NSW Selective High School Placement Test

Reading — Practice Paper

Answers: 38 across 5 question sets (Parts 1–5)

Time allowed: 45 minutes

Instructions: Most questions offer four answer choices (A–D) — choose the one best answer. Part 4 asks you to choose a sentence from a lettered bank; Part 5 asks you to match each statement to an extract. Write your answers on a separate sheet or in the margin.

Paper ID: reading-practice-1

This is a printable practice version. The real NSW Selective Test is delivered on screen (computer-based); this paper lets you practise the same five reading tasks away from a keyboard.

Part 1 — Fiction

Read the passage below, then answer questions 1–8. Each question has four answer choices — choose the one best answer.

Old Mrs Hay has sent the Burnell children a doll's house. The children are allowed to invite schoolmates to see it — but not the Kelveys, two poor sisters (Lil and little Else) whom everyone looks down on.

The doll's house stood open for all to see: drawing-room and dining-room, the kitchen and two bedrooms. But what Kezia liked better than anything, what she liked frightfully, was the lamp. It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled ready for lighting, though of course you could not light it. The father and mother dolls, who sprawled very stiff as though they had fainted in the drawing-room, and their two little children asleep upstairs, were really too big for the doll's house. They didn't look as if they belonged. But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, 'I live here.' The lamp was real.

The Burnell children were allowed to ask the other girls at school, two at a time, to come and look. But not the Kelveys. They were the daughters of a hardworking little washerwoman, and it was whispered that their father was in prison; they were shunned by everybody. Even the teacher had a special voice for them. So the Kelveys were not allowed to see the doll's house; the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys.

One afternoon Kezia was swinging on the gate when she saw the little Kelveys coming along the road. She got down. She had made up her mind; and though her heart beat, she called out, 'Hullo. You can come and see our doll's house if you want to.' 'Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us,' said Lil. 'Oh well,' said Kezia. 'It doesn't matter. You can come and see it all the same. Come on.'

They had just reached the doll's house when the back door opened, and out came Aunt Beryl. 'How dare you ask the little Kelveys into the courtyard!' she said, in a cold, furious voice. 'You know as well as I do you're not allowed to talk to them. Run away at once. And don't come back.' She stepped into the yard and shooed them out as if they were chickens.

Presently the Kelveys were far enough away to sit down and rest on a big red drain-pipe by the side of the road. Lil's cheeks were still burning. But little Else, who had not said a word since they left the courtyard, seemed to have forgotten it all. She smiled her rare smile. 'I seen the little lamp,' she said softly.

[1] shunned: avoided, deliberately kept away from
From 'The Doll's House' by Katherine Mansfield (1922)

1. The passage says the dolls 'didn't look as if they belonged', but of the little lamp that it 'seemed to smile' and 'was real'. What is suggested by setting the lamp against the dolls in this way?

- **(A)** The dolls were broken and the lamp was not.
- **(B)** The plain little lamp feels alive; the dolls do not.
- **(C)** Kezia preferred small toys to large ones.
- **(D)** The lamp was simply better made than the stiff dolls were.

2. The Kelveys were kept away because 'the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys.' What is the writer doing with the phrase 'the line had to be drawn somewhere'?

(A) Admitting the writer cannot decide who was right.

(B) Stating plainly that the Kelveys had to be kept out.

(C) Echoing the grown-ups' own smug words back at us.

(D) Explaining a sensible rule the school had made.

3. Kezia invites the Kelveys in 'though her heart beat'. What do the words 'though her heart beat' add?

(A) She knew she was breaking the rule and chose to do it anyway.

(B) She was frightened of the Kelvey sisters.

(C) She was excited to show off the fine doll's house.

(D) She was out of breath from swinging on the gate.

4. Beryl is angry throughout. But what does the comparison 'as if they were chickens' add, in particular, to how she treats the Kelveys?

(A) She finds them a silly nuisance under her feet.

(B) She is used to ordering the whole household about.

(C) She treats them as beneath notice — not as children at all.

(D) She wants them gone as fast and as noisily as possible.

5. After being driven off, little Else 'seemed to have forgotten it all' and says softly, 'I seen the little lamp.' What does this reveal about Else?

(A) She only spoke of the lamp to take Lil's mind off the shame of it.

(B) She was secretly hoping her own family might one day own a lamp exactly like it.

(C) She was really too young and simple to grasp that she had just been badly insulted.

(D) She holds on to the one beauty she saw; the cruelty could not take it.

6. When Lil warns that they are not allowed to speak to her, Kezia answers, 'Oh well. It doesn't matter.' What does this reply show about Kezia?

(A) She is unsure whether the rule really applies to them.

