

**Queen's College**  
**Mock Examination 2019-2020**  
**English Language Paper 1**  
**Reading**

Secondary 6

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 20 January 2020

Time: 8:30 am – 10:00 am

Maximum Mark: 60

**Reading Passages Booklet**

**Instructions:**

1. Write your Class and Class Number in the spaces provided.
2. Attempt ALL questions.
3. The reading passages are in a separate booklet. Write your answers clearly and neatly in the spaces provided in the Question-Answer Book. You are advised to use a pen to write your answers.
4. For multiple-choice questions, you are advised to blacken the appropriate circle with a pencil so that wrong marks can be completely erased with a clean rubber. Mark only ONE answer to each question. Two or more answers will score NO MARKS.

## PART A

Read Texts 1–2 and answer questions 1–24 in the Question-Answer Book for Part A.

### Text 1

#### I. A scarce new world

1 [1] Anyone plugged into today’s vast digital world knows that it can be a rabbit hole of distractions. Our phones  
and computers present us with an endless barrage of ads, apps and websites that all busily vie for our attention.  
With a dizzying amount of content and information readily accessible, consumer attention has become a scarce  
5 resource. As often happens with scarce resources, an entire economy has arisen around it: the attention  
economy.

[2] In a new take on the traditional business model, the attention economy treats attention as a commodity that  
can be bought and sold. Today’s biggest tech companies earn their profits not by selling products and services  
to consumers, but by selling consumer attention to advertisers. And business is booming. The more page views  
and clicks a tech company can generate, the more profit it can earn through its advertising sales. As a result,  
10 big tech companies are endlessly searching for innovative new ways to capture and hold users’ attention.

#### II. \_\_\_\_\_

[3] This relentless battle for our attention is taking a serious toll on our society, altering both our minds and  
our culture. The attention industry has left us in a state of near-permanent distraction. As we constantly flit  
back and forth from one thing to the next, we are increasingly losing our ability to focus properly. According  
15 to a 2015 study conducted by Microsoft, our attention span has tanked in recent years. At the turn of the  
century, before the mobile tech revolution, the average attention span was about twelve seconds. Today, it’s  
closer to eight seconds. This sharp drop should be cause for alarm. What will our minds be like in another few  
decades?

[4] Tech industry expert and author Tim Wu has studied the attention economy extensively and found similar  
shortcomings in our current capacity to maintain focused attention. ‘We’re prone in this culture to lose control  
of our attention and our time. We’re constantly getting swept up into various kinds of vortexes, where you lose  
hours of the day clicking on random nothingness,’ he said in an interview. This phenomenon is one most of us  
20 are well familiar with, but the fact that it’s so common only makes it more disturbing.

[5] ‘I do think it’s become considerably harder in our environment to enter important deep states of focus and  
concentration, because we surround ourselves with technology, whose business model is to distract us,’ said  
Wu, who views chronic distraction as an intimate feature of the attention economy. ‘The attention industry  
needs people who are in a distracted state, or who are perpetually distractable, and thus open to advertising.’  
The less focused we are, the more susceptible we are to the myriad of suggestions made to us by the parade of  
25 advertisements marching across our screens.

#### III. \_\_\_\_\_

[6] Even tech insiders are starting to acknowledge the severity of the problems associated with the attention  
economy. Tristan Harris, an ex-employee of Google, has been an outspoken critic of the tech industry and has  
frequently pointed out the negative effects that increased digitalization is having on our minds. According to  
Harris, the attention economy has ‘manipulated our emotions’ to the point that ‘we are so distracted and  
35 polarized and anxious that we are ceasing to function as a society’. Harris refers to this process as ‘human  
downgrading,’ a loss in certain basic human capabilities due to our perpetually distracted state. This  
degradation is not just limited to cognitive functions like attention spans. It also involves other fundamental  
aspects of human experience, such as relationships and even common decency.

[7] The problem is poised to get even worse. As machines develop a better understanding of our emotional  
weak spots, they will better be able to exploit these weaknesses for commercial purposes. Increasingly detailed  
and targeted algorithms will be able to direct our attention to specific online content, keeping us forever focused  
40 on our screens.

