



Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing

THINKING SKILLS ASSESSMENT (TSA) TEST SPECIFICATION

2018

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Introduction

Applicants for certain university courses have studied a wide range of subjects and come from different backgrounds. To assess their suitability for their chosen courses, the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford and University College London ask students, as part of the overall application process, to take the Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA).

TSA is an assessment of two kinds of thinking:

Problem Solving - reasoning using numerical and spatial skills.

Many of the problems encountered in academic and professional work are novel. No ready 'off-the-peg solution' is available. The task is to find or create a solution.

Critical Thinking - reasoning using everyday written language.

The skill of Critical Thinking is essential for many areas of academic study and often involves considering an argument put forward to promote or defend a particular point of view. Historians put forward arguments to explain and interpret past events, while scientists use argument to evaluate evidence from their experiments. Whatever the subject of study, it is necessary to understand the arguments presented by others and to be able to assess whether the arguments establish their claims.

These are both skills which are considered to be important in higher education.

Overview of the test

Both Problem Solving and Critical Thinking are assessed by multiple-choice questions. In each case a stimulus is presented, followed by the stem (question) and five options. One of the options is the correct answer (key) and the remaining four options (distractors) are wrong.

In the case of the Critical Thinking questions, the stimulus is a passage of text. In Problem Solving, the stimulus may include a diagram, a table of information (a railway timetable for example), or a graph. The options may also be graphs or diagrams.

Assessment

The TSA test consists of 50 multiple-choice questions to be taken in the time allowed of 90 minutes. Marks are not deducted for incorrect answers, so candidates are asked to attempt all questions. The questions vary in difficulty with a few being very easy and a few being very hard.

The standard TSA contains 25 Problem Solving questions and 25 Critical Thinking questions. Tests are delivered in pencil and paper or computer-based format. Candidates taking a pencil and paper TSA test answer on a separate answer sheet; a soft pencil (HB or softer) and a good eraser are needed.

The questions are presented roughly in order of difficulty, with the different types of Problem Solving and Critical Thinking questions interspersed throughout the test, so that candidates who do not finish in the time allowed will have been exposed to a fair balance of the different styles of question.

TSA Oxford, the version of the test used for admission to the University of Oxford, includes an additional 30-minute writing task, for which candidates must answer one from a choice of four prompts.

Calculators and dictionaries are **NOT** permitted.

Problem Solving

There are three kinds of Problem Solving question in the test, each assessing a key aspect of insight into unfamiliar problems. The three kinds are Relevant Selection, Finding Procedures, and Identifying Similarity. Although most questions fall into one category, some questions fit into one or more of the categories.

The following examples show the three kinds of questions you will find in this section.

Example 1: Relevant Selection

Often a real-world problem will be overloaded with information, much of which is unimportant. The first step in solving the problem is to decide which bits of the information available are important. It may be that the question has presented you with information which is not important, perhaps redundant, and possibly distracting. This kind of question demands Relevant Selection, in which the task is to select only that information which is necessary and helpful in finding a solution and applying it.

In order to qualify for a bonus, employees must fulfil certain criteria:

£1,000 bonus:	Absences less than 5%
	Production targets exceeded by at least 10%
	Rejects are less than 5% of output
£500 bonus:	Absences less than 10%

Answer and explanation

The answer is **D**. Since the question asks only whether any bonus is achieved, the easier criterion can be used (that for the £500 bonus).

On the first criterion (absences less than 10%) all but Jones qualify: S P O M

On the second criterion (production targets met) all but McKay qualify: S J P O

On the third criterion (rejects less than 8%) all qualify: S J P O M

So only S P and O fulfil all three: **D**

A Checks against the higher targets, no one reaches all the criteria.

B Checks against the higher targets, but thinks Smith reaches the first and second when he is only on the border which is not successful.

C Fails to count O as his production was just on target.

E Thinks J qualifies although his absences are exactly 10%, not below.

Example 2: Finding Procedures

Sometimes you will find that even if you have selected all of the relevant information, no solution presents itself. You then have to find a method or procedure which you can use to generate a solution. Typically you will have three or four numbers which have to be operated on. This aspect of Problem Solving is called Finding Procedures.

