

<http://www.snopes.com/language/document/1895exam.asp>

## 1895 Exam

**Claim:** An 1895 graduation examination for public school students demonstrates a shocking decline in educational standards.

**Status:** *False.*

**Example:** *[Collected on the Internet, 1999]*

Could you have passed the Eight Grade in 1895?  
Probably not . . . take a look:

This is the eighth-grade final exam from 1895 from Salina, KS. It was taken from the original document on file at the Smoky Valley Genealogical Society and Library in Salina, KS and reprinted by the Salina Journal.

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8th Grade Final Exam: Salina, KS - 1895

Grammar (Time, one hour)

1. Give nine rules for the use of Capital Letters.
2. Name the Parts of Speech and define those that have no modifications.
3. Define Verse, Stanza and Paragraph.
4. What are the Principal Parts of a verb? Give Principal parts of do, lie, lay and run.
5. Define Case, Illustrate each Case.
6. What is Punctuation? Give rules for principal marks of Punctuation.
- 7 - 10. Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.

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Arithmetic  
(Time, 1.25 hours)

1. Name and define the Fundamental Rules of Arithmetic.
2. A wagon box is 2 ft. deep, 10 feet long, and 3 ft. wide. How many bushels of wheat will it hold?
3. If a load of wheat weighs 3942 lbs., what is it worth at 50 cts. per bu., deducting 1050 lbs. for tare?
4. District No. 33 has a valuation of \$35,000. What is the necessary levy to carry on a school seven months at \$50 per month, and have \$104 for incidentals?

5. Find cost of 6720 lbs. coal at \$6.00 per ton.
  6. Find the interest of \$512.60 for 8 months and 18 days at 7 percent.
  7. What is the cost of 40 boards 12 inches wide and 16 ft. long at \$20.00 per in?
  8. Find bank discount on \$300 for 90 days (no grace) at 10 percent.
  9. What is the cost of a square farm at \$15 per acre, the distance around which is 640 rods?
  10. Write a Bank Check, a Promissory Note, and a Receipt.
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#### U.S. History (Time, 45 minutes)

1. Give the epochs into which U.S. History is divided.
  2. Give an account of the discovery of America by Columbus.
  3. Relate the causes and results of the Revolutionary War.
  4. Show the territorial growth of the United States.
  5. Tell what you can of the history of Kansas.
  6. Describe three of the most prominent battles of the Rebellion.
  7. Who were the following: Morse, Whitney, Fulton, Bell, Lincoln, Penn, and Howe?
  8. Name events connected with the following dates: 1607, 1620, 1800, 1849, and 1865?
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#### Orthography (Time, one hour)

1. What is meant by the following: Alphabet, phonetic orthography, etymology, syllabication?
2. What are elementary sounds? How classified?
3. What are the following: Alphabet, phonetic orthography, etymology, syllabication?
4. Give four substitutes for caret 'u'.
5. Give two rules for spelling words with final 'e'. Name two exceptions under each rule.
6. Give two uses of silent letters in spelling. Illustrate each.
7. Define the following prefixes and use in connection with a word: Bi, dis, mis, pre, semi, post, non, inter, mono, super.
8. Mark diacritically and divide into syllables the following, and name the sign that indicates the sound: Card, ball, mercy, sir, odd, cell, rise, blood, fare, last.
9. Use the following correctly in sentences, Cite, site, sight, fane, fain, feign, vane, vain

vein, raze, raise, rays.

10. Write 10 words frequently mispronounced and indicate pronunciation by use of diacritical marks and by syllabication.

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### Geography

(Time, one hour)

1. What is climate? Upon what does climate depend?
2. How do you account for the extremes of climate in Kansas?
3. Of what use are rivers? Of what use is the ocean?
4. Describe the mountains of N.A.
5. Name and describe the following: Monrovia, Odessa, Denver, Manitoba, Hecla, Yukon, St. Helena, Juan Fernandez, Aspinwolf and Orinoco.
6. Name and locate the principal trade centers of the U.S.
7. Name all the republics of Europe and give capital of each.
8. Why is the Atlantic Coast colder than the Pacific in the same latitude?
9. Describe the process by which the water of the ocean returns to the sources of rivers.
10. Describe the movements of the earth. Give inclination of the earth.

**Origins:** This item, purportedly a final examination for graduating eighth grade students (or graduating high school students, depending upon which version you have) is of interest because it's supposed to be documentary evidence of how shockingly our educations have declined over the last century or so. Why, most *adults* couldn't muster a passing score on this test today, people think; that mere schoolkids were expected to pass it is proof that the typical school curriculum has been steeply "dumbed down" over the years, pundits claim:

*[Thomasson, 2001]*

The object of this exercise was only to reveal what many of us have known for some time. The dumbing down of American public education over the past 100 years has been substantial, particularly in the last 50 years. When Great-grandma says she only had an eighth-grade education, don't smirk.