#### IV. \_\_\_\_\_

45 [8] If the attention economy continues to grow at its present rate, we could be facing dire personal and social consequences. We need to find ways to combat the endless distractions coming at us via our electronic devices. We need to develop a resistance to the attention economy. The human mind—our consciousness as we know it—is at stake.

#### Text 2

##### Jackie Lam on the dark side of the attention economy

1 [1] In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the darker aspects of the tech industry. We're starting to confront the reality that our most cherished electronic devices may actually be doing us harm. The emergence of the so-called attention economy, which traffics in our attention, has transformed us into an army of highly distracted customers, clicking on anything and everything that catches our eye. Dr Jackie Lam, a sociologist who specializes in the tech industry, talks to us about the attention economy, its history, and possible solutions to the problems it has created.

##### How did the attention economy get started, Dr Lam?

10 [2] Well ... it's really an offshoot of the advertising industry. To properly understand the attention economy, we need to understand the history of the advertising industry. It's important to recognize that advertising and technology have always had a close relationship. Every time a new communication technology has been introduced into society, advertisers have jumped all over it. We saw this in the 1920s when ads first appeared on the radio. And with television ads in the 1950s. And we're seeing it again now with ads on our smartphones and computers. The difference today is that we carry our smartphones with us wherever we go. So for the first time in history, advertisers have access to us almost twenty-four hours a day. This has created the high levels of distraction we're seeing in people today.

##### What are some solutions to this problem?

20 [3] That's a complicated question. Some people insist that the only solution to these problems is to step away from the Internet. But this isn't a realistic option for most of us. Another solution I've heard floating around is to encourage users to pay for ad-free content. But I think we need to start treating attention like a real industry, because that's exactly what it has become. That means it should be regulated just like other industries. We need our lawmakers to step in with bold ideas.

##### Isn't this also a matter of personal responsibility? Aren't people ultimately responsible for what they're paying attention to?

25 [4] I think this misses the point. You need to remember that these tech companies expend huge amounts of resources trying to find ways to manipulate us into paying attention to them. It's hard for an individual person to resist that kind of enormous collective effort.

## Part B

Read Text 3 and answer questions 25–48 in the Question-Answer Book for Part B.

### Text 3

#### Stuck in a dopamine loop: how technology companies design their sites to be addictive

1 [1] Every minute millions of tech users around the world realize the quick thrill of a new ‘like’, a  
notification, or a comment on a social media post. These built-in reward features on our favourite apps and  
websites are purposely designed to stimulate our brain’s neural network in a way that leaves us wanting  
more and more. It’s all part of the basic psychology underpinning today’s most popular technology, which  
5 is designed to be incredibly addictive.

[2] Finding ways to stoke our addictive tendencies is a big business today. After all, the more addictive a  
website is, the more hours people will spend scrolling around it. The world’s biggest technology companies  
have long understood this simple truth; as a result, they have long been mining the science of psychology  
to figure out exactly what causes addictive behaviour. It turns out that one key factor in hooking users is  
10 the neurotransmitter dopamine.

[3] Dopamine is closely connected to our motivational drive. According to the behavioural psychologist  
Susan Weinschenk, dopamine ‘propels you to take action’. The chemical, produced in the brain, causes us  
to seek out rewards. And when a particular behaviour earns us a reward, our brains release even more  
dopamine. This, in turn, encourages us to seek out further rewards. Weinschenk describes this as the  
15 dopamine loop. It helps create associations between certain behaviours and rewards, making it a positive  
reinforcement system. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense. It’s the brain’s way of  
encouraging beneficial behaviours. But modern technology companies have exploited this neural  
mechanism for their own purposes and profits.

[4] Companies like Facebook and Twitter have carefully created reward systems on their platforms to feed  
20 directly into our dopamine loops. The rewards that are offered are virtual, of course, but they work on our  
brains in the same way that more tangible rewards do: they give us a dopamine hit, which ensures that we  
keep coming back. We are especially receptive to the reward systems on social media sites, because these  
rewards—in the form of ‘likes’, new followers and friend requests—target our inherent human desire for  
25 social validation and peer approval. It’s almost impossible for the brain not to respond to this form of  
recognition. We are all intensely vulnerable to the threat of social isolation, a vulnerability that social  
media companies have capitalized on to the fullest.

