



Cambridge O Level

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

1123/11

Paper 1 Reading

October/November 2025

INSERT

2 hours

INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading passages.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.



This document has **8** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

Read **Text A** and answer **Question 1** and **Question 2** on the question paper.

Text A: *The circus train*

This story is set over 90 years ago. Jacob Jankowski has left his previous life behind and set off in search of a new beginning.

- 1 I stop because I'm tired, hungry and have no idea where I am. The only sign of civilisation is a railway track which rests on a raised bed of gravel and rattles faintly in the darkness. A warning whistle shrieks and a massive engine explodes around the bend, thumping along the track. It is huge and churns out rolling clouds of billowing smoke, passing so close I'm hit by a wall of wind. The sudden sight, sound and stink are too much. I watch, stunned, as the first carriages whoosh by, loaded with what look oddly like telephone poles. 5
- 2 I snap out of my stupor. There are people on that train. Wherever it's going, it's travelling towards civilisation and food. I start running in the same direction as the train, scanning desperately for something to grab on to. Spotting an open door, I lunge forwards, reaching for the iron grab-bar and flinging myself upwards. My left foot and elbow hit first, and then my chin smashes onto the metal edging. I cling tightly and after a couple of seconds realise I'm still intact. I open my eyes and consider my options. There's no dismounting without going under the train. I pull myself upwards with everything I've got, scraping my way inside and collapsing on the carriage floor. 10
- 3 I lie panting, then jerk upright on my elbow – two men are staring at me. 15
 'What have we here?' says one, an old man, holding a lantern in my face.
 I scramble to my feet and stumble backwards, only to find that there's nowhere to go.
 The old man squints at me: 'What's your name, boy?'
 'Jacob Jankowski,' I reply.
 'Who's he running from, Camel?' asks the other man from the darkness. 20
 I pause.
 The old man's face hardens. 'You done something?'
 'No,' I say. He squints again and then nods.
 'You out of work?'
 'Yes, sir.' 25
 'You like circuses?'
 I must look puzzled because Camel lets loose with a toothless cackle. 'Kid, don't tell me you didn't notice.'
 'Notice what?' I ask.
 'Ah, that's hilarious,' he says, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. 'You landed on a circus train, boy.' 30
 I blink at him. 'That there's the circus tent – the big top,' he says, waving the lamp at great faded rolls of canvas. 'And this man here is Uncle Al.'
- 4 There's no mistaking Uncle Al as he steps forwards theatrically into the pool of lantern light. He has showman written all over him, from his ridiculously curled moustache and huge belly to his booming voice: 'So, just looking for adventure, Mr College Boy?' He's smirking, clearly amused. 35
 'No, sir, I ...'
 'Is he right?' interrupts Camel. 'Are you a college boy?'
 I feel like a mouse being bounced between two cats. 40
 'I was.'
 'Study something useful?' Uncle Al's eyes gleam in mockery.
 'I studied veterinary sciences.'
 His expression changes instantly: 'Vet school? You're a vet?'
 'Not exactly. I never wrote my final exams.' 45
 'Why not?'

'I just didn't.'

'And those final exams, those were in your final year?'

'Yes.'

Camel and Uncle Al exchange glances.

50

- 5 I'm escorted to the giraffe's carriage. There's pus flowing down the giraffe's long nasal passage. She seems sad imprisoned here. She's the most elegant creature I've ever seen. Her legs and neck are delicate; her body is sloped and covered with markings like puzzle pieces to the top of her triangular head. Her eyes are huge, dark and beautiful, and she has velvet-soft lips. She's wearing a rope around her neck which I hold, but she's too weak to move as I swab out her infected nostrils and swaddle her throat in a soft cloth. When I'm finished, they let me sleep. 55
- 6 When I finally awake, the train has stopped. Camel leans in through the carriage door. 'Come on, kid,' he says. I get off the train and follow him. 60
It's late but this southern sun is still burning in a flame red sky. The terrain is flatter here too with dry, brown, trampled grass. At the edges, near the track, canvas tents have popped up like mushrooms.
- 7 Camel nods his head at the largest tent – obviously the big top. 'Want to take a peek?' I peer inside through a small hole in the canvas: the tent is massive, supported by long, straight poles jutting at various angles. The canvas is taut and nearly translucent – fading sunlight filters through the material. With the rigging on the poles, it looks like the deck and mast of a pirate sailboat. 65
- 8 Brilliantly painted red and gold cages, their sides propped open to reveal lions and tigers, hypnotise the captive audience. Llamas and zebras bring wild whoops of delight. The big top is packed solid, glowing and pulsing with the sound of the audience laughing, clapping and whistling. Sometimes there's a collective intake of breath or ripple of nervous squeals as a trapeze flies by. The elephant looms against the far sidewall, an enormous beast the colour of storm clouds. She's gargantuan. Her skin is mottled and cracked like a scorched riverbed. She trots forwards and the crowd erupts with glee. 75
- 9 'Listen,' says Camel softly. 'If you got a life to go back to, I reckon that's what you should do.' 'Too late,' I say. 'I'm staying.'

