Answering the Question ... (B)

' BLACK – RED – GREEN ' / + *SHADOW–WORDS*

[INTRODUCTION]

INTELLIGENCE TEST : 'Perform the following 20 tasks. You have 10 minutes.'

In the test, this is followed by a list of 20 tasks – mostly quite straightforward but *very* time-consuming. Even the clever and the quick get *nowhere*. Look on ye Mighty, and Despair!

And yet, some participants complete the sheet quite easily. How? Because:

> **TASK 1**   says **'Read everything on this sheet before you begin.'**

and   **TASK 20**   says **'Ignore Tasks 2 $\rightarrow$ 19. Just sign below & hand this in.'**

Such 'tests' provide an excellent demonstration of 'NON-READING' $=$ a tendency to…

- **'dive in'**
- **read without actually registering**
- **read things into the question that aren't there**
- **'not hear' what the question is after**

Misreading is an epidemic – and not just in exams and assignments. Have you ever …

- **Received feedback: "Not *bad* … but you didn't answer the question" ?**
  - **Got a grade that fails to reflect your (enormous) graft ?**
  - **Rushed assignments – left them to the last minute ?**
  - **Neglected to `make/ check/ revise` an essay plan ?**
  - **More or less hammered out what you were *going* to say anyway ?**
- **Based your answer on a chunk of textbook or on recycled lecture notes ?**
  - **Imitated a similar answer / stock response from somewhere else ?**
  - **Just 'played it safe' & written what you already knew about ?**

The latter is comforting – but only temporarily. Ignoring the question *never* impresses.

So, imagine you're in the hot-seat with a question in front of you. It's best to …

Make sure you answer the ACTUAL question...

> ... not the one in your HEAD
>
> [**use 'Black – Red – Green' technique**]

Play to your STRENGTHS...

> ... but cover all the *IMPLIED* areas too
>
> [**use *'ShadoW–WordS'* technique**]

ANSWERING the QUESTION...(B) : The '**Black – Red – Green**' Method

Imagine you've got an exam or essay question in front of you. You already have some sense of what the subject's about, or have spent some time reading up on it. What next?

Crazy as it sounds, check you're ANSWERING THE QUESTION ! Do you *really* understand what it's looking for? Or have you 'heard what you want to hear', missed some vital clue, gone miles off track? In confusion (or anxiety) it's tempting to regurgitate lecture notes or stock opinions; people can get so stressed (especially in exams) that they'll hammer out an argument they feel secure about, but which actually has (sadly) scant relevance to the question set.

So, here are **two** techniques I've developed for interpreting questions in a thorough way:

WORD by WORD (or PHRASE by PHRASE)	Examine <u>every</u> word in the question, one after the other. 'Unpack' <u>each phrase or word</u> for all its implications.
OVERALL PATTERN	Consider the question's pattern of ideas and expectations as <u>a whole</u>. Cover all the terrain: overtly required *and* implied.

These are really just ways of making sure you read the question – and take it in – on several levels. Hence they're as much an attitude, or state of attention, as they are techniques. These aren't the only techniques of course, and you should feel free to develop your own approach. Here, though, I focus on the **WORD by WORD** method. It's pretty simple, with 2 main stages …

STAGE I   (Covering the Question; Creating Notes)

- Find pens or pencils in these **three colours**: BLACK, **RED**, GREEN. Now go through the question, carefully, underlining words or phrases according to this colour code:

<u>BLA</u>CK =	<u>BLA</u>tant Instruction	Something you clearly *must* do; a directive.
RED =	**RE**ference Point ; **RE**quired Input	Any definition, term, author, theory, particular text, idea (either referred to *or* strongly implied).
GREEN =	GREmlin 'GREEN Light'	= Subtle signal, easily missed (to your cost !) = Hint on: how to proceed, desired emphasis, etc.

Don't overdo **BLACK**. *Home in on* **specific** *demands (eg 'Compare* <u>all</u> *the texts, using* <u>2 or more</u> *of the criteria …')*
Broadly, **RED** *refers to anything in the 'knowledge base' (facts, authors, theories, etc) that you'll need to draw on.*

- Ideally, **most of the words** in the question (including quotes) should get underlined in one (or more) of the colours. Make sure you cover *all* significant phrases. If any large sections remain un-coloured, discuss them with your tutor: have you missed something?

- Now, using a large sheet of paper, list all your **ideas, thoughts & reactions** for each coloured segment. Give attention to each section in turn, remembering what its colour stands for [with GREEN, the *ShadoW–WordS* handout can be very useful]. Spend time on this process. Brainstorm. Refer to related books and notes. Make links. Be inventive.

STAGE II   (Using 'Stage I' notes: Planning & Checking)

Reassess your notes. Are they thorough enough? Suitably to the point? What are the key ideas, links, insights? Importantly, do the notes already suggest a good structure for your answer? When it comes to writing the piece itself (an essay, say) use your notes at least <u>twice</u> :

- <u>Near the **start of the process**</u>: to help you write a **Core Statement** &/or to structure an **Essay Plan** covering <u>all</u> the main expectations of the question. You can either use a structure you know, or else find/ invent one to suit (see the '13 Ways').

- <u>Near the **end**</u>, to ensure you've included <u>all</u> key points, with suitable emphasis. Also to check: (BLACK) you didn't miss any specific instructions; (**RED**) all named & implied references have been dealt with; (GREEN) you picked up hints on which directions to take/avoid + any *ShadoW–Word* subtleties regarding style, depth, approach, etc.

Finally, if you wish, bring in my second technique: i.e. briefly consider the 'OVERALL PATTERN' of the question (see the first box, above) and check your answer is in harmony with it. This activity also helps to compensate for any 'reductionism' that might have slipped into Stage I.

