

Dumbing Down: Then and Now

The Way We Were



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

8th Grade Final Exam:

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 'lie', 'play', 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.

Arithmetic (Time, 65 minutes)

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 50cts/bushel, 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 the 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 per meter?
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 of which is 640 rods?
10. Write a Bank Check, a Promissory Note, and a Receipt

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.

Orthography (Time, one hour) (Do we even know what this is???)

1. What is meant by the following: alphabet, phonetic, orthography, etymology, and syllabication.
2. What are elementary sounds? How classified?
3. What are the following, and give examples of each: trigraph, sub vocal, diphthong, cognate letters, and lingual.
4. Give four substitutes for caret 'u.' (HUH?)
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-, and sup-.
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

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 North America
5. Name and describe the following: Monrovia, Odessa, Denver, Manitoba, Hecla, Yukon, St. Helena, Juan Fernandez, Aspinwall and Orinoco.
6. Name and locate the principal trade centers of the U.S.
7. Name all the republics of: Europe and give the 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 the inclination of the earth.

Wow. Now I know why my parents insisted on working jobs that they hated to send my to a private school. Not only could I name all five countries Israel borders without resorting to Google and name the secretaries of defense going back to Dick Cheney, but I could answer most of the questions in the 8th grade final exam without really trying, I'm sure if not for some vagaries such as knowing the exact size of a bushel, I could have answered them all.

Despite all this I'm not bragging. I'm of above average intelligence true but I'm certainly not a rocket scientist. I went to a school where they were more concerned with discipline and education than self esteem and self actualization. Thank God for the wisdom of my parents.

I've actually seen the original document. It is indeed an exit/graduation exam for "8th graders," but it's important to remember that was the highest level of public education offered in that area at the time, **or in almost any other**. 8th grade then did NOT mean what it means today--a bunch of giggly 14 yr olds with poor math skills.

The "high school movement" did not begin until right about 1900, and before that there were very, very few "high schools," and those almost exclusively in larger metro areas. They served much the same function as four-year colleges do today, to train white-collar workers in specific areas and provide grounding in the liberal arts for the middle and upper classes of society. Universities and colleges were few.

As I mentioned before, many of those "8th graders" of 1895 were 17 or 18 by the time they would take this exam--rural school schedules were necessarily flexible because *everyone* worked on the farm or ranch, and school was taught only during the winter months. You had to pass an exam to go on to the next grade--no passing just by breathing, no "social promotion" with your age group. Often by the time a "class" reached 7th or 8th grade, half or more of the students would have already foundered out in lower grades, and of the remainder, maybe two-thirds would actually pass the exit exam and graduate - *from the 8th grade*.

The exam shown would not only serve as today's equivalent of a high school honors exit exam but also as the equivalent of the SAT. Anyone who passed it and gained their diploma could rightfully be called "well educated" by any standard. To boot, *the students knew what would be on the test*. You hear complaints today about teachers "teaching to the test" when it comes to assessment exams, but that's *exactly* what they did in 1895.

Every time this one pops up it mostly reminds me of how little the average person today knows about the history of education in America.

Note to Reader: Keep in Mind the Snoops and Truth and Fiction Articles as You read this articles.

The Way We Are

Case Western Reserve's Ted Gup, in the April 11, 2008 issue of the [*Chronicle of Higher Education*](#), writes about how little his students know:

"Nearly half of a recent class could not name a single country that bordered Israel. In an introductory journalism class, 11 of 18 students could not name what country Kabul was in, although we have been at war there for half a decade. Last fall only one in 21 students could name the U.S. secretary of defense. Given a list of four countries - China, Cuba, India, and Japan - not one of those same 21 students could identify India and Japan as democracies. Their grasp of history was little better. The question of when the Civil War was fought invited an array of responses - half a dozen were off by a decade or more. Some students thought that Islam was the principal religion of South America that Roe v. Wade was about slavery that 50 justices sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, that the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1975."

A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that only 31 percent of college graduates could read a "complex book and extrapolate from it." Furthermore, the study found that far fewer college graduates are leaving school with "the skills needed to comprehend routine data, such as reading a table about the relationship between blood pressure and physical activity."

From "[Failing Our Students, Failing America](#)", the Intercollegiate Studies Institute report on the testing of 7,000 college students at 50 colleges, 2007-2008:

"College seniors know astoundingly little about America's history, political thought, market economy and international relations... Not one college surveyed can boast that its seniors scored, on average, even a 'C' in American civic knowledge. Harvard seniors scored highest, but their overall average was 69.9%, a 'D+'."

MAJOR FINDINGS

- College Seniors Failed a Basic Test on America's History and Institutions.
- Colleges Stall Student Learning about America.
- America's Most Prestigious Universities Performed the Worst.
- Inadequate College Curriculum Contributes to Failure.
- Greater Learning about America Goes Hand-in-Hand with More Active Citizenship.

