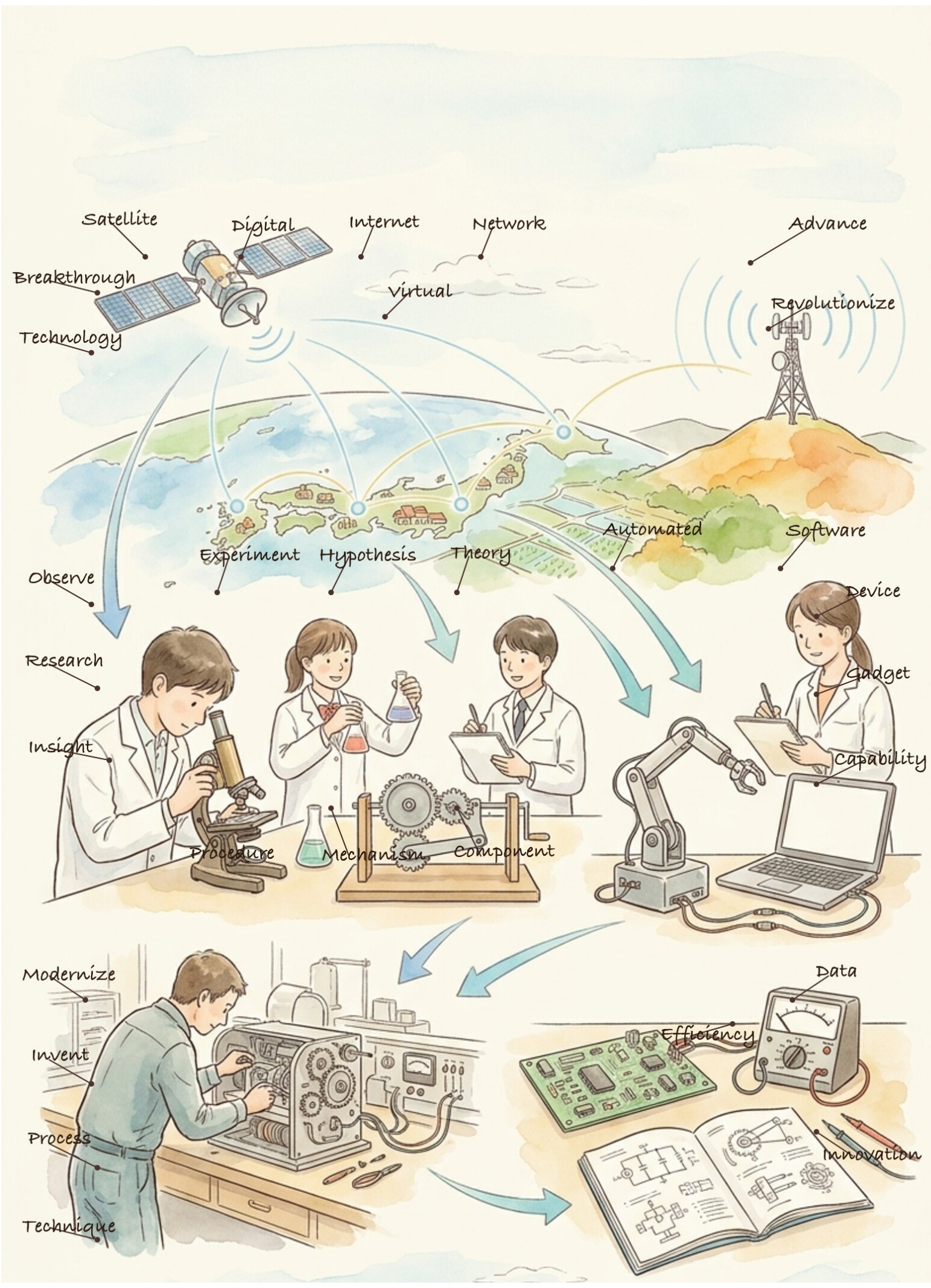




THE O/L ENGLISH GRADE LADDER



BOOK 3

Breaking the Cliff

The B grade, and why only one candidate in ten ever reaches it

Solid C (50) → High B (65 marks)

For the student scoring 50–58 who writes short sentences and stops there

G.C.E. (O/L) English Language · Subject 31

Idasara Academy



How to Use This Book

Read this page properly. Book 3 is different from the two before it, and going in with the wrong expectation is how students give up in week three.