(B) She means the Kelveys' poverty makes no difference to her.

(C) She thinks the quarrel is only between the two mothers.

(D) The grown-ups' rule simply carries no weight with her.

7. The passage notes that 'even the teacher had a special voice for them'. What does this detail show?

(A) The teacher lowered her voice to spare them being overheard.

(B) Even the adults joined in looking down on them.

(C) The teacher was especially fond of the Kelvey girls.

(D) The teacher spoke firmly to keep the Kelveys in line.

8. What does the passage as a whole explore?

(A) The simple joy of being given a wonderful new toy.

(B) Why it is important to share your things with everyone.

(C) How grown-ups pass their own prejudices on to their children.

(D) Being shut out — and a small beauty that survives it.

Part 2 — Vocabulary

Read the passage below. Numbered gaps have been left in the text. For each gap (questions 9–16), choose the word that fits best from the four options given for that question.

Tipped from a covered basket into a valley it has never seen, a homing pigeon circles once and then heads off, without pause, straight for its distant loft. Because the basket stayed shut throughout the outward journey, the bird cannot have ____ **(9)** the route it travelled; whatever guides it home must be carried within its own body. For many years most scientists ____ **(10)** that pigeons steer by the sun. Yet the birds reach home just as reliably beneath thick cloud, so this explanation has since been abandoned.

Most researchers now think a pigeon can somehow sense the Earth's magnetic field and read it the way a sailor reads a compass. If they are right, scientists would call this sense of direction ____ **(11)**: a pigeon is born already knowing which way home lies, and needs no lessons to find it. That would explain how a young bird, freed far from home for the very first time, still finds its way with ____ **(12)** accuracy, never once heading down the wrong valley.

In both World Wars, when the radio sets were jammed or fell silent, commanders turned to pigeons to carry their messages across the lines. It was ____ **(13)** work: the long flights through gunfire took a heavy ____ **(14)** on the birds, and many never reached their lofts at all, and the few that limped home with their message capsules intact were honoured as heroes.

Today a champion racing pigeon is a treasured animal. On race morning every basket is flung open at the same instant, but the lofts themselves are scattered across many different towns, so no two birds cover the same ____ **(15)** on the way home. To keep the contest fair, each bird's time is measured against the miles it has flown, and the prize goes to the one that has flown ____ **(16)** — not to the first bird spotted dropping onto its loft.

9. Choose the word that best fits gap (9).

- **(A)** predicted
- **(B)** chosen
- **(C)** shortened
- **(D)** memorised

10. Choose the word that best fits gap (10).

- **(A)** proved
- **(B)** assumed
- **(C)** confirmed
- **(D)** established

11. Choose the word that best fits gap (11).

(A) unerring
(B) innate
(C) automatic
(D) inherited

12. Choose the word that best fits gap (12).

(A) unerring
(B) unflagging
(C) unswerving
(D) unfailing

13. Choose the word that best fits gap (13).

(A) thankless
(B) perilous
(C) tedious
(D) tiring

14. Choose the word that best fits gap (14).

(A) toll
(B) price
(C) strain
(D) cost

15. Choose the word that best fits gap (15).

(A) route
(B) course
(C) journey
(D) distance

16. Choose the word that best fits gap (16).

(A) fastest
(B) highest
(C) furthest
(D) soonest

Part 3 — Poem

Read the poem below, then answer questions 17–22. Each question has four answer choices — choose the one best answer.

The narrator, stuck in a city office, once knew a drover named Clancy. He writes to him, gets a surprising reply, and then daydreams.

I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better
Knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan, years ago;
He was shearing when I knew him, so I sent the letter to him,
Just "on spec", addressed as follows: "Clancy, of The Overflow".

And an answer came directed in a writing unexpected,
(And I think the same was written with a thumb-nail dipped in tar)
'Twas his shearing mate who wrote it, and verbatim I will quote it:
"Clancy's gone to Queensland droving, and we don't know where he are."

In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of Clancy
Gone a-droving "down the Cooper" where the Western drovers go;
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing,
For the drover's life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know.

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.

I am sitting in my dingy little office, where a stingy
Ray of sunlight struggles feebly down between the houses tall,
And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city
Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all.

And in place of lowing cattle, I can hear the fiendish rattle
Of the tramways and the buses making hurry down the street,
And the language uninviting of the gutter children fighting,
Comes fitfully and faintly through the ceaseless tramp of feet.

And the hurrying people daunt me, and their pallid faces haunt me
As they shoulder one another in their rush and nervous haste,
With their eager eyes and greedy, and their stunted forms and weedy,
For townsfolk have no time to grow, they have no time to waste.