What nearly all these pundits fail to grasp is "I can't answer these questions" is not the same thing as "These questions demonstrate that students in earlier days were better educated than today's students." Just about *any* test looks difficult to those who haven't recently been steeped in the

material it covers. If a 40-year-old can't score as well on a geography test as a high school student who just spent several weeks memorizing the names of all the rivers in South America in preparation for an exam, that doesn't mean the 40-year-old's education was woefully deficient — it means the he simply didn't retain information for which he had no use, no matter how thoroughly it was drilled into his brain through rote memory some twenty-odd years earlier. I suspect I'd fail a lot of the tests I took back in high school if I had to re-take them today without reviewing the material beforehand. I certainly wouldn't be able to pass any arithmetic test that required me to be familiar with such arcane measurements as "rods" and "bushels," but I can still calculate areas and volumes just fine, thank you.

Ah, but this is high school (or even eighth grade) stuff, people say — it's basic knowledge that everyone should remember and use. Nonsense. The questions on this exam *don't* reflect only items of "basic knowledge" — many of the questions require the test-taker to have absorbed some very *specialized* information, and if today's students can't regurgitate all the same facts as their 1895 counterparts, it's because the types of knowledge we consider to be important have changed a great deal in the last century, not necessarily because today's students have sub-standard educations.

Consider: To pass this test, no knowledge of the arts is necessary (not even a nodding familiarity with a few of the greatest works of English literature), no demonstration of mathematical learning other than plain arithmetic is required (forget algebra, geometry, or trigonometry), nothing beyond a familiarity with the highlights of American history is needed (never mind the fundamentals of world history, as this exam scarcely acknowledges that any country other than the USA even exists), no questions about the history, structure, or function of the United States government are asked (not even the standard "Name the three branches of our federal government"), science is given a pass except for a few questions about geography and the rudiments of human anatomy, and no competence in any foreign language (living or dead) is necessary. An exam for today's high school graduates that omitted even *one* of these subjects would be loudly condemned by parents and educators alike, subjects about which the Salina, Kansas, students of 1895 needed know nothing at all. Would it be fair to say that the average Salina student was woefully undereducated because he failed to learn many of the things that we consider important today, but which were of little importance in his time and place? If not, then why do people keep asserting that the reverse is true? Why do journalists continue to base their gleeful articles about how much more was expected of the students of yesteryear on flawed assumptions? Perhaps some people are too intent upon making a point to bother considering the proper questions.

Consider the following, a certification examination for prospective *teachers*, prepared by the Examiners of Teachers for the Public Schools in Zanesville, Ohio, in the late 1870s:

#### English Grammar

1. Analyze the following and parse words in italics

I cannot *tell* if to *depart* in silence,  
Or bitterly to speak in *your* reproof,

*Best fitteth* my degree or your condition.

2. Write the following in prose, and parse the verb *awaits*.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
*Awaits* alike th' inevitable hour:  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

3. Give a brief example of a compound and a complex sentence. Give the rule for the use of the subjunctive mood.

4. Define and give the etymology of verb, pronoun, conjunction and adverb. Give example of a defective, an auxiliary, an impersonal and a redundant verb. How many kinds of pronouns are there? Give examples of each.

5. *Prior* has the following sentence. State it if be good grammar. If not, why? If it be, parse the word *than*.

Thou art a girl as much brighter *than* her,  
As he is a poet sublimer *than* me.

6. Give rule for forming plural of nouns ending in "y," with examples. Give plurals of staff, radius, miasma, Miss White, rendezvous, talisman, loaf, grief, seraph, Mussulman, forceps, spoonful, who, beef, s, x, ó, and madam. Also give the singulars of kine, ashes, banditi [sic], swine, animalcula.

7. Compare chief, much, former, far, forth, next, round, up, ill, full.

8. Give the feminines of abbot, earl, duke, lad, marquis, hero, tiger, nephew, testator, bachelor, wizard, and ox.

9. Write the past tense and past participle of these verbs:

Lay, Seek, Sit, Get, Dare,  
Thrive, Lie, Set, Light, Loose,  
Fly, Flee, Chide, Overflow, Catch,  
Lose, Swim, Climb, Drink, Stay,  
Leap, Quit, Swell, Burst, Eat.

10. Define metonymy, catachresis, and hyperbole; and state the difference between a metaphor and a simile.

11. Punctuate the following lines:

But when I ask the trembling question  
Will you be mine my dearest Miss  
Then may there be no hesitation  
But say distinctly Yes Sir yes.

12. Parse the three "thats" in the following sentence:

He *that* fears *that* dog thinks *that* he is mad.