Three thermometers are each accurate to within 2 degrees above or below the temperature they actually read. One reads 7° , one reads 9° and one reads 10° .

What is the minimum range in which the true temperature lies?

A $5^\circ - 12^\circ$

B $7^\circ - 9^\circ$

C $8^\circ - 10^\circ$

D $8^\circ - 9^\circ$

E $7^\circ - 10^\circ$

Answer and explanation

The answer is **D**. The method here is to search for the acceptable highest and lowest temperatures for the conditions to be met, realising that the middle value is irrelevant. As one reads 7° , the temperature cannot be above 9° and, as another reads 10° , the temperature cannot be below 8° . This is given by **D**.

A This is obtained by subtracting 2 from the lowest and adding 2 to the highest.

B Takes the lowest reading and goes to 2 above it.

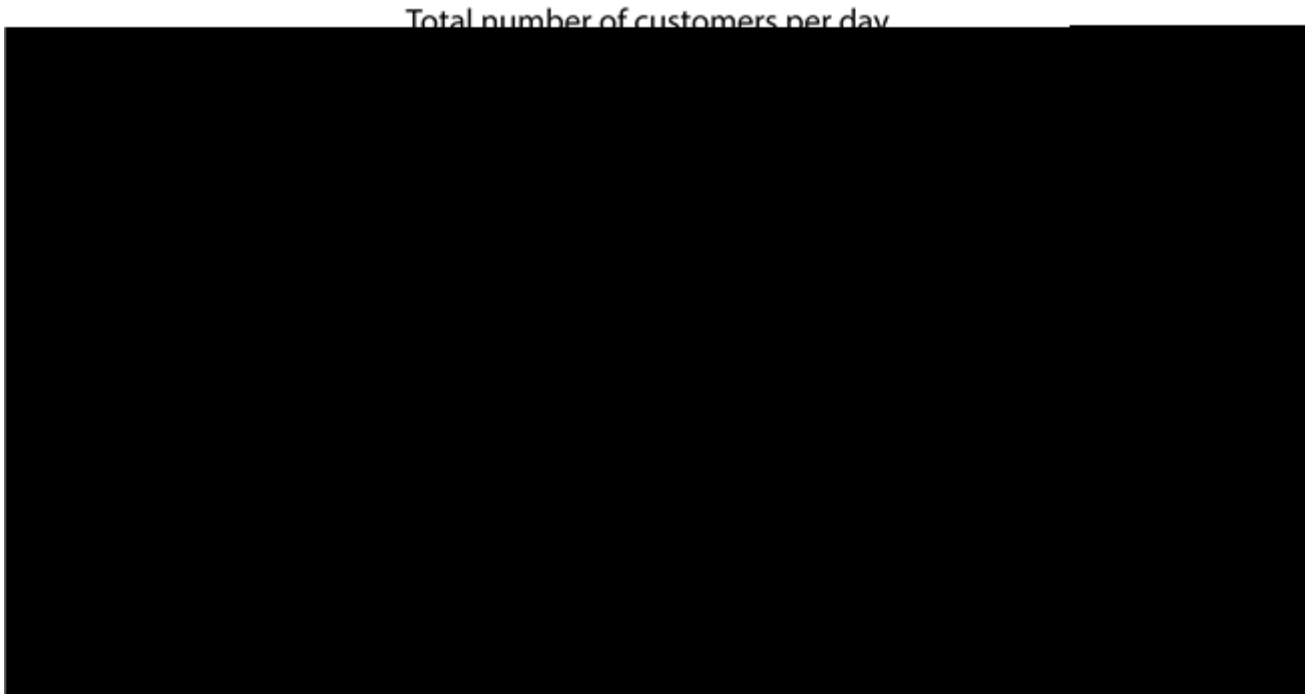
C Takes the highest reading and goes to 2 below it.

E Takes the range to be from the lowest reading to the highest reading.