What is different

Books 1 and 2 gave you **methods for finding marks**. Sort the box, hunt the fact, take the easy five first. The marks were on the paper and you learned where to look.

Book 3 gives you **methods for making marks**. Nobody has hidden the answer to Test 14 anywhere. You have to write a hundred words about a chart, and the examiner will judge what you built.

That is genuinely harder. It is also why so few people do it, and why doing it is worth so much.

The rhythm

Days 1 to 6: **fifteen to twenty minutes**. Day 7 is a **full timed paper — about three hours**. Weekend morning. Not a school night, not squeezed.

One promise and one warning

The promise: the chart question is not a talent. It is a shape, and the paper prints the vocabulary it wants underneath the chart. Most students never notice.

The warning: you will write badly on Day 6, and that is correct. Sentence combining feels clumsy before it feels natural — you are rebuilding how you join clauses, and rebuilding always looks worse before it looks better. Book 4 is where it pays.



Your Seven Days

- **Day 1** — The Cliff Decoded: the three rules that zero a good answer
- **Day 2** — The Verb Form Passage (Test 10) — 5 marks
- **Day 3** — The Question That Rotates (Test 12) — 5 marks
- **Day 4** — Reading a Chart (Test 14) — the words are given to you
- **Day 5** — Writing the Chart Description (Test 14) — 10 marks
- **Day 6** — Sentence Combining: the engine for Book 4
- **Day 7** — The Barrier Gate: a full paper



Day 1 — The Cliff Decoded

The emptiest band on the paper

The real national figures for the 2025 O/L English examination:

- A — 15.41 per cent
- B — **9.56 per cent**
- C — 21.65 per cent
- S — 26.94 per cent
- W — 26.43 per cent

Read the B line again. **Fewer candidates score a B than score an A.** The band that should be a gentle step between C and A is a hole.

That does not happen by chance. It happens because there is a cliff here, built from three rules in the marking scheme that almost no student is ever told.

The three rules that make the cliff

Rule 1 — The Zero-Content Trap. The official scheme says:

> If 0 (zero) mark is awarded to the content, do not award marks for language, organization and mechanics of writing.

Write beautiful English about the wrong thing and you score **zero**. Not a low mark. Zero.

Rule 2 — The word-count floor. Test 14 asks for about 100 words. Under 40, the scheme caps you at **4 out of 10**, whatever the quality.

Rule 3 — Content is bulleted, and the bullets are the marks. Look at any Test 14 question. Under each option the paper prints *"Include the following:"* and then a list. **Those bullets are the content mark.** Miss one and you lose part of it; miss all of them and Rule 1 destroys the question.

What this means for you

The cliff is not made of vocabulary. It is made of **structure and instruction-following**. That is very good news, because both can be learned in a week and vocabulary cannot.

READING · Four Marks and Nine Marks

Two students answered the same Test 14 chart question about reasons for being late to school.

Student A wrote: "The chart is about students late to school. Many students are late. Buses are the problem in our country. Students should wake up early and then they will not be late. Thank you."

