



National
Qualifications
2016

X724/76/11

**English
Reading for Understanding,
Analysis and Evaluation — Text**

THURSDAY, 5 MAY
9:00 AM – 10:30 AM

Total marks — 30

Read the passages carefully and then attempt ALL questions, which are printed on a separate sheet.



* X 7 2 4 7 6 1 1 *

The following two passages consider whether or not 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote.

Passage 1

Read the passage below and then attempt questions 1 to 7.

In the first passage, Catherine Bennett puts forward the case for allowing 16-year-olds to vote.

Rude, impulsive, sulky . . . still, let our 16-year-olds vote.

5 There are hugely important questions to address before 16-year-olds can be invited into the complicated UK electoral process. Are they sufficiently mature? Can they tell one party from another? Are they too preoccupied by a combination of exams and hectic social lives to be bothered? Even worrying about their appearance has been cited as a reason why under-18s might struggle to give adequate thought to the political and economic issues facing Britain today.

10 There was a long period, between being sixteen myself and then, decades later, getting to know some present-day teenagers, including the one in my own house, when I would have agreed with champions of the status quo. I presumed — without knowing any — that these 16-year-olds were as clueless as my younger self, but with an increased obsession with their peer group, a result of unpatrolled access to social media, greater affluence, and being subject to a constant barrage of entertainment.

15 If these factors were not enough to guarantee extreme teen disengagement with the political process, scientists have supplied biological reasons to question the efficiency of teenagers' smartphone-fixated brains. The last time there was a significant move to reduce the voting age, the biologist Richard Dawkins set out the potential risks posed by the undeveloped teenage brain to our current epistocracy. An epistocracy — as of course all older voters will know — is government by wise people, that is, those with fully developed grey matter. In the article, Dawkins cited evidence from neuroscientists that “the brain undergoes major reconstruction from the onset of puberty which continues until 20 or beyond”. Crucial, if I understand them correctly, is the importance of this continuing development to the frontal lobes. This is the area at the front of the brain which “enables us to think in the abstract, weigh moral dilemmas and control our impulses”. It was not even clear, the author said, that teenagers are developed enough to “be making life-changing decisions for themselves”.

25 If we simply accept this argument, what does it mean in practice? It means that a grown-up who believes in wizardry or unicorns or vampires can become a Member of Parliament, but a school pupil the age of, say, Malala Yousafzai, has yet to acquire the intellectual credentials to vote. Malala had been the victim of a terrorist attack in Pakistan as a result of her blog advocating education for girls, had recovered and continued to campaign tirelessly for equal educational opportunities for all children. This led to her becoming, in 2014, at the age of seventeen, the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

30 Of course, it would be naïve to suggest that all teenagers can be as accomplished as Malala. However, there is, in fact, considerable evidence that the “unfinished” brain can be pretty good at sport, music, creating computer software and raising thousands of pounds for charity. True, 16-year-olds can be rude, sulky, reckless and unreliable. But the adult world is scarcely exempt from these characteristics. Perhaps — as politicians must hope — most teenagers know too little about politics to make self-congratulatory comparisons between themselves and the at times limited brain power on show during parliamentary debates. The evidence of their own eyes confirms that, when considering normal behaviour, 16-year-olds barely compete in terms of incivility, tantrums, profanity, impulsivity, prejudice, time-wasting and an unedifying dependency on tabloid websites, when compared to millions of fully enfranchised grown-ups. If law-makers ever think of restricting voting by the inadequately brained, illiterate, non-taxpaying or ignorant, the consequences for some adults would be chilling.

Indeed, recent research suggests that those who have been emphasising the negative effects of social media and modern technology on the developing brain may have got it all wrong. Sixteen and seventeen-year-olds are part of the iGeneration, the first generation who have grown up with the digital innovations of the 21st century. They are flexible enough mentally to develop their political worldview from the wide range of sources to be found on the Internet, too media aware to be taken in by spin doctors and manipulative politicians.