Example 3: Identifying Similarity

In each of these questions you will be presented with a set of information and asked to identify if another set of data has a similar structure.

Graham recorded the number of visitors to his shop each day last week and presented the results in the bar chart below:



When he calculated the number of customers per hour he found that he had the same number for five of the days, but the values for Tuesday and Friday were slightly higher. The opening hours of the shop are as follows:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Close</i>
Monday	8am	6pm
Tuesday	?	?
Wednesday	8am	8pm
Thursday	8am	6pm
Friday	?	?
Saturday	8am	6pm
Sunday	10am	4pm

Which one of the following could be the opening hours of the shop for Tuesday and Friday?

- A Tuesday 9.30am - 5.30pm, Friday 8.00am - 6.30pm
- B Tuesday 9.00am - 4.30pm, Friday 8.30am - 6.00pm
- C Tuesday 9.00am - 4.30pm, Friday 8.00am - 6.00pm
- D Tuesday 9.00am - 5.00pm, Friday 8.00am - 6.30pm
- E Tuesday 10.00am - 5.00pm, Friday 8.30am - 6.00pm

Answer and explanation

The answer is **E**. The bar for Tuesday is three quarters the height for Thursday, so the shop must be open for less than 7 and a half hours if the average number of customers per hour is to be higher. The shop must also be open for less than 10 hours on Friday. The only option that satisfies these conditions is **E**.

A is open for 8 hours on Tuesday.

B is open for exactly 7 and a half hours on Tuesday.

C is the values if you assume the same average number of customers per day across the week.

D is open for too long on both days (misinterpreting the effect of the average number being higher).

The mathematical knowledge and skills needed

Number concepts

- simple fractions
- place value (for example, knowing that the "5" in "7654" indicates "50")
- ideas about percentages (for example, the idea that 1% could be thought of as "1 in every 100", and that if 20% of a group of adults are men, 80% must be women).

Numerical operations

- the four rules of number (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division)
- percentage operations (for example, if something was sold at £10, and is now advertised at "20% off", how much would the customer pay?)
- calculations in everyday contexts (complex calculations with fractions and decimals are not required).

Quantities

- time and the calendar
- money
- measures as shown below:

Length	Weight	Area	Volume (capacity)
Kilometre (km) Metre (m) Centimetre (cm) Millimetre (mm)	Kilogram (kg) Gram (g)	Centimetre square (cm ²) Metre square (m ²)	Cubic centimetre Litre (l) Gallon

Knowledge of the following relationships is also required:

$1 \text{ km} = 1000 \text{ m}$

$1 \text{ m} = 100 \text{ cm}$

$1 \text{ cm} = 10 \text{ mm}$

$1 \text{ kg} = 1000 \text{ g}$

Also required is knowledge of the terms for measurements which are used informally in daily life (e.g. feet, miles), but numerical relationships for these measures (e.g. 12 inches = 1 foot) are not required.

Space and spatial reasoning

- area (including the calculation of the area of a rectangle)
- perimeter (including calculation)
- volume (including the calculation of the volume of a box)
- reflections (in mirrors) and rotations of simple shapes
- two-dimensional (2D) representations of three-dimensional (3D) shapes (for example, being able to interpret a "bird's eye view" of a house).

Generalisation

Recognition that some operations are generalisable, for example, that converting 24 to 3 and 40 to 5 both involve division by 8 (formal algebra is not required).

Tables and graphs

- extracting information from graphs
- extracting information from tables.

Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking in the context of the TSA can best be made clear by the following definition: In an argument, **reasons** are put forward as grounds for a **conclusion**. The argument is a good argument provided its conclusion follows from the reasons. That is to say, if you accept the reasons, you must accept the conclusion. **For the purposes of the Critical Thinking assessment, the reasons given should be accepted as being true.**

Here is an example of a simple argument:

Jill promised she would attend the meeting or send a substitute. We know she can't attend the meeting. So we are expecting a substitute.

The structure of this argument is as follows:

Reasons: Jill promised she would attend the meeting or send a substitute. We know she can't attend the meeting.

Conclusion: So we are expecting a substitute.