I gave the "general knowledge" test to a group of second-semester Latin students here, and here are the results; please note that there were 16 students in the class that day.

1. Name at least one country that borders Israel.
13/16 got at least one; 7/16 named multiple countries correctly.
2. Of what country is Kabul the capital?
6/16.
3. Who is the U.S. Secretary of Defense?
2/16 (Ouch - although many remembered Rumsfeld)
4. Which of the following countries is/are democratically ruled?
8/16
5. In what years did the U.S. Civil War begin and end?
1/16 (I wonder, would it have helped if I had called it The War Between the States?)
6. What is the principal religion of South America?
12/16
7. What social issue did the Supreme Court decide in Roe v. Wade?
6/16
8. How many justices sit on the U.S. Supreme Court?
6/16
9. In what year was the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima?
5/16

I told the students that I thought their summertime reading should include a newspaper.

Snoops Article about this: FALSE

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

Origins: This item above is 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 school kids 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.

1895 Salina, Kansas Eighth Grade Graduation Exam-**Unproven!**

<http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/a/1895exam.htm>

Summary of eRumor

The email lists questions from what it says is an exam required for eighth grade graduation in 1895 in Salina, Kansas. It is described as an example of how much more educated an eighth grader was a hundred years ago than today.

The Truth

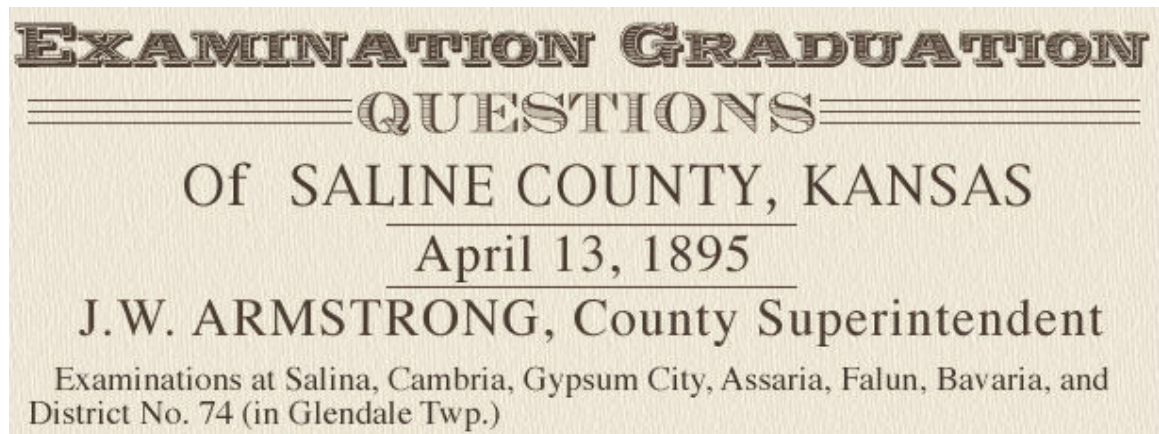
TruthOrFiction.com has listed this eRumor as unproven, even though there is a source for it and we have obtained an actual copy of the exam. There has not been sufficient proof given, in our view, that the exam is what is claimed.

Rather than being for eighth graders, there are several aspects of the exam that raise the question as to whether it was intended for adults, perhaps newly graduated teachers or teacher applicants.

The eRumor says the exam is from the Smokey Valley Genealogical Society in Salina, Kansas, and was published in the Salina Journal newspaper. That is true. Shirley Tower, the volunteer librarian for the Smokey Valley Genealogical Society, found the exam and posted it on their website in 1996 and the Salina Journal's article appeared the same year. The exam started circulating on the Internet and became the subject of numerous newspaper articles including in the Washington Post and the Boston Globe.

There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the exam, but there are questions about for whom it was intended (If the graphics are difficult to read, place your pointing device arrow over the graphic for details).

First, the original exam doesn't mention the eighth grade. Here is an actual photograph of the title of the document:



Second, the document describes itself as being administered orally and for "applicants." Unless eighth graders were described as "applicants," it makes one wonder if the exam was actually for newly graduated teachers:

READING AND PENMANSHIP — The Examination will be oral, and the Penmanship of Applicants will be graded from the manuscripts.

Third, some of the questions don't seem to be oriented toward students, but rather toward a teacher or a teacher applicant, for example:

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?

A real example of the story as it has been circulated:

How many of us could graduate from 8th grade?

Remember when our grandparents, great-grandparents, and such stated that they only had an 8th grade education? Well, check this out. Could any of us have passed the 8th grade in 1895? This is the eighth-grade final exam from 1895 Salina, KS. USA. It was taken from the original document on file at the Smokey Valley Genealogical Society and Library in Salina, KS and reprinted by the Salina Journal. 8th Grade Final Exam: Salina, KS -1895

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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.

Arithmetic (Time, 1.25 hours)

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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.

*****Gives the saying of an early 20th century person that "she/he only had an 8th grade education" a whole new meaning.

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