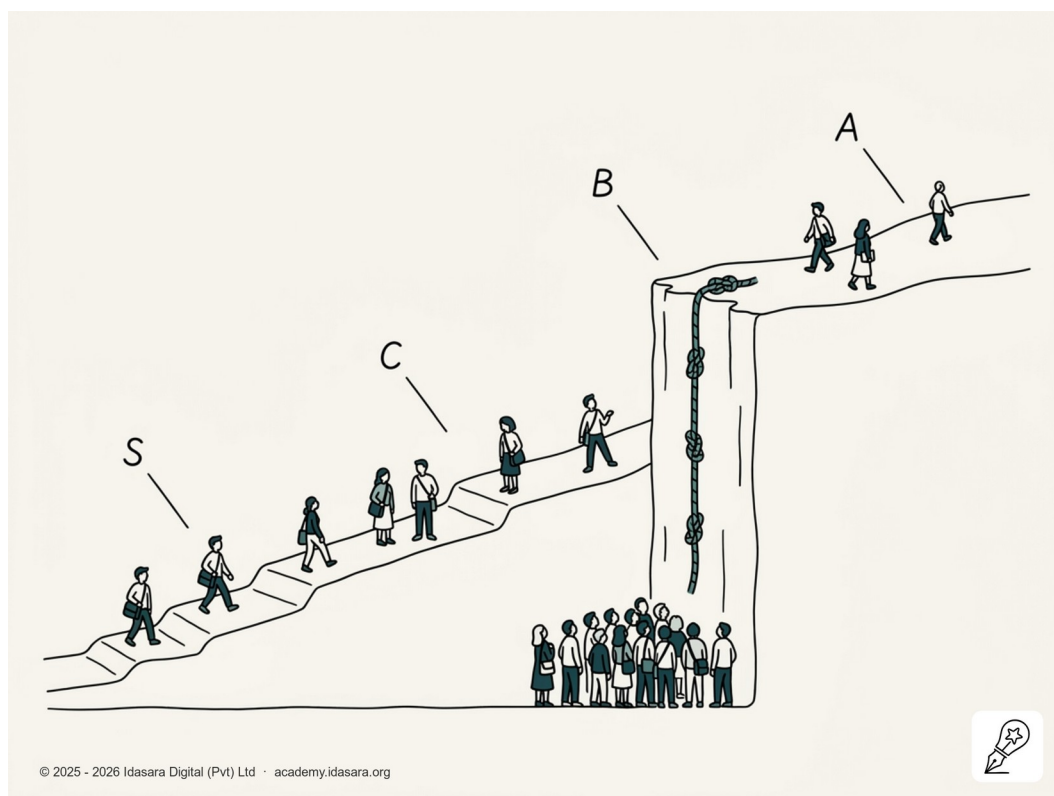
That is 38 words. Under the 40-word floor, so it is capped at 4. Worse, only one sentence refers to the chart at all — the rest is opinion the question never asked for. It scored **3 out of 10**.



Student B wrote 104 words. The first sentence said what the chart showed and how many students were surveyed. Then four sentences compared the bars, using the words the paper had printed underneath: *most* students blamed buses stuck in traffic, *many* said a family member was ill, *a few* mentioned oversleeping, and *less than* five gave no reason at all. The last sentence said which reason was the largest overall.

Student B's English was not better. There were two tense slips and a spelling mistake. But every sentence pointed at the chart, every figure was correct, and the words came from the box the paper supplied. It scored **9 out of 10**.

Six marks. Not six marks of English — six marks of doing what the question asked.



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WRITING ACTIVITY · Find the Bullets

Open the 2023, 2024 and 2025 papers at Test 14. Do not write an answer.

For each year, copy out **both options** — the letter and the chart — and underneath each, list the bullets or helper words the paper gives you.

You will find:

- Option **(a)**, the letter, always has "Include the following:" and three or four bullets.
- Option **(b)**, the chart, always has "The following words will help you:" and a list of comparison words.

Now write one sentence: "The paper tells me what to include in out of options, every year."

Most students have sat three mock papers without ever noticing this.



PAST-PAPER DRILL · Count the Cliff · 5 minutes

Take your last Test 14 and Test 16 answers, from any mock or term test.

Count three things for each:

1. **How many words?**
2. **How many of the paper's bullets or helper words did you actually use?**
3. **Did you write anything the question did not ask for?**

Write the three numbers down. For most students at 50–58 marks, number 2 is the one that explains the grade.



Day 2 — The Verb Form Passage

Test 10 · 5 marks · today you win 4

What Test 10 actually is

Test 10 gives you a short passage — a letter, a holiday account, a piece about honesty — with five verbs in brackets. You write the **correct form** of each.

It is not a grammar-rules question. It is a **tense-consistency** question: the passage has already chosen a time, and your job is to stay in it.

Find the time first

Before you fill a single blank, read the first two sentences and decide: **is this passage in the past, the present, or a mixture?**

- "*Last weekend, I went on a trip with my family. We visited a place called the National Park...*" → **past**. Almost every blank will be past.
- "*Telling the truth (be) one of the most important values that we should uphold...*" → **present**. Almost every blank will be present.

Deciding the time first solves three of the five blanks before you think about grammar at all.

