

# The Guardian, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015

## Dear Ms Morgan: in grammar there isn't always one right answer

I can understand that you may not have had a chance to look at the [2016 sample test \[pdf\]](#) for key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling. It suffers from a severe case of terminology-itis. The symptoms are: a) an assumption that there is universal agreement on all the names, structures and functions of bits of language in this test – there isn't; b) the best way to achieve coherence and effectiveness in children's writing comes from getting them to learn these names – there is no evidence for this; c) that the hours of teaching-time required to teach these names could not be better spent helping children to do detailed comparative work on different kinds of texts, investigating, interpreting and experimenting, while keeping in mind the objective of enabling all children to write coherently and interestingly.

Though this test's apparent purpose is to examine children's knowledge of language, I think its main purpose is to grade children. That's why some of the questions are based on stacked-up levels of abstraction and some are trick questions.

As some of the test involves four-way multiple-choice questions, will your department put out the directive: "If you are in doubt about an answer, tick any box – you have a one in four chance of being right. Remember that a part of doing tests well has nothing to do with what you know about the subject, and a lot to do with what you know about passing exams"?

The [Spag test](#) was brought in on the evidence-free assumption that spelling, punctuation and grammar questions have "right and wrong answers" (see [Bew Report 2011 \[pdf\]](#)). This statement is factually wrong as shown by this test: question 2 asks children to choose verb forms to put into a sentence, for which there is only one "right" answer. I can think of two correct answers. Question 3 asks children to match prefixes to words. There are two common right answers for one of them and a rare one for another.

The terminology that the test uses is not simply "right". Question 41 assumes there is a "subjunctive" in English. Many linguists think there isn't. The working party that advised the government recommended that it should be avoided altogether. I've been told by one of the working party that "the minister" overruled them. Question 31 asks the children to spot a "command". The meaning of two of the questions is that they are

commands, but only one uses the “imperative” form. This is a trick question to lure children into choosing the “wrong” command.

Two of the questions make the assumption that a given punctuation mark is the only right one, all that the children have to do is decide where it goes. Both examples are a matter of style not correct usage.

After centuries of telling us that “joining words” are called “conjunctions”, several years ago the word “connective” turned up in every classroom. This test talks only of “conjunctions”. Again, teachers have been sweating over “fronted adverbials” for the past few years. In question 47, one of them appears as an “adverb”. Perhaps, this sort of thing doesn’t confuse you, Ms Morgan, but teachers and pupils might be excused for drowning in it.

Linguists make distinctions between different kinds of language-use. Other linguists may well disagree, as with question 38, which asks the children to spot the difference between a “subordinating conjunction” and a “preposition” where it is the same word, “after”. Question 44 asks them to spot the “present perfect”. These two questions have little more usefulness for non-specialists than collecting car names.

Question 42 is problematic because it includes a number as a “determiner”. Children and teachers will be entitled to be muddled if they’ve been taught that “my”, “your”, “her”, “his” and “their” are also “determiners” because in question 46 they turn up as “possessive pronouns”. (Both terms are right, but this double terminology is confusing for 11-year-olds.) Question 26 requires the historical knowledge that “Tudor” comes with a capital letter. Under the new national curriculum, 11-year-olds will not reach the Tudors. Question 30 describes a tense as “past progressive” where many call it “past continuous”.

The terminology of the test’s name is problematic: questions 19 and 23 are not about spelling, punctuation or grammar. They are about “vocabulary” (synonyms and antonyms). It’s ironic that a test on grammar (which emphasises the importance of categories) should contain such a category shift. I would add, Ms Morgan, if you’re interested in writing, it’s more useful to discuss how those words that are called “synonyms” by examiners express subtly different things.

But are the people who devised this test really interested in writing? I doubt it.

**Yours, Michael Rosen**