Oxford Essential Dictionary*, from which so much can be learned about both basic sentence-construction and pronunciation. In 2012 he lectured at two Chinese universities on the study of English (see his editorial letter in *Learningguild Letter* 1.2012, on the website). He continues to write in philosophy, often referring to one or more of Plato, Cicero, Kant, Mill and Green, and, in the twentieth century, Moore, Austin and Hare.

What should I do to find out more? Send an email to Dr Howes at learningguild@gmail.com or phone him at (03) 9380 5892. You are welcome to ask for advice on preparation for the exam. Dr Howes or a colleague would comment in writing on an essay on a topic in Section 5 of a past paper, normally for a fee of \$25.

When can I take the exam? The paper to be named March 2019 has as its base date **Saturday March 30th**. The exam may be taken outside Melbourne (it has been taken in Washington DC and in Bristol, England). Provided that its integrity is maintained, permission may be given to take it after the base date.

What values underlie this exam? Look, on the website, for the 1.2008 issue of *Learningguild Letter*, pp. 1-6, in which Dr Howes has written about the tradition of the *trivium*, the set of the three paths grammar, logic, and rhetoric that was in the Middle Ages a prerequisite for admission to a university. That set, **updated** – we might now describe it as consisting of sentence-construction, reasoning, and choice of words – remains essential for those who want to think and write with clarity. (On that quality, go to [Keith Thomas](#) – [Alan Macfarlane](#) and read the eleventh paragraph.) Students and writers need to be exposed to a **range** of English wide in time, place, type and subject; to value **cogency** far more than persuasiveness, and therefore to study principles of reasoning; and to learn, not least through good exams, to combine **care** and **alacrity**.