Our teenagers do have their flaws. No, they don't always evince much money sense, although they do, as consumers, pay sales tax. Yes, if voting booths were bedrooms they would probably leave wet towels all over them. But having now witnessed some of the more loveable teenage qualities — idealism, energy, a sense of injustice, open-mindedness — these seem to be exactly the ones of which modern politics is starved. Even a limited turnout by young voters, minus all the ones who are supposedly too apathetic or too busy insulting police officers or attending Ibiza-themed foam parties, might inject some life into the next election.

Naturally, engaged teenagers would want answers on stuff that directly affects them such as unpaid internships, exams, student debt, the minimum wage, benefits and perhaps any military engagements in which they might be invited to serve. However, it might lead to a fresh look at policies that affect future generations, by voters who will actually be around to experience the consequences. If voting has to be rationed, maybe it should be elderly citizens — who may not see the impact of, say, political inaction on climate change or carelessness about fuel sustainability — who should give way to 16-year-olds.

We could compromise: make it seventeen. Then 16-year-olds would only have a year to wait — after they have already married, donated an organ, bought fireworks, and signed up to fight for their country — before they would be allowed to choose, alone in an exposed voting booth, between competing political visions. Judging by the current resistance of adults who believe they know so much better, you'd think we were doing our young people a great big favour.

Passage 2

Read the passage below and attempt question 8. While reading, you may wish to make notes on the main ideas and/or highlight key points in the passage.

In the second passage, Julia Hartley-Brewer puts forward her arguments for not allowing 16-year-olds to vote.

Letting 16-year-olds vote would be a disaster.

I have decided that it is only right and fair that my 8-year-old daughter should be allowed to vote. She knows her politics and can name the party leaders on sight, which is more than can be said for a large proportion of voters — and she pays tax. Every time she saves up her pocket money to buy a new toy or game, it comes with a price tag that includes a hefty 20 per cent of VAT. On all these grounds, she has just as much of a claim to have her say about Britain's future as do the 16 and 17-year-olds of this country. And yet no one is demanding that she is given the vote because, well, she's an 8-year-old. She's a child; she doesn't have the intellectual and emotional development of an adult so she doesn't get to have the rights of adults.

So why is it that so many people — including prominent politicians — believe that we should be giving 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote? The call for the voting age to be lowered to sixteen is as absurd an idea as you'll hear.

Yes, 16 and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote in the Scottish referendum. And what did they achieve? The turn-out for that tiny age group was a lot higher than among most other younger voters (largely, it is thought, because they were encouraged to turn out to vote by their parents)
15 but it did not enthuse the 18 to 20 age bracket, which as per usual largely didn't bother at all. Wouldn't our democracy be better served if we spent more time, effort and resources on engaging the people who already have the right to vote, rather than just adding on a few million voters who will never vote again after their first trip to the polling station?

Ah, but that's not the point, the protagonists claim. We should allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote
20 because they are legally allowed to do other, far more important, life-changing or life-risking things than put a cross on a ballot paper, so why not let them vote as well? And that would be a really good argument, if it were true. Because, in actual fact, we don't allow our 16 and 17-year-olds to do very much. They can't legally drink alcohol or smoke, for starters. We don't trust them to be sensible with a pint of lager so why trust them with a stubby pencil in a polling booth?

Okay, but they can get a job and pay income tax and that's not fair if they don't have a say in the
25 government that sets those taxes, right? But income tax isn't the only tax we pay so why should that be the crucial decider? We all pay VAT on many of the goods we purchase from a very young age so, on that argument, my 8-year-old should be eligible to vote too.

Allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote would be a disaster. Voting is, after all, not a privilege like
30 receiving pocket money or being permitted to stay out past your usual curfew on a Saturday night. It's a right. And a hard-won right at that.

When politicians say they want 16 and 17-year-olds to vote, what they really mean is that they
35 want 16 and 17-year-olds to vote for them. This is not about empowering young people or shifting the focus of debate to issues more relevant to 16 and 17-year-olds. Mainstream politics will continue to focus on issues important to adults, such as the economy and the state of the health service. It is simply calculated electioneering on the part of cynical politicians to retain power.

Don't believe the nonsense being spouted in the name of democracy. There is absolutely nothing wrong with making people wait until they are eighteen to vote.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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