The five forms you actually need

- **Past simple** — *went, visited, packed, saw*
- **Present simple** — *is, makes, helps* (add **-s** for he/she/it)
- **Present continuous** — *is going, are waiting*
- **Present perfect** — *has finished, have seen*
- **Past continuous** — *was walking, were sitting*

The commonest single error is forgetting the **-s** on he/she/it in a present-tense passage. *It make our relationships stronger* → *It makes our relationships stronger*.

READING · Last Weekend

Read this and notice how every verb agrees with the time set in the first line.

Last weekend I went on a trip with my family. We visited a national park that was full of tall trees and birds.

The weather was sunny and perfect for sightseeing. We packed our lunch and left the house before six o'clock. My father drove, and my sister slept for most of the journey.

When we arrived, a guide met us at the gate. He explained the rules and warned us not to feed the animals. We walked along a narrow path for almost an hour before we saw our first elephant.



It was standing beside a small tank, drinking quietly. Nobody spoke. My mother took a photograph, and then we moved on.

We reached home late in the evening. Everybody was tired, but nobody complained. It had been a good day.

Every single verb is past. *Went, visited, was, packed, left, drove, slept, arrived, met, explained, warned, walked, saw, was standing, spoke, took, moved, reached, was, complained, had been.* The passage chose its time in the first four words, and never moved.



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WRITING ACTIVITY · Set the Time, Then Fill

Copy this passage and fill each blank with the correct form of the verb in brackets. **First write at the top: PAST or PRESENT.**

Honesty (1) (be) one of the most important values in life. It (2) (make) our friendships stronger. When we (3) (tell) the truth, people (4) (trust) us and (5) (come) to us for help.

Now do the same for this one, deciding the time first:

Yesterday my brother (1) (walk) to the market. He (2) (buy) vegetables and (3) (carry) them home. When he (4) (reach) the gate, it (5) (start) to rain.

Then write one sentence: "In passage one the time is In passage two it is"



PAST-PAPER DRILL · 2024 and 2025 Paper II, Test 10 · Target 4 / 5 each

Set a timer for 6 minutes per paper.

Order of work:

1. Read the first two sentences and write PAST or PRESENT at the top.
2. Fill every blank in that time.
3. Check the he/she/it blanks for the missing **-s**.

Never leave a blank. A wrong form still shows the examiner you knew the structure.



Day 3 — The Question That Rotates

Test 12 · 5 marks · today you win 4

The one question you cannot predict

Test 12 changes shape every year. Look at what it has actually been:

- **2023 — reported speech.** *"Yesterday my brother told me that he had lost his job."*
- **2024 — conditionals.** *"If you jog every morning, you will lose weight."*
- **2025 — the passive.** *"The new bridge is being built right now, so the road is closed."*

Three years, three different structures, always 5 marks, always underline-the-correct-option.

Because you cannot know which one you will get, you must **prepare all three**. That is today's work, and it is why this day is the densest in the book.

Structure 1 — Reported speech

When you report what somebody said, the verb steps **one tense back** and the time words change.

- *"I lost my job," he said* → He said that he **had lost** his job.
- *"I am tired," she said* → She said that she **was** tired.
- *"I will come tomorrow"* → He said he **would** come **the next day**.
- Questions lose their question order: *"Where do you live?"* → He asked where I **lived**.

Structure 2 — Conditionals

Three patterns. Learn the shape, not the name.

- **Type 1 — real, future.** *If you jog, you will lose weight.* (present → will)
- **Type 2 — unreal, now.** *If I had time, I would go with you.* (past → would)
- **Type 3 — unreal, past.** *If you had practised, you would have delivered it well.* (had + past participle → would have)

The commonest error is mixing them: *If I would have time...* is always wrong.

Structure 3 — The passive

Use it when the thing matters more than who did it.

- *Villagers built the tank* → *The tank was built by villagers.*
- *They are building the bridge* → *The bridge is being built.*
- *Someone has stolen my bag* → *My bag has been stolen.*

Formula: **the right form of *be* + the past participle.**

**READING · Three Structures in One Story**

Read this. Every bold phrase is one of the three structures Test 12 tests.

The old bridge in our village **was built** more than fifty years ago. For many years it **was neglected**, and by 2019 the planks **had been broken** in several places.

The village committee met in March. The secretary said that the bridge **had become** dangerous, and he asked what **could be done** about it. One member replied that if the committee **collected** a small sum from each household, the repairs **could be** finished before the monsoon.

Everyone agreed. If they **had waited** another year, the bridge **would have collapsed** completely.