In this case, the conclusion appears at the end of the argument, and is introduced by the word "so". Sometimes a conclusion may be introduced by words such as "therefore", "thus", "it follows that". However, sometimes a conclusion may not contain any such word. It is also important to note that a conclusion may appear at the beginning of, or in the middle of, an argument, rather than at the end. For example, the above argument could have been written in this way:

We know Jill cannot attend the meeting. We are expecting a substitute. She promised she would attend the meeting or send a substitute.

or in this way:

We are expecting a substitute for Jill. We know she cannot attend the meeting, and she promised she would attend or send a substitute.

In both these cases, "We are expecting a substitute (for Jill)" is the conclusion, because it is the statement which **follows from**, or **is supported by**, the rest of the passage.

Some arguments may omit a crucial stage in the reasoning - an **assumption** which must be made in order for the conclusion to follow. Here is an example:

She doesn't stand much of a chance. The polar bear is right behind her.

In this argument it is not explicitly stated that polar bears are dangerous, but the conclusion that "she doesn't stand much of a chance" depends upon the belief that polar bears are dangerous. This belief is taken for granted, or assumed.

In summary, the features of arguments are:

reason(s)

conclusion(s) (which may or may not be introduced by words such as "so", "therefore")

assumption(s) i.e. crucial parts of the argument which have not been stated.

Arguments can be much more complex in structure than the examples given so far and they can be lengthy. But whatever their length and complexity, there are certain skills involved in understanding and evaluating arguments. These include: drawing and summarising conclusions, identifying assumptions and reasoning errors, and assessing the impact of additional evidence.

The following examples show the seven kinds of questions you will find in the Thinking Skills Assessment.

Example 1: Summarising the Main Conclusion

In this type of question you have to judge which one of the statements **A** to **E** best expresses the main conclusion of the argument. So the first important step is to read the passage carefully and pick out the sentence which is the conclusion. Remember that the conclusion can appear anywhere within an argument - not necessarily at the end. Remember also that what you are looking for is the statement which follows from, or is supported by, the rest of the passage.

It may be helpful to ask yourself: "What is the main message which this passage is trying to get me to accept?". When you think you have answered this question, underline the sentence which expresses this main message, then look to see if the rest of the passage gives you reasons for believing this. Sometimes a passage may have an intermediate conclusion which is just one of the steps in the reasoning towards the main conclusion. Be careful to check this. If the sentence you have underlined gives reason to believe some other statement in the passage, then it will not be the main conclusion. Do not worry about whether the reasons are true. Just ask yourself: "If these reasons were true, would they give me good reason to accept the sentence I have underlined?".

Vegetarian food can be healthier than a traditional diet. Research has shown that vegetarians are less likely to suffer from heart disease and obesity than meat eaters. Concern has been expressed that vegetarians do not get enough protein in their diet but it has been demonstrated that, by selecting foods carefully, vegetarians are able to amply meet their needs in this respect.

Which of the following best expresses the main conclusion of the above argument?

- A** A vegetarian diet can be better for health than a traditional diet.
- B** Adequate protein is available from a vegetarian diet.
- C** A traditional diet is very high in protein.
- D** A balanced diet is more important for health than any particular food.
- E** Vegetarians are unlikely to suffer from heart disease and obesity.

Answer and explanation

What does this argument seem to be trying to get us to accept? It seems to be trying to persuade us that vegetarian food can be healthier than a traditional diet, so we should underline the first sentence. Then we need to see whether the rest of the passage gives us reason to believe this. Two reasons are given:

1. Vegetarians are less likely to suffer from heart disease and obesity than meat eaters.
2. A vegetarian diet can contain sufficient protein.

We may not know whether these reasons are true, but if they were true, they would indicate that vegetarian food is healthier in one respect than a traditional diet which includes meat, and that a vegetarian diet does not necessarily have the disadvantage to health (providing insufficient protein) which we may have thought. So it seems clear that the first sentence of the passage is being offered as a conclusion.

A is the statement which best expresses this conclusion.

B is not the main conclusion, but it is one of the reasons for the main conclusion - labelled above as reason (2).