Read **Text B** and answer **Question 3** on the question paper.

Text B: Climbing Mount Everest

This text discusses the popular challenge of climbing the world's tallest mountain above sea level.

- 1 Ever since Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay and New Zealand climber Edmund Hillary became the first recorded individuals to reach the top of Sagarmatha, the Nepali name for Mount Everest, in 1953, the numbers attempting to emulate their greatness have skyrocketed. By 1980, 112 people had reached the summit. By 2018, it was over 9000 people. With the increase in visitors in recent years, many locals now run tourism businesses, ranging from eateries to guesthouses, to cater for the sheer numbers descending on them. 5
- 2 Lists are published online of people who climbed Everest in the 20th century. The list for the 21st century doesn't exist, nor is it likely to. Something that over 800 people now do in any given year just isn't that notable. Today's smug social media photos of the path to the summit of Everest show climbers literally queueing on the mountain. 10
- 3 The Sherpa indigenous community in Nepal has lived in the harsh conditions among the world's tallest mountains for centuries. Every year, Sherpas guide foreign adventurers on excursions to Earth's highest peaks. That wasn't the case when Norgay and Hillary first summited Everest in 1953. Doing it first, figuring out how to do it, was part of what made them the best. 15
- 4 When did this monumental achievement in human history become something anyone reasonably fit can just pay people to help them do? Nowadays, teams of elite Sherpas, known as 'icefall doctors', trek up Everest to fix the hi-tech ropes and ladders that make it easier for their clients to climb. Other Sherpas carry heavy loads on their backs so that clients can travel light. When reading old accounts of mountaineering expeditions, we see that Sherpas achieved amazing feats, but their achievements were never highlighted. Foreign adventurers would say something like, 'I climbed the mountain and around seven Sherpas helped' – they didn't even know their names! 20
- 5 Since then a whole service industry has developed around mountaineering. Facilitated by hired Sherpas and ultra-modern equipment, today's summiteers justify their indulgence with claims of raising awareness of climate change or contributing to the local economy. Tourism is a large part of the Nepali economy, and Nepal is definitely worth visiting. The majority of activities travellers can enjoy (trekking, rafting, kayaking) are much more affordable, equally beneficial for your mental health and pose a significantly lower risk to life. If mountain climbing really is your thing, there are numerous other peaks in Nepal that can be climbed for much less money. 25
- 6 What sets Everest apart is that many of the people who now attempt to climb it aren't necessarily professional or seasoned mountain climbers. But climbing Everest is not the only way to see the mountain. Trekking routes in the area provide glorious views. And when travelling through Nepal, by booking activities and accommodation with local providers, you're directly contributing to the livelihoods of ordinary Nepali people. 30
- 7 Anyone still tempted to climb what technically isn't even the tallest mountain in the world (if you consider other mountains that begin below sea level) needs to hurry up. The glaciers of Everest are melting at an exponential rate, making the ice that's left much less stable and more dangerous. 35
- 8 The impact of humans on even the highest reaches of our planet hasn't gone unnoticed. Samples of microplastic were recently found on Everest – the highest point above sea level where microplastic had ever been recorded. Some climbers apparently don't care about their 40

belongings, abandoning them on their way back down. In recent years, both the government and the Sherpas have been proactively trying to clean the mountain, bringing in new rules to help with waste management. 45

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