The work **was started** in May. Timber **was bought** from a mill in the town, and volunteers **were organised** into two groups. The new planks **were fitted** in eleven days.

The president later told the newspaper that the village **had done** the work itself, and that nobody **had been paid**.

Count them: eight passives, three reported statements, two conditionals. Test 12 will ask you for one of these three — but it will not tell you which until you open the paper.



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WRITING ACTIVITY · All Three, Five Each

Reported speech — report these five:

1. "I am going to Colombo," she said.
2. "We finished the work yesterday," they said.



3. "Where is the library?" he asked.
4. "I will help you tomorrow," my brother said.
5. "The bus has already left," the conductor said.

Conditionals — complete these five:

6. If you study every evening, ...
7. If I had a bicycle, ...
8. If the rain had stopped earlier, ...
9. Unless we leave now, ...
10. If she practises daily, ...

Passive — rewrite these five:

11. The villagers cleaned the tank.
12. Somebody has taken my umbrella.
13. They are repairing the road.
14. A king built this temple.
15. The teacher will mark the papers.

Then write at the bottom which of the three you found hardest. That is the one to redo tomorrow.

PAST-PAPER DRILL · 2023, 2024 and 2025 Paper II, Test 12 · Target 4 / 5 each

Set a timer for 5 minutes per year — fifteen minutes in total.

You are deliberately doing three different structures in one sitting, because that is what preparing for a rotating question means.

Before each item, name the structure to yourself: *reported?* *conditional?* *passive?* Naming it first prevents the commonest error, which is applying the right change to the wrong pattern.



Day 4 — Reading a Chart

Test 14 · 10 marks · today you learn to read it; tomorrow you write it

Choose the chart

Test 14 offers exactly two options every year: a **letter** or similar functional writing, or a **chart to describe**.

Take the chart. Both options give you bullets, so both tell you what to include — but the letter asks you to invent details, manage a greeting and a closing, and get the tone right for a person you made up. Every one of those is a place to lose marks.

The chart asks you to say what the numbers already say. Nothing is invented.

The thing almost nobody notices

Under every chart question, the paper prints a line like this:

> *The following words and phrases will help you:* > many, some, a few, most, more than, less than

Those are the real words from the real papers:

- **2023:** *many, some, a few, most, more than, less than*
- **2024:** *most, many, more than, equal, less than, least*
- **2025:** *lower, higher, youngest, oldest*

The examiner is telling you which words earn marks. Use them. Use as many as you can. A description built from the printed words scores better than one built from words you thought sounded impressive.

How to read the chart before you write

Four things, in this order, written in the margin:

1. **What is it about?** Read the title and the sentence above it.
2. **How many people?** There is nearly always a number — *120 students, 100 Grade 11 students*.
3. **Which bar is highest? Which is lowest?** Mark them H and L.
4. **Any two that are close or equal?** Mark them. That is where *more than, less than* and *equal* earn their marks.

Four notes. Ninety seconds. Now you can write.

READING · Reading Three Charts

Here are the three charts the examiners actually used, described in words.

2023. A bar chart from a Vice Principal's survey on why Grade 11 students were late to school. The bars were excuses: buses stuck in traffic, a family member falling ill, oversleeping, and so on. The tallest bar was the buses. The helper words were *many, some, a few, most, more than, less than*.



2024. A pie chart showing the future plans of 100 Grade 11 students at a college in Kalutara. The slices were plans: further studies, employment, vocational training, and others. The helper words were *most*, *many*, *more than*, *equal*, *less than*, *least* – and note the word *equal*, which tells you two slices were the same size.

2025. A bar chart showing how children under five in Sri Lanka consume foods rich in vitamin A and iron, grouped by age in months. The helper words were *lower*, *higher*, *youngest*, *oldest* – which tells you the comparison the examiner wants is between age groups, not between foods.

Read those helper words again. In every year they describe **exactly the comparison the examiner is looking for**. In 2024 the word *equal* is a clue that two slices match. In 2025 *youngest* and *oldest* tell you to compare the ends.

The helper words are not vocabulary support. They are instructions.



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WRITING ACTIVITY · Read Four Charts in the Margin

Open the 2023, 2024 and 2025 papers at Test 14, option (b). Write no description yet.