C is not the main conclusion, because it is not even stated in the passage. It is taken for granted that a traditional diet provides enough protein, but even this is not explicitly stated.

D is not the main conclusion, as it is not stated in the passage. No attempt is made to define a balanced diet. The passage simply makes a comparison between a traditional diet and a vegetarian diet.

E is not the main conclusion, but it is close in meaning to one of the reasons for the main conclusion - labelled above as reason (1).

Example 2: Drawing a Conclusion

When you are asked which conclusion follows, you need to consider each of the statements **A** to **E**, and to think about whether the information in the passage gives you good reasons to accept the statement.

Those in favour of coursework contributing to A-level grades say that this is much fairer than assessment by exam only, as it means that students who are willing to work hard but who perform poorly in exams will have a better chance of doing well. However, this arrangement currently allows far more opportunity for cheating, casting doubt on its fairness. For example, there is a growing market for customised essays, available (for a fee) via the internet. At the moment, the only deterrent is a teacher's vigilance, but while teachers might identify work which seems atypical for individual students, they won't necessarily detect when, for example, a student has had an unacceptable amount of help from family or friends.

Which one of the following conclusions is best supported by the passage above?

- A** Assessment by coursework is not necessarily fairer than assessment by examination.
- B** The opportunities for cheating in coursework mean that A-levels should be assessed by exams only.
- C** Traditional examinations are still the fairest way of grading A-level students.
- D** There is no entirely fair way of assessing students at A-level.
- E** Examinations do not assess how hard a student has worked.

Answer and explanation

The answer to this question is **A**, because the passage argues in the following way:

Firstly it presents the statement that the contribution of coursework in A-level assessment is seen to be fairer than an examination only because it allows students who perform poorly in examinations but who work hard to have a better chance of doing well.

However, it tells us that coursework is open to cheating through the buying of essays via the internet and also that cheating is possible through having help from family and friends.

So, teachers are the only deterrent against cheating in coursework at the moment – as they can detect some instances but not all.

Therefore, it concludes that the inclusion of coursework in A-level assessment does not mean the system is fairer than assessment by examination only.

B goes further than the conclusion suggested by the passage. The phrase 'At the moment, the only deterrent' suggests that other strategies may be employed in the future.

C refers to one of the reasons why the current system isn't fair, as a good student could perform badly on the day of the examination and so not receive an appropriate assessment of their ability.

D goes further than the passage by suggesting that there is no fair way to assess students at A-level. This may be true but is not claimed by the passage.

E while correct, is not a conclusion but is a part of the argument.

Example 3: Identifying an Assumption

An assumption is something which is not stated in the argument, but which is taken for granted in order to draw the conclusion. So you need first to sort out what the conclusion of the argument is. Ask yourself what is the main point which the argument tries to get you to accept. Then look for the reasoning it gives to support this conclusion, and think about any important point which is not actually stated in the reasoning.

People who write books revealing the inner workings of the secret service have usually been dismissed from the service or have retired with a sense of grievance against it. The result is that only the seedy side of the secret service is exposed. This is partly because those who would paint a more favourable picture are unwilling to flout the legal restrictions placed on all who have been employed in the secret service, and partly because the records of the organisations are not available to outsiders.

Which of the following is an underlying assumption of the argument above?

- A** The records of the secret service are readily available to its former employees.
- B** The work of the secret service is undervalued as a result of publication of distorted accounts of its working.
- C** The seedy side of the secret service is of minor significance compared with the important work it carries out.
- D** Legal restrictions against revealing the inner workings of the secret service do not apply to those who have been dismissed.
- E** Those who have a grievance against the secret service are either unable or unwilling to give a balanced account of its workings.

Answer and explanation

The answer to this question is **E**. The conclusion is that only the seedy side of the secret service is exposed. The reasons given for this are that:

- (i) the records of the secret service are not generally available;
- (ii) there are legal restrictions on employees of the secret service which forbid them from writing about it;
- (iii) the only employees or ex-employees who would ignore this restriction are those with a sense of grievance against the secret service.