- Also parse the word "but" in each of the following:

There was no one *but* saw him;

We ran, *but* he stopped;

All ran *but* Peter;

If you did *but* know it.

13. Correct the following:

- (a) Although I persuaded the old man, he refused to yield, and I expect he divided his estate between his 3 daughters. His example, though he meant well, is calculated to have a bad effect.
- (b) As I laid down I seen the smoke rising over the way.
- (c) Whom do you say that I am? or who do you take me to be?
- (d) John and James were both there, though neither were invited.
- (e) As water is froze easier than alcohol, so riches are easier acquired than a good name.
- (f) Between you and I, there is some mystery about that fire last night. Did you hear where it was at? I am glad none of my friends were in the house. I should be sorry if either James or William were inculpated in setting it on fire.

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### Orthography

1. Give etymology of orthography. What are mutes, labials, and liquids, and why so called?
2. Give meaning of the prefixes, ante, anti, circum, quad, proto, oct, trans, sym, and con.
3. Form derivatives of prefer, begin, stop, run, defy, abridge, tie, and die, with the suffix *ing* or *ed*.
4. Write a word containing a diphthong, one containing a digraph, and one containing a trigraph.
5. Define accent, and mark the accent on the words: inverse, diverse, adverse, reverse, obverse, calcine, piquant, orthoepy, abdomen, acclimated, area, salutatory, accessory, gondola, illustrate, prolix, portent, inquiry, contemplated, expert, extant.
6. Spell the words (given orally)

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### Arithmetic

Put all your work on the paper and make it explain itself.

1. Define integer, fraction, interest, discount, power, and root.
2. What effect has multiplying both terms of a fraction by the same number, and why; and why in dividing one fraction by another do you invert the divisor and multiply the terms together?
3. If A's age were increased by its  $\frac{3}{7}$  its  $\frac{4}{5}$  and 19, the sum would equal  $2\frac{1}{2}$  times his age; required his age.
4. Multiply  $\frac{7}{8}$  by .000018 and divide the product by 27 millionths.
5. 32 men agree to construct 28 miles 4 furlongs and 32 rods of road; after completing one-half of it, one-fourth of the number of men left the company, what distance did each man construct before and after one-fourth of the men left?
6. A man drives 97 pegs on a straight line and spaces them 3 ft. 8 in. apart. What is the distance from the first peg to the last peg, lowest terms?
7. A man receives \$65 interest for the use of \$600 for 3 years, 7 months, and 15 days. What is rate per cent.?

8. What is due on the following note?

\$1200                    Zanesville, O., December 10, 1871.

One year after date I promise to pay to the order of Richard Roe twelve hundred dollars, value received.

JOHN DOE

9. Give the rule for obtaining the difference of time, having the difference of longitude, and *vice versa*, and give the reasons for the rule.

10. A square lot containing 54,756 square feet is surrounded by a close board fence 12 feet high. What would the boards cost at \$13 per thousand?

### Geography

1. Where does the earth have the greatest diameter?

2. Why do we reckon 180 degrees of longitude and only 90 of latitude?

3. What is meant by the equinoxes?

4. Locate the Crimea, Bombay, Bay of Fundy, and the Capital of Mississippi.

5. Into what three functions is the government of the United States divided? — define each function.

6. Describe and locate the Indus and Niger rivers.

7. Through what waters would a ship pass in going from Duluth to Odessa?

8. Bound France and give five of its chief cities.

9. Name the New England states and locate their capitals.

10. Define equator, zone, latitude, and longitude.

11. Into what bodies of water do the following rivers flow: The Danube, Rhone, Volga, Tiber, Rio Grande, Jordan, and Mahoning.

Plenty of critics maintain that most of today's teaching candidates couldn't pass this test. Well, even if that were true, it wouldn't make today's candidates all that different than their 19th century counterparts. As Joseph Crosby, the man who created the English Grammar and Orthography sections of this exam, wrote to a friend in 1876:

I gave them a pretty severe test in Grammar, and some of them did make terrible work of it. One young lady said the singular of "Swine" was "pigs", another "a hog". One being asked to give me the past tense of "I lie down" said "I lied", which she certainly did. Out of some 30 or 35 words I gave them to *spell*, not over 10 were spelled correctly by any one, several missed on all but 5 or 6 — Yet they blushed & tried so hard to do well — and many were graduates of the High School — that I was sorry for them. I had no idea that graduates could be so ignorant.

And after all, do we really care these days whether our educators know the "feminines of the words hero, bachelor, and ox"?

Although this exam may indicate, as Velz wrote, that "[o]ur notion of nineteenth-century education as primitive and backward may need modification," perhaps what it demonstrates most is the truth of the aphorism that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

**Last updated:** 9 July 2007

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