And I somehow rather fancy that I'd like to change with Clancy,
Like to take a turn at droving where the seasons come and go,
While he faced the round eternal of the cash-book and the journal —
But I doubt he'd suit the office, Clancy, of "The Overflow".

[1] droving: driving cattle or sheep over long distances
[2] on spec: on the off-chance, without knowing if it will work
'Clancy of the Overflow' by A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson (1889)

17. How does the poem change as it moves from the stanzas about Clancy to the stanzas about the narrator's own life?

(A) It turns from a fond picture of Clancy to a colder, more distant tone by the end.

(B) It moves from calm admiration of the bush to fear of the city's violence.

(C) It shifts from longing for the bush to a weary, resigned acceptance of the city.

(D) It turns from an open, admiring picture of the bush to a shut-in, sour picture of the city.

18. In the final stanza, what does the 'round eternal of the cash-book and the journal' stand for?

(A) The turning seasons of the droving life out in the bush.

(B) The narrator's endless round of office bookkeeping.

(C) A daily newspaper he reads to pass the slow office hours.

(D) The letters he keeps writing off to Clancy at The Overflow.

19. In the bush stanza, whose are the 'kindly voices' that greet Clancy?

(A) The wind and river, spoken of as friendly people.

(B) The cattle he drives across the plains.

(C) Other drovers riding along beside him.

(D) Townsfolk who have ridden out to visit him.

20. How does the narrator feel about the city where he works?

(A) Frightened of its dangers and its violence.

(B) Oppressed and repelled by it.

(C) Numbly indifferent to his grey surroundings.

(D) Mainly wistful, his heart still off in the bush.

21. In the city stanzas, three of these descriptions give human or devilish qualities to lifeless things. Which one is meant plainly, as a simple fact?

(A) the 'fiendish' rattle of the tramways

(B) the 'stingy' ray of sunlight

(C) the 'dusty, dirty' city

(D) the buses 'making hurry' down the street

22. In the final stanza, how serious is the narrator's wish to swap lives with Clancy?

(A) It is a firm decision he has now made to leave the city.

(B) A wistful daydream — he admits Clancy would not suit the office.

(C) He is sure he would make a far better drover than Clancy.

(D) He no longer envies Clancy at all by the end.

Part 4 — Gapped text

6 sentences have been removed from the passage below. They are listed, along with 1 extra sentence that does not belong in any gap, in the sentence bank beneath it. For each numbered gap (questions 23–28), write the letter of the sentence that fits best. Use each sentence at most once.

For thousands of years, sailors have feared the darkness of the open sea. A single hidden rock or sandbank could tear open a wooden hull and send a ship to the bottom within minutes. For the families waiting at home, a storm at sea could mean they never saw their fathers and brothers again. ____ **(23)** The earliest solution was simple: people lit bonfires on hilltops near dangerous shores.

The most famous lighthouse of the ancient world stood on the island of Pharos, near the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Built more than two thousand years ago, it towered over the harbour like a giant stone finger. A fire burned at its top every night, and polished metal mirrors threw the light far out to sea. ____ **(24)** Yet even this wonder could not last forever. A series of earthquakes shook the tower, and after many centuries it crumbled into the sea.

For hundreds of years after the fall of Rome, few new lighthouses were built, and many of the old ones fell into ruin. ____ **(25)** These busy new routes demanded better guidance than a smoky bonfire could give.

The greatest change came in the early nineteenth century, when a French scientist named Augustin Fresnel designed a new kind of lens. ____ **(26)** Instead, a lighthouse fitted with a Fresnel lens could be seen from more than thirty kilometres away. Its rings of glass gathered the scattered rays and bent them into a single powerful beam. Fishermen and merchants alike blessed the bright new light that reached them far out on the water.

For over a century, every lighthouse needed a keeper who lived beside the light. The keeper's job was lonely but vital: he had to trim the wicks, polish the lenses, and wind the clockwork that turned the lamp. ____ **(27)** If the light failed even for a moment, ships might be dashed against the rocks.

Today, almost every lighthouse in the world works on its own. ____ **(28)** Even so, these towers still stand watch along dangerous coasts, flashing their patient warning to any ship that passes in the night.

Sentence bank

(A) Electric lamps and computers have replaced the keepers, who have now retired from their lonely posts.

(B) Earlier lights had wasted most of their glow, scattering it uselessly into the sky.

(C) Sailors could see its glow from many kilometres away, and travellers counted it among the wonders of the world.

(D) Because of this danger, coastal peoples searched for a way to warn ships away from the shallows.

(E) Some old lighthouses have now been turned into small museums or unusual holiday cottages.