For each chart, write these four notes in the margin:

1. Topic –
2. How many people –
3. Highest / Lowest –
4. Any two close or equal –



Then copy out the helper words for each year and, beside each word, write **which two things it would compare** in that chart.

Example, 2024: *equal* → *vocational training and employment, both 20 per cent.*

Finally invent a small chart of your own — ask five people at home a question with four possible answers — and write the same four notes about it.

PAST-PAPER DRILL · Chart Notes Under Time · 6 minutes

Take the 2025 Test 14 chart. Set a timer for **90 seconds** and make the four margin notes.

Then set it again for 90 seconds on the 2023 chart. Then the 2024 one.

Three charts, four notes each, four and a half minutes. Tomorrow you turn those notes into a hundred words.



Day 5 — Writing the Chart Description

Test 14 · 10 marks · today you win 7

How the examiner marks this

Test 14 is marked out of 10 in four parts. Knowing the split changes how you write.

- **Content — 3 marks.** Did you report the data accurately? Are the key figures there?
- **Language — 3 marks.** Are your sentences complete and mostly correct?
- **Organisation — 2 marks.** Beginning, middle and end?
- **Mechanics — 2 marks.** Capitals, full stops, spelling.

The five-sentence shape

1. **What the chart shows.** *The chart shows the reasons given by 120 Grade 11 students for being late to school.*
2. **The highest.** *Most students said that buses were stuck in traffic.*
3. **The middle, with comparisons.** *Many blamed a family member falling ill, while some mentioned oversleeping.*
4. **The lowest.** *A few gave no reason at all, and less than five said the alarm had failed.*
5. **The overall point.** *Overall, traffic was by far the largest single cause.*

About 100 words. Every sentence points at the chart. Every helper word used.

The two rules that protect you

Rule 1 — every number you quote must be correct. A wrong figure costs content marks. Check each against the chart before moving on. This is worth more than any clever sentence.

Rule 2 — never explain why. Do not write *"because students are careless"* or *"the government should fix the buses."* That is not in the chart, the examiner is not asking, and invented content is how a good answer drifts off topic and loses the content mark.

READING · Two Descriptions

Both students described the 2023 chart on reasons for being late.

Answer A. "In this chart we can see about students. Many students are late for school. The bus service in our country is very bad and the government must do something about it. Also students are using phones at night so they cannot wake up early. Students should sleep early."

That is 55 words. Only one sentence refers to the chart. Two invent reasons the chart never gave, and one gives advice nobody asked for. Not a single figure appears. It scored **3 out of 10**.

Answer B. "The bar chart shows the excuses given by 120 Grade 11 students for arriving late to school. Most of the students, twelve in all, said that buses were stuck in traffic. Many others, eight students,



PAST-PAPER DRILL · 2025 Paper II, Test 14 · Target 7 / 10

Set a timer for **20 minutes: 3 minutes on the margin notes, 14 writing, 3 checking.**

Your three-minute check, in this order:

1. Count the words. Over 100?
2. Check every number against the chart.
3. Count the helper words you used. Fewer than four — add a comparison.
4. Have you explained *why* anything happened? Cross it out.

That check is worth more marks than any extra sentence you could write instead.



Day 6 — Sentence Combining

No marks today. Every mark in Book 4.

Why your writing sounds young

Read this: *"Plastic is bad. It blocks the drains. Then floods happen. This is a problem."*

Every sentence is correct. Nothing is misspelled. And it will score 1 or 2 out of 5 for Language, because the examiner is looking for **connected** sentences and these are four separate small ones.

Now read this: *"Because plastic blocks the drains, heavy rain quickly causes floods, which damage homes in low-lying areas."*

Same ideas. One sentence. That is the difference between a C and a B on every writing question.

You do not need grammar names

You will not learn what a subordinate clause is called. You will learn **eight joining words** and fuse sentences with them until it is automatic.

- **because** • **although** • **while** • **since** — a reason or a contrast
- **which** • **who** • **that** — extra information about a thing or a person
- **so that** — a purpose

How combining works

Take two small sentences. Delete the repeated part. Join with the right word.

- *The bus was late. The students missed the assembly.*

→ **Because** the bus was late, the students missed the assembly.

- *Our village has a tank. It was built by a king.*

→ Our village has a tank **which** was built by a king.

