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MATCH WITS WITH THE KIDS

A Little Learning for all the Family



ICON BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

'An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.'

Now, of course being able to tell the difference between what you know and what you don't isn't the same as admitting it. We've all had an education of one kind or another, and much of what we've learnt will have been taught by those much vaunted academic establishments the School of Hard Knocks and the University of Life. But it all began when, as a small child, you first went to infant school ...

School days; best days of your life, apparently. And if you still happen to be at school yourself, make the most of it; the need to provide a living for yourself, put a roof over your head and pay taxes are – comparatively – just around the corner.

But if your school days are now more a case of Ancient History than Current Affairs, how much do you remember of what you learnt at school? And I don't mean what you learnt behind the bike sheds. Do you remember how to calculate the area of a circle? Can you recall who won the Battle of Naseby? Do you still know how to conjugate the Latin verb *amare*? If the answer to any of these questions is 'No' and your school days now seem more like something of a school daze, then you've come to the right place! *Match Wits With The Kids* is for you.

There is a rebellious saying that has probably been repeated any number of times over the years, which I first came across, printed on a postcard, when I was a secondary school student. This postcard took pride of place on the noticeboard above the desk where I was religiously made to do my homework every night by my mother, who just happened to be a lecturer. It

obviously struck a chord with me at the time. It went something like this:

*The more I study, the more I learn;
The more I learn, the more I forget;
The more I forget, the less I know;
So why study?*

As someone who has just picked up *Match Wits With The Kids: A Little Learning for all the Family*, you can probably answer that question for yourself. I suspect that it has been some time since you were last a student yourself and although you rigorously completed your homework and no matter how thorough you were when it came to revising for exams, over the years the pressures of modern living have slowly but surely corroded your memory. In my case, I put this down to having children of my own.

If you are a parent yourself, you have probably picked up this book because somewhere down the line a child of yours is going to come up to you, crumpled exercise book in hand, and ask some dread question such as, 'Dad, what is Pythagoras' Theorem?' or 'Mum, who was the fifth wife of Henry VIII?' or even, 'What does VIII mean?'

It may be that you are a student yourself and despite having the word 'learning' in the subtitle you have not been put off, so here you are reading this introduction. Well you *need* this book because, whether you like it or not, if you are going to get on in life, a few letters after your name along the lines of BA, MSc or PhD are going to make the world of difference. To acquire those letters you are going to need some other letters first, namely G, C, S and E. If you're lucky, there might be an AS or an A thrown into the mix a couple of years after that.

And there's always the possibility that you are a teacher yourself. In my experience, if you are going to be a good teacher you need to do your homework, just as much as your pupils do. If all the kerfuffle surrounding selling a house boils down to location, location, location, then for a lesson to be a success – any lesson in which you wish to impart your hard-won knowledge – then preparation, preparation, preparation is the key. Failing that, blag it. As long as you know more than your students on the day, you'll be okay. And that's where this handy little revision guide comes in.

This is not an exhaustive textbook; it couldn't hope to be. It's a prompt, to remind you of the important facts that you may have forgotten. If you want to know more than just the bare bones, I would suggest you then turn to an encyclopaedia or one of any number of helpful, considerably more detailed and longer textbooks on whatever subject it is you need to gen-up on most. However, hopefully by dipping your toes into the warm paddling pool that is *Match Wits With The Kids*, you will gain a better idea of what it is that you want to glean from the depthless oceans of knowledge.

So sit back, relax, and turn the page, because class is in session!

Jonathan Green
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Chapter One

ENGLISH

The Story of English

The English spoken today is not the same as that spoken 50 years ago, let alone 100 or 1,000 years ago, and it will continue to change throughout the 21st century. That is because it is a living spoken language by which millions of people all over the world, from widely varying cultures, communicate.

However, much of the English you will have learnt at school still applies, even if in some cases it is not with quite the same vigour or emphasis on grammatical correctness. Whether students of English realise it or not, others (notably examiners) will appreciate it if they use what is referred to as Standard English, in other words, the form of English as taught in schools in the good old days.

So, if you can't tell the difference between a preposition and a pronoun, if you've forgotten what a simile is, and if you've never understood how to use apostrophes correctly, have no fear; this chapter's¹ for you.