(F) Above all, he could never let the flame go out, no matter how fierce the storm.

(G) Slowly, though, sea trade recovered, and ships crowded the coasts of Europe once more.

23. Which sentence best fits gap 23?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

24. Which sentence best fits gap 24?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

25. Which sentence best fits gap 25?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

26. Which sentence best fits gap 26?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

27. Which sentence best fits gap 27?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

28. Which sentence best fits gap 28?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F) (G)

Part 5 — Multiple matching

Read the extracts below. Each statement (questions 29–38) describes one extract. For each statement, write the letter of the extract it matches.

Extract A

For a whole summer I was the only one in my swimming class who would not let go of the pool wall. The water past the black line looked bottomless, and my legs turned to string whenever Grandma Nadia coaxed me towards the deep end. Twice I hauled myself out, wrapped up in a towel, and announced that I was never getting back in — and twice she somehow talked me down the steps again the following Saturday.

She never once hurried me. 'We have all the mornings in the world,' she would say, counting my kicks out loud in that low, steady voice of hers. What I only pieced together much later was that she had not swum a single stroke until she was a grown woman: the sea had terrified her as a girl, and she had taught herself to swim out of sheer stubbornness. She lives up north near my aunt now, so these days we mostly meet on a screen — but the instant my face goes under, I still hear her counting.

Extract B

Mr Okafor could wring a laugh out of the gloomiest Monday morning. Whenever my clarinet let out one of its duck-like squawks, he would clutch his chest and stagger as though he had been wounded, until the whole room — me included — was helpless with giggles. I came within a whisker of handing the clarinet back to the storeroom in my very first term, because my fingers simply would not land where I told them to.

He would not hear of me stopping. 'Slow is smooth,' he was fond of saying, and he never once pushed me on faster than I could go. Bar by clumsy bar, the squawks slowly turned into something you might charitably call a tune. He retired at the close of last year and moved away down the coast, so I know I will never sit in his cluttered little music room again. Even so, these days when the new Year 3 boy across the aisle squeaks exactly the way I used to, I am the one who leans across to show him where his fingers belong.

Extract C

Everyone in my family can talk the hind leg off a donkey — everyone but me. So when I was chosen to give the welcome speech at our school's open night, a cousin actually laughed out loud and said I would forget my own name the moment I reached the microphone. I half believed him. For a solid week my stomach knotted itself every time I imagined that hall full of watching faces.

My aunt Priya sat with me every single evening, and we went over the speech until I could have recited it in my sleep — every pause and breath pencilled onto the card. What took me aback was her confession that she still feels queasy before she speaks up at her own work meetings, even after all these years; she simply squares her shoulders and does it regardless. On the night my voice wobbled on the opening line and then held firm. Afterwards I found myself thinking of my little brother, who dreads being looked at even more than I do, and how much I would like to sit beside him like that when his turn comes.

Extract D

The squall came out of nowhere. One minute the bay was flat and silver; the next our little boat was bucking like a startled horse, rain was driving in sideways, and I was gripping the seat so hard that my knuckles ached, certain we were about to tip straight over. I do not

think I have ever been so frightened in all my life.

My cousin Sam, who is barely three years older than I am, might have been ordering a sandwich for all the alarm in his voice. 'Bow into the waves, feet braced — we will be fine,' he said evenly, and he coaxed the boat around and crept us back toward the jetty. It was only once we were tied up and dripping on the boards that he finally let out a long breath and owned up: his own hands had been shaking the entire time, and he had simply decided that I did not need to see it. Ever since, I have thought that one day, when somebody smaller than me is scared out of their wits, I want to be the one whose voice stays flat and steady.

29. Which writer states plainly that this was the most terrified they have ever been?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

30. Which writer only discovered afterwards that the person steadying them had been just as afraid at the time, yet had deliberately not let it show?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

31. Which writer came to realise that their helper had once been frightened of the very skill they were now passing on, and had mastered it in spite of that?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

32. Which writer fondly remembers a helper who could lighten a dreary day with a bit of clowning?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

33. Which writer actually stopped and walked away partway through, more than once, before being coaxed into carrying on?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

34. Which writer's guiding figure has stepped away for good — no longer in their old role and settled somewhere distant?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

35. Which writer hopes that one day, in a moment of real danger, they can be the steadying presence for someone more frightened than themselves?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

36. Which writer was reassured that there was no need to hurry, because there was all the time they could want?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

37. Which writer learned that the person encouraging them is still unsettled by that very challenge even now, and gets through it only by steeling themselves and pressing on regardless?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

38. Which writer, once helped through their own nervousness, would like to be there for a shy young relative facing the same ordeal?

Answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

Answers and next steps

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