- *The rain was heavy. We finished the work.*

→ **Although** the rain was heavy, we finished the work.

READING • One Idea, Three Ways

Watch the same content grow up.

Child version. The rain came. The canal filled. The road was flooded. Students stayed home. The teacher was worried. The exam was near.

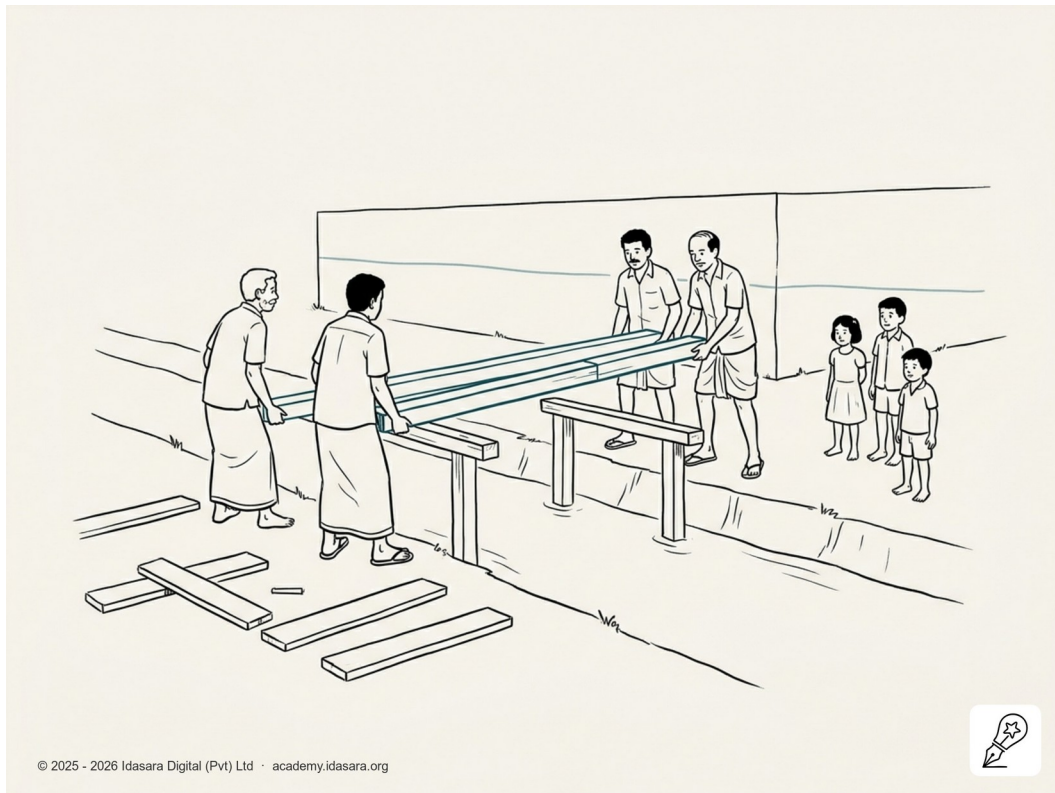
Better version. When the rain came, the canal filled quickly and the road was flooded. Students stayed at home, and the teacher was worried because the exam was near.



B-grade version. When the heavy rain came last week, the canal filled so quickly that the road was flooded and many students, who live on the far side of the village, were unable to reach school. The teacher was particularly worried because the term examination was only days away.

Notice what did **not** change: no difficult vocabulary was added. *Rain, canal, road, flooded, students, teacher, examination* — every important word is the same. What changed is how the pieces are joined.

That is the entire skill. You already have the words.



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WRITING ACTIVITY · Twelve Combinations

Six pairs below. Combine each into **one** sentence. Then do each pair a **second** time with a different joining word — twelve sentences in all.

1. The tank was cleaned. The harvest improved.
2. My brother works in Colombo. He sends money home.
3. The school has no library. Students cannot borrow books.
4. She studied every evening. She passed the examination.
5. The bus fare increased. Many parents complained.
6. Our village is small. Everybody knows each other.

Use each of these at least once: **because · although · which · who · while · so that**

Then read all twelve aloud. If one sounds wrong when spoken, it usually is — rewrite it.



PAST-PAPER DRILL · Rewrite a Description · 6 minutes

Take the chart description you wrote on Day 5.