¹ Note that the apostrophe comes after the word 'chapter' but before the 's', denoting that in this case the apostrophe is standing in for a missing letter – the 'i' of 'is' – and hence represents a contraction and has nothing to do with possession, which is the other area in which the apostrophe is used. Got it?

Standard English and Received Pronunciation

These days **Standard English** effectively means formal English. It is considered to be that form of the English language used by educated speakers, people just like you and me. In other words, when you are using Standard English, whether spoken or written, you are not using slang, colloquialisms (informal expressions) or dialect.

English has become the second most widely used language in the world² and is the first language of over 300 million people across the globe. It is the second language of many millions more, to the extent where one in five people in the world speaks English to a competent degree or better. In fact, within the next few years there will be more people speaking English as a second language than there are native speakers of English. As a result, English is subject to alteration by non-native speakers, which will inevitably have a profound effect on the evolution of the language.

The main regional standards of English are British, US and Canadian, Australian and New Zealand, South African, Indian, and West Indian. Although each of these regional varieties houses a staggeringly wide array of differing local dialects, standardised English is continually being spread around the world by the media and the internet.

Received Pronunciation³ is a form of pronunciation of the English language which is still considered by many to be the correct way of delivering words in an accent that is also considered to be from the top echelons of British society.

² The most widely used language in the world is Chinese Mandarin.

³ Referred to as RP on an actor's CV, luvvie!

It is more often than not referred to as the Queen's English because it is spoken by the monarch. It is also sometimes called BBC English because for a long time it was used by the BBC, although things have changed dramatically in that area in the last decade or more. BBC presenters and staff are no longer restricted to using one type of accent, and many regional accents are now heard on the network.

The use of Received Pronunciation still carries with it a great deal of assumptions about the social and educational background of the person using it. If an individual uses Received Pronunciation, they will normally speak Standard English. Its common root is with the dialects of Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire, via a move to London 500 years ago.⁴

⁴ By the end of the 15th century, Standard English was established in the City of London.

Inevitably, a section on English grammar is going to regularly use expressions which themselves need explaining elsewhere, probably in the same section. As a result, while going through the next few pages you are going to need to be prepared to flick back and forth to check the definitions of anything you are not sure of. But then who ever said this was going to be easy?

Sentences, Clauses and Paragraphs

Sentences

A **sentence** is a set of words that make sense of a thought or idea and together convey a statement, a question, an exclamation or a command. These four categories of sentence are described as follows:

<i>Declarative</i> (statements)	The girl sulked.
<i>Interrogative</i> (questions)	Why are you sulking?
<i>Imperative</i> (commands)	Go and tidy your room.
<i>Exclamatory</i> (exclamations)	Stop sulking!

A sentence usually contains a **subject** and a **verb**. Consider the following sentence:

The cat sat on the mat.

The subject of the sentence is 'the cat', the verb is 'sat', and there is also a phrase in there 'on the mat', which tells us where the action took place. There are three types of sentence: simple, compound and complex.

Simple sentences are ones that give you one main piece of information.

I read the book. I understood everything. I finished my homework.

Compound sentences are made by combining simple sentences or clauses using conjunctions (and, but, or).

I read the book and understood everything. I finished my homework but forgot to hand it in the next day.

Complex sentences are ones that are made up of two or more clauses, one of which will be a subordinate clause.

I finished my homework and, despite reading the book and understanding everything, still forgot to hand it in the next day.

Clauses

A **clause** always has to contain a subject and a verb.

A **main clause** is one that makes sense by itself and so could be written as a simple sentence in its own right. An example of a main clause would be:

I was hungry.

However, a **subordinate clause** is one that does not make sense by itself; it needs a main clause to give it context and so clarify its meaning. The following is a subordinate clause:

because I overslept and missed breakfast

When you combine this subordinate clause with the main clause above, suddenly everything becomes clear.

I was hungry because I overslept and missed breakfast.

Subordinate clauses are introduced by either a subordinating conjunction (such as however, because, although), a relative

pronoun (such as who, whose, which, that), which turns it into a relative clause, or a non-finite verb.⁵ In this last case, the verb can be placed before or after the noun which allows you to move the subordinate clause around within the sentence, making for more interesting writing.

With a subordinating conjunction The soldier kept on fighting, **although** he knew the battle was lost.

With a relative pronoun The war, **which** was long and bloody, cost many lives.

