

# Why Today's Students Can't Pass This 1922 College Entrance Exam

For generations, each autumn has bestowed the unofficial arrival of adulthood on young people as they head off to college for the first time.

But while the entrance into the Ivy Halls has occurred for years, one part of that ritual seems to have disappeared, namely, the entrance examination.

Oh sure, we have SATs and ACTs which are taken with religious fervor by any student who wants to advance to higher education, but there seems to be quite a different flavor between those and the examinations of the past.

Take, for instance, the [1922 English entrance examination](#) for the University of Illinois. The first section contains five elements with multiple questions. Students were asked to choose two in each group and answer them in written form. This requirement – written, not multiple choice like a majority of today's SAT-like exams – is the first difference between the two.

But the second difference is even more striking. Where modern SAT exams provide students with a [passage of reading material](#) on the spot, and then ask various questions on that passage, the 1922 entrance exam seems to expect students to have read and be on familiar speaking terms with any number of works. These include Old Testament stories, a range of Shakespearian plays, English literature, and poetry, as demonstrated in the sample questions below:

1. "Describe the conditions causing Achilles to stop fighting."

2. "What was Franklin's plan for the union of the colonies? Discuss his arguments in favor of it."
3. "What characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are more than mere types? Defend your answer."
4. "Summarize the chief ideas you gained from reading one of Thackeray's essays in the *English Humorist*."
5. "Point out four distinctly Poesque characteristics marking *The Raven*."

One might argue that just because today's entrance exams don't ask such thorough and probing questions doesn't mean that high school students are not familiar with a wide range of classic and historical works. Unfortunately, the experience of university professors such as Allan Bloom suggest otherwise.

In 1987, Bloom [wrote](#) that the decline of student reading habits first became evident in the 1960s. He notes that while there may be a few who "grazed" on classics in high school, "The notion of books as companions is foreign to them." Lacking in this knowledge, students also have a much narrower lens through which to view and interpret the world:

*"In a less grandiose vein, students today have nothing like the Dickens who gave so many of us the unforgettable Pecksniffs, Micawbers, Pips, with which we sharpened our vision, allowing us some subtlety in our distinction of human types. It is a complex set of experiences that enables one to say so simply, 'He is a Scrooge.' Without literature, no such observations are possible and the fine art of comparison is lost. The psychological obtuseness of our students is appalling, because they have only pop psychology to tell them what people are like, and the range of their motives. As the awareness that we owed almost exclusively to literary genius falters, people become more alike, for want of knowing they can be otherwise. What poor substitutes for real diversity are the wild rainbows of dyed hair and other external differences that tell the observer nothing about what is inside."*

Bloom goes on to hint that this scenario has devastating consequences not only for students, but also for the country which they will one day govern:

*“Lack of education simply results in students’ seeking for enlightenment wherever it is readily available, without being able to distinguish between the sublime and trash, insight and propaganda.”*

If we want to prevent the next generation from becoming victims to propaganda, do we need to ensure that our schools are giving students a more well-rounded training in the books and ideas which have come down to us through history?

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