[5] The unsurprising effect of these addictive-by-design platforms is that they have caused a staggering  
dependence among users. Aidan Yip, a seventeen-year-old Hong Kong student, is a case study in Internet  
addiction. He joined his first social media site when he was twelve, and within a couple of years was  
30 spending the majority of his time online. ‘Some days I spent more than ten hours on social media sites,’ he  
said. ‘I had thousands of online friends across a bunch of different platforms. I felt like I always had to be  
online, just in case someone liked or commented on my latest posts.’ Although Aidan’s virtual social life  
was thriving, his real life was tipping towards disaster. Because he was consumed by his social media  
accounts, he ignored his schoolwork, his grades slipped, and his real-life relationships—especially with his  
35 family members—started to deteriorate.

[6] ‘At the height of his addiction, Aidan barely talked to us anymore,’ says Catherine Yip, Aidan’s  
mother. ‘He sat in his room, staring at his phone all day. I had no idea what he was doing online. I felt like  
I didn’t know my own son any more.’

[7] Although Aidan’s parents were able to find help for him at an addiction recovery centre, the issue  
40 continues to lurk in the family’s background. ‘It’s always there,’ says Catherine. ‘Every time he uses the  
computer, I’m worried that he may be slipping back into his old, destructive habits.’ Because it’s virtually  
impossible to be Internet-free, Aidan is forced into daily confrontations with his addiction. It’s an ongoing  
struggle. ‘I’ve learnt how to restrict my Internet use, especially on social media. But to be honest, I’m still  
always tempted to lose myself in the online world,’ he says.

45 **[8]** Aidan’s case may be extreme, but he is far from alone. Recent studies have shown that on average  
people check their mobile phones anywhere from 80 to 150 times a day, desperately awaiting the  
gratification of a fresh reward. But as with most addictions, people tend to develop a tolerance to the  
addictive substance, which requires them to get ever-increasing doses before they realize the same degree  
of satisfaction. In effect, this means that people’s Internet use quickly escalates as they search for their next  
50 hit.

**[9]** With so many of us glued to our screens, trapped in our dopamine loops, the problem of addictive  
technology is threatening to become epidemic. The devastating consequences are already reverberating  
throughout the entire society. Chamath Palihapitiya, a former senior executive at Facebook, recently  
addressed some of these consequences. ‘The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we’ve created  
55 are destroying how society works,’ he said at an event at Stanford University. ‘No civil discourse, no  
cooperation; misinformation and mistruth.’ Instead of seeking truth or engaging in meaningful  
conversations with each other online, we are simply seeking to feed our dopamine loops.

**[10]** Palihapitiya is not alone in his concern that technology companies have gone too far. Adam Adler,  
author of *Irresistible*, a book that lays out many discomfoting effects of the digital age, has raised similar  
60 concerns. Adler has discussed how certain major companies, like Google, have started to create positions  
for ethicists to try to address some of the problems inherent in their platforms. Employing an ethicist  
‘suggests at least to me that they’re concerned about the addictiveness of the products,’ explains Adler. But  
whether these companies are genuinely concerned about users’ health or merely engaging in a public  
relations effort remains to be seen.

65 **[11]** The deliberately addictive properties of today’s websites and apps likely won’t be dismantled any time  
soon. But understanding the science behind these addictive designs may help us move away from the  
endless search for gratification from virtual—but trivial—rewards.

#### Comments

**Gary** 19 August 1:13

70 Internet addiction is a potentially tragic issue that is not taken seriously enough in our society. I’m glad to  
read an article that actually addresses this issue and puts the blame for it on the right people: the executives  
at these major technology companies. It’s outrageous that these companies are allowed to profit off our  
vulnerabilities. We need to start regulating and fining these companies, because they obviously won’t  
regulate themselves.

75 **Jessica** 20 August 12:42

I’m so tired of reading these articles about the woes of modern technology. Social media has been an  
amazing revolution. It’s made it possible for me to stay in touch with friends all across the world. Why  
don’t we talk about the upsides of this technology as well? If you don’t like social media or can’t handle it,  
stay off it!

80 **Kim** 20 August 13:28

The story of Aidan struck a chord with me. As a high school teacher, I’ve seen dozens of students waste  
their time and their potential on online nonsense. It’s heartbreaking to watch.

**END OF READING PASSAGES**