With a non-finite verb **Consumed** by rage, the weary soldier fought on regardless.

In the last example above, we could place the subordinate clause in the middle of the sentence.

The weary soldier, **consumed by rage**, fought on regardless.

In this case, the subordinate clause has now become an embedded clause, because it has been placed in the middle of the main clause 'The weary soldier fought on regardless'.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are tools which help you to organise your writing. A paragraph is a group of sentences that are all connected to the same topic, although it is possible to have a paragraph made up of just one sentence. You should always start a new paragraph when somebody new starts speaking.



⁵ See the section entitled 'Parts of Speech' on page 11.

Parts of Speech

There are eight different **parts of speech**. These are **nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions** and **interjections**. A part of speech explains how a word is used, rather than what it is, whether it names something, describes something, or is just used to join clauses together. As a result, the same word can often be employed in a number of different ways – as a noun in one sentence, a verb in another or even as an adjective.

Nouns

These are naming words. Common nouns are things that you can see or touch, such as a book, a tree, a cat or a computer.

Proper nouns are the specific names of people, places or even certain objects. Wales, Nottingham, Mary and Tower Bridge are all examples of proper nouns.

Abstract nouns are the names given to intangible things such as thoughts, emotions, qualities and ideas. Examples of abstract nouns would be envy, love, truth and peace.

Collective nouns are those names that are given to groups of things, people or animals, such as crowd, flock or herd. There are some marvellous collective nouns for particular bunches⁶ of animals, from the classic murder of crows, to the fantastic crash of rhinoceroses and the downright strange smack of jellyfish.

⁶ 'Bunches' is a collective noun, as it happens, as is 'groups' in the first line of this paragraph.

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One of the recognised names for a group of baboons is a flange. This was first used in a comedy sketch show on television as a joke. However, since then the word, in reference to a 'flange of baboons', has migrated via the internet into academic usage.

Pronouns

A **pronoun** is a word which takes the place of a noun that has already been used in a sentence. Actual examples of pronouns are he, she, it, you, me and they. A possessive pronoun is used in place of a noun and demonstrates ownership at the same time. Examples of possessive pronouns are yours, mine, his, hers, its, ours and theirs. The use of pronouns stops your writing becoming repetitious.

<i>Without pronouns</i>	Samir finished the book and gave the book to Samir's teacher.
<i>With pronouns</i>	Samir finished the book and gave it to his teacher.

Verbs

If nouns are naming words, then **verbs** are doing words. Every verb will refer to some action or other. They are used with nouns and pronouns to make the most basic of sentences.

Main verbs (or **full verbs**) are the ones that, on the whole, you can put the word 'to' in front of to describe⁷ an action. To sing, to run, to eat, to sleep are all main verbs. When a verb has the word 'to' in front of it, it can also be referred to as the infinitive. The once-loathed split infinitive, as in 'to boldly go', is actually perfectly acceptable in English grammar.

⁷ To describe – that's a main verb for you right there!

Auxiliary verbs help the main verb, changing the emphasis of its meaning in some way. Should, would, could and might are all examples of auxiliary verbs. So, to use the main verbs listed above, we could say: we should sing, he would run, I could eat, she might sleep.

Primary verbs is the term given to those verbs which can either be used as main verbs or auxiliary verbs. They are be, have and do.

<i>As a main verb</i>	She is beautiful.
<i>As an auxiliary verb</i>	She is shopping.

Verbs can also be described as either finite or non-finite. The finite form of the verb changes depending on who it is referring to, how many things it is referring to, and the tense it is in.

<i>Affected by person</i>	I am /We are
<i>Affected by number</i>	He swims /They swim
<i>Affected by tense</i>	I dance well/I danced well

These contrasts are not shown by the non-finite form of a verb. There are three of them to remember.

The **present participle** is created when -ing is added to the verb. It is not affected by either person, number or tense.

<i>Person</i>	I am working late at the office, dear.
<i>Number</i>	But darling, we're all working late tonight.
<i>Tense</i>	He was working late at the office. Honestly.

The **past participle** is created by adding -ed to the end of the verb. Once again, it is not affected by person, number or tense.

<i>Person</i>	I painted the living room.
<i>Number</i>	They painted the whole house.
<i>Tense</i>	The cat was painted by accident.