English Comprehension: Medium Practice Paper 1

Read this passage carefully, then answer the questions that follow.

The Sixty-Third Winter

The narrator is a young scientist who has been sent to the village of Ashenholt to build an automatic weather station on the hill above it. She expects the work to take a fortnight. In this passage she calls first on Mr Ableman, who has written down the weather of the village by hand since he was a boy.

I arrived in Ashenholt on the sort of morning that makes a scientist optimistic: still air, a clean sky, and a frost so even it might have been measured out with a ruler. My instruments came behind me in a van. I had been sent to put up an automatic weather station on the hill above the village, and I had allowed myself a fortnight to do it.

The vicar had told me to call on Mr Ableman first. Nobody explained why, and I was too busy to ask. He lived at the end of a row of cottages, in a front room so warm that my glasses misted at the door, and he shook my hand as though he had been expecting me for years.

‘You’ll want the books,’ he said.

They filled two shelves and part of a third: sixty-three identical ledgers, bound in green cloth, one for every year since 1961. Inside, in a hand that had grown smaller and neater with age, were four readings a day — temperature, rainfall, wind, and a column he called simply ‘remarks’. Snow on the chapel roof. First swallow. Beck frozen at the ford.

I said something kind about how much work it must have been. I am not proud of the way I said it. In my head I was already up on the hill with my station, which would take a reading every ten minutes without being asked, in weather that would keep any sensible person indoors, and would never once forget.

Mr Ableman poured the tea and did not seem to mind. He asked how my machine measured rainfall, and listened to the answer with his head on one side, the way a bird listens to the ground. Then he told me, pleasantly, that I had chosen the wrong hill.

I asked him, with more patience than I felt, what was wrong with it. He gave me no reason at all. He got up instead, took down the ledger for 1974 and turned to a page in March, where the remarks column said: ‘Plantation set out on Bracken Hill.’ Fourteen thousand spruce, he said, put in over one week, and the top of that hill had been out of the wind ever since.

I built the station on Bracken Hill. It was flat, there was a track to it, and the paperwork had been signed in an office two hundred miles away by people who had never stood in the rain here. For eleven days the readings came in beautifully. On the twelfth I set them beside the figures from the rest of the county and found my wind speeds running a third below everybody else’s.

I moved the station four hundred metres, to the shoulder of the hill where the spruce gave out, and the numbers came right within a day. It cost me nine days, two apologies, and rather more of my own good opinion of myself than I care to admit.

Before I left I asked whether the county might copy the ledgers. He said they had asked in 1998 and he had told them no, because a book that leaves the village stops being the village’s. Then he wrote the day’s four readings, closed the book, and asked me what my machine had made of the frost.

I told him it had recorded minus six. He nodded, and in the remarks column, in his small neat hand, he wrote: ‘Hard frost. Young woman up from the city. Station moved. Wind right at last.’

Please answer these questions. (Look at the passage again if you need to.) You should choose the best answer and mark its letter on your answer sheet.

Q1. Why has the narrator come to Ashenholt?

A. to copy Mr Ableman’s weather records for the county

B. to spend a fortnight’s holiday in the village

C. to put up an automatic weather station on the hill

D. to study the spruce plantation on Bracken Hill

E. to deliver a van of instruments to the vicar

Q2. ‘a frost so even it might have been measured out with a ruler’ (lines 2–3)

Why is this a good way of describing the frost?

A. It suggests the frost was patchy and uneven in places.

B. It shows the frost lay perfectly evenly, and that the narrator sees the world in measurements.

C. It proves the narrator had already begun taking readings.

D. It tells us the frost was thicker than any the village had known.

E. It shows that the narrator was cold and wished she had stayed at home.

Q3. ‘Nobody explained why, and I was too busy to ask’ (lines 7–8)

What does this suggest about the narrator at this point?

A. She had been told not to ask questions in the village.

B. She was nervous about meeting a stranger.

C. She already knew a great deal about Mr Ableman.

D. She was impatient to get on with her own work and took no interest in the village.

E. She was worried that she would not finish within a fortnight.

Q4. ‘he shook my hand as though he had been expecting me for years’ (lines 10–11)

What does this tell us about Mr Ableman?

A. He was warm and welcoming towards someone he had never met.

B. He had been told exactly when the narrator would arrive.

C. He had mistaken the narrator for somebody else.

D. He was annoyed that she had taken so long to come.

E. He had been waiting outside the cottage all morning.

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Q5. How many years of weather records did Mr Ableman keep in his ledgers? (lines 13–14)

A. fourteen

B. sixty-three

C. ninety-eight

D. one hundred and ninety

E. one thousand

Q6. ‘in a hand that had grown smaller and neater with age’ (line 15)

What does the word ‘hand’ mean here?