Rewrite it, combining every pair of short sentences you can find. Keep every figure exactly as it was.

Count before and after. Target: **half as many sentences, the same number of facts.**

That ratio is what the Language criterion measures — and in Book 4 it is what turns a 3 into a 5.



Day 7 — The Barrier Gate

A complete paper. Paper I and Paper II. About three hours.

This is the first time you sit the whole thing under real conditions, and it is the most valuable session in this series. Everything before now has been practice on parts. Today is the machine assembled.

What to do

Take the **2024 paper**, both parts:

- **Paper I — 1 hour — 40 marks**
- Break — 10 minutes
- **Paper II — 2 hours — 60 marks**

Phone off and in another room. No notes, no dictionary. Someone else keeps the time if possible.

Your target

NOTE · The gate you must clear

Score **65 out of 100** on the full paper.

This is a genuine B, measured exactly as the Department of Examinations measures it. No projection, no partial mock — the real thing.

Pacing on Paper II — where the marks are lost

Most students who fail this gate do not fail on English. They run out of time and leave Test 16 half-written, and the floor caps them.

Hold to this, strictly:

- **Tests 9 to 13 — 27 marks — 35 minutes**
- **Test 14 — 10 marks — 25 minutes**
- **Test 15 — 8 marks — 25 minutes**
- **Test 16 — 15 marks — 30 minutes**
- **Check — 5 minutes**

If you reach 1 hour 30 and have not started Test 16, **stop whatever you are doing and start it.** Fifteen marks written badly beats fifteen marks not written.

If you cleared 65

You are in the top ten per cent of English candidates in the country. Sit with that, because it is true and nobody will tell you.



Then go to **Book 4 — The Distinction Crown**. From here the A is not about learning more. It is about stopping the small losses.

If you did not clear 65

Look only at Test 14 and Test 16.

- **Test 14 under 6?** Redo Day 5. Nine times out of ten the cause is invented content, not weak English — reread Answer A and Answer B and mark A yourself.
 - **Test 16 under 8?** That is Book 4's work and you have not been taught it yet. Do not panic at a low score on a question this book did not cover.
 - **Everything reasonable but nothing strong?** You are close. Sit the gate again with the 2023 paper in a week. Most students clear it on the second attempt.
-



Your Next 150 Words

Chart and comparison words — straight from the papers

most · many · some · a few · more than · less than · least · equal · higher · lower · youngest · oldest · majority · minority · by far · overall · according to · shows · displays · represents

Joining words — the engine

because · although · while · since · which · who · that · so that · whereas · however · therefore · furthermore · as a result

Verb-form words

went · visited · packed · reached · explained · warned · noticed · agreed · organised · fitted · collected · finished · started · bought

Passive forms

was built · was neglected · had been broken · is being built · has been stolen · were organised · were fitted · could be done · had been paid

Reported-speech words

said that · told me that · asked where · asked whether · had lost · had become · would come · the next day · the previous day

Conditional words

if · unless · will · would · would have · had



What Comes Next

You have done the hard one. Everything after this is refinement.

Book 4 — The Distinction Crown is the last, and it is the least about learning English. At this level marks are not gained by knowing more — they are gained by **stopping the small losses**: a careless slip on Paper I, a missing conclusion, a tense that drifts, ten minutes lost to bad pacing.

One thing Book 4 will tell you may surprise you, so hear it now: **do not try to use bigger words**. At this stage that lowers your marks rather than raising them. The A band rewards a student who writes accurately, not one who writes impressively.

Take a day off. You have earned it more than after any other book in this series.

THE O/L ENGLISH GRADE LADDER

Breaking the Cliff

Something strange happens to Sri Lankan students at fifty marks. They arrive, and then they stop.

Nationally, 21.65 per cent of candidates score a C. Only 9.56 per cent score a B — fewer than score an A above it. The B band is the emptiest pass band on the paper, and that is not an accident.

It happens because everything up to fifty can be collected by matching, choosing and sorting. Above fifty the marks have to be made. Test 14 and Test 16 are worth twenty-five marks between them, and both demand connected English of your own.

That is the cliff. This book is the way up it — and it turns out the paper gives you more help than anyone told you. On the chart question it prints the very words it wants you to use.

Book 3 of four. Next — The Distinction Crown, where accuracy replaces ambition.



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