From these reasons, it would not follow that only the seedy side of the secret service was exposed if those with a grievance were able and willing to give a balanced account. So it must be assumed that either they are not able or they are not willing to do so.

A is not assumed. The passage says that the records are not available to outsiders. But ex-employees may or may not have access to records. We do not need to assume that they do have access in order to conclude that when they write about the secret service, they reveal only its seedy side.

B is not assumed, because it goes further than the passage. It considers the effects of publications about the secret service. But what we are looking for as an assumption is something which helps to support the conclusion of the passage.

C is not assumed, because the passage says nothing about the importance of the work carried out by the secret service. It does suggest that there is another side to the secret service, besides the "seedy side", but no assumptions can be made about which is more important.

D is not assumed, because the passage says that the legal restrictions apply to "all who have been employed", and this must include those who have been dismissed.

Example 4: Assessing the Impact of Additional Evidence

Here you are asked to consider what would weaken the argument, so you need first to be clear about what

Example 5: Detecting Reasoning Errors

You are asked to identify the flaw in the argument, which means that you must explain why the conclusion does not follow from the reasons which are given. So you need to be clear about what the conclusion is, and what reasons are meant to support it. Ask yourself what the main point is which the argument is trying to establish, and how it tries to establish it.

Some people attempt to smuggle a pet into Britain because of the quarantine regulations which are aimed at preventing rabies from entering the country. If there were no such regulations, there would be no reason to smuggle pets. Since the most likely source of a rabies outbreak in Britain is a smuggled pet, if the quarantine regulations were abolished, the danger of a rabies outbreak would be reduced.

Which of the following is the best statement of the flaw in the argument above?

- A** Rabies is not likely to enter Britain in a wild animal.
- B** The quarantine regulations cannot prevent owners from smuggling their pets.
- C** If there were no quarantine regulations, pets with rabies could enter Britain easily.
- D** If people did not want to travel with their pets, there would be no need for quarantine regulations.
- E** If pets were inoculated against rabies, there would be no need for quarantine regulations.

Answer and explanation

The answer is **C**. The argument draws the conclusion that if quarantine regulations were abolished, there would be less likelihood of an outbreak of rabies. The reasoning offered in support of this is that:

1. smuggled pets are the most likely source of an outbreak of rabies; and
2. if there were no quarantine regulations, no-one would be tempted to smuggle pets into Britain.

But the conclusion does not follow, because if there were no quarantine regulations, smuggled pets would no longer be the most likely cause of a rabies outbreak. Instead, the most likely cause would be pets which could be brought in without breaking any law. **C** is the statement which best explains this.

A does not describe the flaw, because it simply states something with which the argument would agree.

B does not describe the flaw, because it states something which the argument depends on - the idea that quarantine regulations cannot prevent outbreaks of rabies.

D does not describe the flaw, because it concerns the reason why quarantine regulations are thought to be necessary, rather than the consequences of getting rid of these regulations.

E does not describe the flaw, because it does not mention what would happen if quarantine regulations were abolished. Instead, it suggests a way to make them unnecessary, whilst still being able to prevent an outbreak of rabies.

Example 6: Matching Arguments

This type of question asks you about similarity between arguments, but not the sort of similarity where two arguments are about the same topic. The similarity you are looking for is in the structure or the pattern of the argument.

I cannot get any answer when I dial my mother's number. Either she is not answering her phone or she has decided to stay away on holiday for an extra week. She must still be away. She would never let the phone ring without answering it.

Which of the following most closely parallels the reasoning used in the above argument?

- A** If I want to remain fit and healthy I have to watch my diet and take exercise. I want to stay fit so I eat carefully and go running regularly.
- B** If Denise had carried on going to the gym and eating sensibly, she would never have got so run down. She did get run down, so she must either have given up her diet or stopped going to the gym.
- C** Joe is looking a lot fitter. Either he has cut down on his eating or he has been out running every day. I know for a fact that Joe couldn't keep to a diet, so it must be exercise that's done it.
- D** Anyone who swims over twenty lengths a day has to be pretty fit. Sheena swims thirty lengths a day. Therefore Sheena must be quite fit.
- E** Sticking to a diet is hard at first but after about two weeks most people get used to it. I have been dieting for nearly two weeks so I should be getting used to it soon.