FOOTNOTE:	**Stage I** is something akin to 'Deconstruction' (with deep attention to the detail) while **Stage II** is a form of 'Reconstruction' (which responds to the 'overall pattern').

Answering the Question…(B): **'BLACK – RED – GREEN' Method (summary)**

WORD by WORD   (or PHRASE by PHRASE)

- Examine <u>every</u> word in the question, one after the other.
  - 'Unpack' <u>each phrase or word</u> for all its implications.

STAGE I   Covering the Question; Creating Notes.

Go right through the question, <u>underlining</u> words and phrases using the following **colour code:**

BLACK =   <u>BLA</u> **tant Instruction**
Something you *must* do. A clear directive or 'order'.

RED   =   <u>RE</u> **ference Point /** <u>RE</u> **quired Input**
Any technical term, author, theory, text or idea …
(*either* specifically referred to *or* implied).

GREEN =   <u>GRE</u> **mlin** + **'<u>GREEN</u> Light'**
A subtle signal, easily missed + Any hint on how to proceed
or on desired emphasis, style, etc (see *'ShadoW-WordS'*).

BLACK: *Try to underline only the **specific** demands … eg:*
                'Evaluate <u>four</u> texts, using <u>at least two</u> of the following criteria …'

RED: *Refers to anything in the 'knowledge base' (facts, authors, theories, etc).*

Make sure <u>MOST</u> words get underlined with (at least) 1 colour.

For each coloured segment, list **ideas, thoughts & reactions** …

Give attention to each segment in turn.
Remember what its colour stands for.
*For GREEN, use '**ShadoW–WordS**'.*
Brainstorm. Make links.

STAGE II   Use 'Stage I' notes <u>twice</u>, to plan & check …

<u>Near the **start of the process**</u> … to help with the **Core Statement**
& structure an **Essay Plan** covering <u>all</u> the question's expectations

<u>Near the **end of the process**</u> to ensure you have:

done everything you were specifically asked to do ……..   (**BLACK**)

dealt with all named & implied references ………………..   (**RED**)

picked up hints on <u>how</u> to approach the task +
any subtleties regarding style, depth, detail, etc ………….   (**GREEN**)

(+ included <u>all</u> your key points, with suitable emphasis)

Optional: is your answer in harmony with the question's 'OVERALL PATTERN' of ideas?

'Mission Possible': THE STUDY SKILLS PACK

QUESTIONS ... and their SHADOW–WORDS

Certain words in the question ... cast ... 'Shadows' (= hints on how to answer)

'<u>Consider</u> ...'	=	Weigh up all the possibilities & be attentive to detail
'<u>Discuss</u> ...'	=	Look at several sides to this - then decide what *you* think
'<u>Outline</u> ...'	=	Be selective, relevant & <u>BRIEF</u>
'<u>What kinds of</u> ...'	=	How many kinds *are* there ?
'<u>Argue your case</u> ...'	=	Deal with counter-arguments
'<u>In what ways</u> ...'	=	What about the OTHER ways ?
'<u>To what extent</u> ...'	=	Make a judgement – <u>BUT</u> explore your reservations...
'<u>Show that</u> ...'	=	Solid argument / evidence [in 'show', *how* is the key]

... *etc.*

SHADOW–WORDS can help to generate a ready-made <u>INTRODUCTION</u> ...

- **Use SHADOW–WORDS** to guide your initial thoughts / plans

- Show you've **understood the question** + its **subject area**

- **Outline the terrain**, then **decide on your 'focus'** ...
  (by all means lean towards your strengths & expertise)

  BUT :

  justify that 'focus'...

  i.e. Spell out its relevance to question + Indicate what you've left out (& why)

'Black – Red – Green' : an EXAMPLE

"In particular, we found ourselves responding to voices :

imagined voices, authentic (seemingly tape-recorded) voices,

voices which come at us from unfamiliar places…"

QUOTE   Introduction to *New Writing 12*, page ix
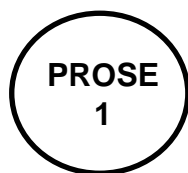
'voices'

QUESTION (based on above quote) **:**

Compare two prose pieces from ***New Writing 12*** and, with the

above quote in mind, consider the ways in which they are

constructed.

Plural !

COMPARATIVE STRUCTURE ?

BLATANT INSTRUCTIONS :

- **NOT POETRY !**
- **TWO PIECES**
- *'in mind' –* **= VIGILANCE (refer amply to quote !)**

PROSE 1

How each VOICE is constructed (several ways)

CONSIDER …

use

ShadoW-WordS

'GREEN LIGHTS'

… & COMPARE

Bring 1 & 2 together

PROSE 2
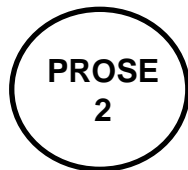
'GREMLIN' : *'in mind…'* **suggests select 1 & 2 cannily (to illustrate quote)**

REFERENCE POINT (implied)

= NW12 context [i.e. voice + British Council?]

'we found ourselves….' = Editorial stance?

Put in INTRO / CONCLUSION ?

REFERENCE POINT (overt)

[quote] Analysis of 'VOICE'

+

REQUIRED DISCUSSION (implied?)

'Imagined' = ? 'Unfamiliar' = ? 'Authentic' = "LIVE" ?

+ HINTS • **'seemingly' (= craft?)**
• **'come at us' (= forceful texts?)**

REQUIRED ANALYSIS (overt)   'constructed'

How is voice constructed? Any theories or accounts of this?

REQUIRED INPUT (overt?)   'the ways'

Enumerate the (various) means: origins, style, tone, 1st person, etc?

INTRO: **REASONS FOR SELECTING 1 & 2**

CONCLUSIONS: **What comparison reveals + Editorial view of the terms 'authenticity' & 'familiar'**