A. a helper who wrote the entries for him

B. the part of the body he wrote with

C. his handwriting

D. a measurement used for the height of horses

E. a share of the work

Q7. Why has the author included the details ‘Snow on the chapel roof. First swallow. Beck frozen at the ford.’ (lines 17–18)?

A. to prove that Mr Ableman’s figures could not be trusted

B. to explain how a rain gauge works

C. to show that the winters had grown colder over the years

D. to suggest that Mr Ableman had run out of room in the ledger

E. to show the kind of everyday detail his ‘remarks’ column recorded

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Q8. ‘I said something kind about how much work it must have been. I am not proud of the way I said it.’ (lines 19–20)

Why is the narrator not proud?

A. She had been polite out loud while privately looking down on his work.

B. She had spoken far too quietly for him to hear her.

C. She had said something unkind and wished to take it back.

D. She had forgotten to thank him for the tea.

E. She had promised to help him with the ledgers and then refused.

Q9. Why has the author ended the paragraph with the words ‘and would never once forget’ (line 23)?

A. to explain how the station stored its readings

B. to show that the narrator had a very good memory herself

C. to hint that the narrator was afraid of forgetting something important

D. to show that the narrator thought her machine better than any person

E. to warn the reader that the station would soon break down

Q10. ‘the way a bird listens to the ground’ (line 26)

This is an example of…

A. personification

B. a simile

C. onomatopoeia

D. alliteration

E. a metaphor

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Q11. What type of word is ‘pleasantly’ (line 27)?

A. a noun

B. a verb

C. an adjective

D. an adverb

E. a conjunction

Q12. ‘He gave me no reason at all.’ (line 29)

Why did Mr Ableman fetch the 1974 ledger instead of arguing with the narrator?

A. He could not remember the reason and had to look it up.

B. He wanted her to see the written proof rather than take his word for it.

C. He was too shy to explain himself to a stranger.

D. He hoped she would notice how neat his handwriting was.

E. The vicar had told him to show her the books.

Q13. Why was the top of Bracken Hill the wrong place for the station? (lines 31–33)

A. It was too flat for the instruments to stand safely.

B. The frost there lay far more thickly than anywhere else.

C. It was two hundred miles from the office that signed the paperwork.

D. The village had never given permission for anything to be built there.

E. A spruce plantation put in during 1974 had sheltered it from the wind.

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Q14. ‘by people who had never stood in the rain here’ (line 36)

What is the narrator suggesting?

A. The office staff had chosen a good site by studying the weather closely.

B. The paperwork had been signed by people who did not really know the place.

C. It had not rained in the village for a very long time.

D. The decision had been made by people who lived nearby.

E. Nobody in the office had heard of Ashenholt at all.

Q15. How did the narrator discover that something was wrong with her readings? (lines 37–39)

A. The station stopped sending readings on the twelfth day.

B. Mr Ableman checked her figures against his ledgers.

C. She set her figures beside the county’s and found her wind speeds too low.

D. The rainfall she recorded did not match the rain she could see falling.

E. The instruments had been damaged by the frost.

Q16. ‘rather more of my own good opinion of myself than I care to admit’ (lines 42–43)

What does the narrator mean?

A. She lost a great deal of her pride.

B. She had spent more money than she expected to.

C. She had begun to think even better of herself than before.

D. She refused to admit that she had made any mistake.

E. She was too embarrassed to speak to Mr Ableman again.

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Q17. ‘a book that leaves the village stops being the village’s’ (lines 45–46)

Why did Mr Ableman refuse to let the county copy his ledgers?

A. He thought the county would lose them or damage them.

B. He was saving them to sell to a museum one day.

C. He wanted to finish writing them before anyone else read them.

D. He did not believe the county would find them useful.

E. He believed the records belonged to Ashenholt and should stay there.

Q18. How many adjectives are there in the phrase ‘in his small neat hand’? (line 50)

A. 0

B. 1

C. 2

D. 3

E. 4

Q19. ‘Hard frost. Young woman up from the city. Station moved. Wind right at last.’ (lines 50–51)

What does this last entry tell us about Mr Ableman?

A. He had known all along that the narrator would fail.

B. He was still annoyed that his advice had been ignored.

C. He sets down what happened plainly, without any boasting.

D. He had begun to lose interest in keeping the ledgers.

E. He wanted the county to read the entry one day.

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Q20. Which of these would make the best alternative title for the passage?

A. A Fortnight in Ashenholt

B. The Storm on Bracken Hill

C. Fourteen Thousand Spruce

D. The Man Who Was Right

E. The Green Ledgers

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