Answer and explanation

As a first step to finding the structure in this argument, look at the passage to see if there are repeated statements which you could represent with a letter (e.g. X or Y). It is slightly difficult to do that in this argument, because the repeated statements are worded in a slightly different form each time. But we can see that there are two important ideas which are mentioned twice:

My mother is (must be) away.

My mother is not answering the phone (is letting the phone ring without answering it).

If we replace these statements with X and Y, we can see the following structure.

Either X is true or Y is true.

Y cannot be true.

So X must be true.

X = my mother is away.

Y = my mother is letting the phone ring without answering it.

We now have to look for the argument which has this same structure.

C is the answer. In this case X = Joe is exercising, Y = Joe is dieting and the structure is the same:

Either X (Joe is exercising) or Y (Joe is dieting).

Y (Joe is dieting) cannot be true.

So X (Joe is exercising) must be true.

A has a different structure:

If I want X, I have to do Y.

I want X.

So I do Y.

X = remain fit (and healthy).

Y = watch my diet and take exercise.

B has a different structure:

If X and Y had happened, Z would not have happened.

Z did happen.

So either X didn't happen or Y didn't happen.

X = Denise going to gym.

Y = Denise eating sensibly.

Z = Denise getting run down.

D has a different structure:

All people who do X are Y.

Sheena does X.

Therefore Sheena is Y.

X = swim over 20 lengths a day.

Y = fit.

E has a different structure:

Most people who do X, succeed in Y.

I have done X.

So I should succeed in Y.

X = stick to a diet for 2 weeks.

Y = getting used to the diet.

Example 7: Applying Principles

When you are asked which statement illustrates the principle underlying the passage, you must first identify this principle. A principle is a general recommendation, which, in the passage, will be applied to just one particular case, but which could also be applied to other cases. For example, someone might use the principle "Killing is wrong" in order to argue for pacifism, i.e. for refusing to go to war. If we are to accept the principle that killing is wrong, then it also follows that capital punishment is wrong, and even that killing in self-defence is wrong. In order to answer this type of question, you first need to understand the argument, so look for the conclusion, and for the reasons, in the usual way. This should enable you to see what principle the argument relies on in order to draw its conclusion. You then need to consider each possible answer to see which one follows from the principle.

Smokers who suffer from heart disease which is caused by their smoking should not be allowed to get free health treatment. That is because this is an example of self-inflicted illness. Those whose actions have caused illness or injury to themselves should make a financial contribution to their treatment.

Which one of the following best illustrates the principle underlying the argument above?

- A** Children should get free dental treatment, even if they eat sweets which cause dental decay.
- B** Heart disease sufferers who can afford to pay for health treatment should not receive free treatment.
- C** Smokers who cannot afford to pay for health care should be allowed free treatment when they are ill.
- D** People who are injured in car accidents should receive free treatment regardless of whether they were wearing a seat belt.
- E** Motor cyclists whose head injuries are caused by not wearing a crash helmet should make a financial contribution to their treatment.

Answer and explanation

The conclusion of this argument is that smokers who get heart disease as a result of smoking should not get free health treatment. The reason given for this is that their illness is self-inflicted. This reasoning relies on the general principle that if your actions have caused your illness or injury, you should make a financial contribution to your treatment.

The correct answer is **E**, which applies the principle to motor cyclists whose failure to wear a crash helmet has caused their head injuries.

A is not an application of the principle, because it suggests that even if a child's actions (eating sweets) have caused a health problem (dental decay), the child should nevertheless have free treatment.

B is not an application of the principle, because it makes a recommendation based on people's ability to pay for treatment, rather than on whether their actions have caused their illness.

C is not an application of the principle, because, like **B**, it makes its recommendation solely on the ability to pay.

D is not an application of the principle because it recommends free treatment regardless of whether people's actions have contributed to their injuries.

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