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1 ENGLISH LANGUAGE

It's what we speak and write every day of our lives, but how well do we do it? Do we really understand the words we use, or how to put them together accurately and effectively? Have a go at these tests and see just how competent you are in your mother tongue.

1 Parts of Speech

Purists argue about what exactly constitutes a ‘part of speech’ and therefore how many of them there are, but let’s not go there: let’s say there are nine. These are noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction, determiner and interjection. They are the building blocks of a sentence and each performs a separate function. As I am sure you know – or used to know.

So rather than patronize you by telling you that a noun is a naming word and a verb is a doing word, let’s try you out on a few sample sentences. Underline, circle, highlight or just shout out the nouns, pronouns and adjectives in the following:

1. In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice.
2. The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom.
3. At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of a meditation and a meerschaum.

2 Parts of Speech 2

Now let's try verbs, adverbs and prepositions – and remember that it's possible for a verb to be made up of more than one word.

1. It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.
2. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind.
3. The family of Dashwood had been long settled in Sussex.

3 Parts of Speech 3

Finally, spot the conjunctions, determiners and interjections in this extract:

'Ahem!' said Mr Micawber, clearing his throat, and warming with the punch and with the fire. 'My dear, another glass?'

Mrs Micawber said it must be very little; but we couldn't allow that, so it was a glassful.

4 Keep It Simple

One of the first rules of good writing is never to use a big word when a little one will do. A rule, of course, that is made to be broken, because some of the big words are irresistible. But it's worth bearing in mind, so that if someone accuses you of being pretentious, you can at least claim to be being pretentious on purpose.

Whatever your motives, can you match the fancy word in the upper list to the everyday alternatives in the lower?

1. Desipient
 2. Effulgent
 3. Inchoate
 4. Lachrymose
 5. Lubricious
 6. Meretricious
 7. Minutious
 8. Nugatory
 9. Otiose
 10. Piligerous
-
- A. Foolish
 - B. Hairy
 - C. Lewd
 - D. Nit-picking
 - E. Prone to weeping
 - F. Rudimentary, immature
 - G. Shining brightly
 - H. Superficially attractive, insincere
 - I. Trifling, of little importance
 - J. Useless, serving no purpose