

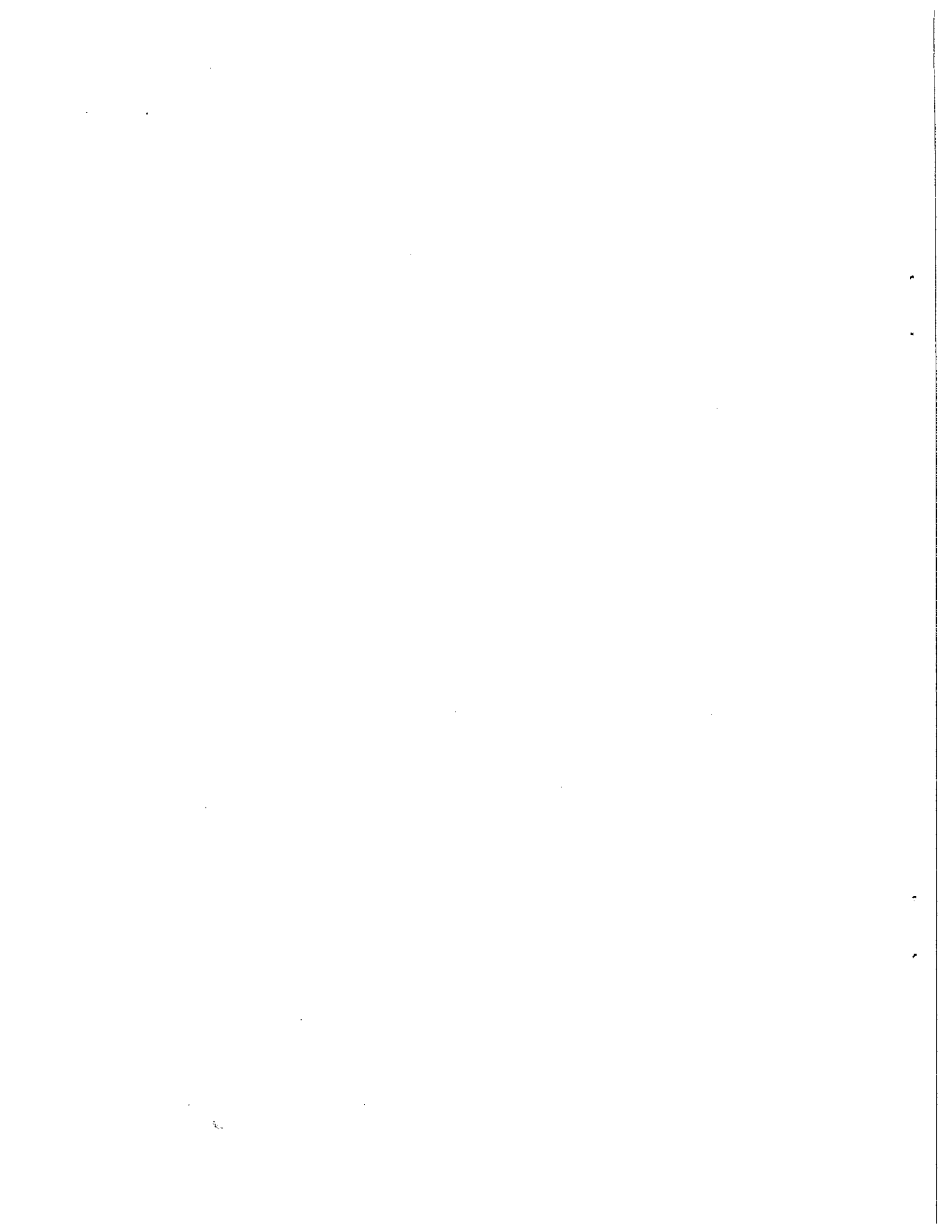
# **Preformulations and Language Acquisition**

by

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# Preformulations and Language Learning

## Introduction

In Europe, Australia, New Zealand and other English-speaking populations, there is often less concern at the higher levels with the theory of how language works-- generative linguistics, for example--and more with the everyday though no less complex aspects of language. Foremost among these everyday aspects is what I call "preformulations," which include slang and remains relevant on up through high, quite respectable expressions such as: "Mention should also be made of damage control." This is also an example of recursiveness, in which two preformulations are used in a single structure: (1) "Mention should also be made of" + (2) "damage control."

There are three main distinguishing properties of preformulations. The first is that they consist of two or more lexical items. The second is that they recur with virtually no change except in tense and number. Perhaps the most interesting characteristic is the third: That they capture or create a precise meaning which they have a great reluctance to share with any other construction or expression. It should be noted that some "slotted" preformulations have slots or holes that can be filled by any number of words that are not part of the targeted structure--the preformulation. For example: NP is thought to VP (e.g.: Anger is thought to have played an important role in John's getting fired.)

The transition from lexical items to preformulations seems to often occur quickly. That is to say, "You would do well to study more". Although "study more" would seem able to quickly move into the preformulation, a complement like "feed the chickens before your cousin arrives" would probably never become preformulated. (For instance: ("You would do well to feed the chickens before your cousin arrives.") The apparent reason for this is the probability that the concept "study more" occurs more often than "feed the chickens".

### Go to Sleep

Possibly one of the most common of all preformulations in English is "go to sleep." I can say "went to sleep" (tense) and "goes to sleep" (number), but I cannot say "go into sleep, go for sleep, drop to sleep, become asleep, become sleeping, lose wakefulness," or "put into sleep." The meaning that "go to sleep" has captured is this: to begin sleeping naturally without primary consideration of (1) incidental inducements such as the presence of music, fatigue, or the beating of his/her mothers heart, or (2) powerful causes such as drugs, sickness or injury. Any of these may help bring about the loss of consciousness, but "go to sleep" refers

precisely to the change from waking to sleeping without reference to such external motivations. It is this change that is at the center of "go to sleep" and not the causes that may have brought this change about. If your wish is to refer to the savagely powerful effects of, say, meth-amphetamine--then your preformulation of choice is definitely not "go to sleep." This precision at the hands of the lexical formula are the prime distinguishing marks of all preformulations. To be sure, what we are dealing with is a narrowing of causes and situations in which "go to sleep" would be used. An increase in precision is a prime characteristic of preformulations.

### **Thousands and Thousands Yield Greater and Greater Precision**

There are thousands of unique preformulations in general speech, law, medicine, engineering, astronomy, physics, mathematics, library science, education, history--these structures are everywhere. To the extent that we are familiar with and use them properly, we will be considered competent in at least expressions related to these fields. If, however, I say, "\*The baby went into sleep at 8 p.m.," I will immediately identify myself as a non-native speaker of English. If I say, "\*The baby lost wakefulness at 8 p.m.," I will possibly cause the parents alarm.

One of the key factors in speaking any language acceptably is syntax: making sure that the verbs go with the nouns and avoiding expressions like "\*Him go sleeping 10 clock" instead of "He went to sleep at 10 p.m." In other words, we must learn the use of lexical items like "sleep" and we must learn the preformulations that are essential to avoid ambiguity and even the virtually complete loss of sense: "\*They no for that he to wake any more after 10 clock." In my personal capacity as editor, I have encountered rather long essays in English written by non-native speakers of English. Because the underlying idea was good, I sometimes saw fit to revise virtually every sentence in what was a time-consuming activity.

In other words, apparently all languages are made up of individual words (lexical items) plus the preformulations which must be present in order for precisely meaningful expressions to be strung into sentences. Two basic lists are essential: (1) lexical items and (2) preformulations. If we consider language from a broader point of view, we will probably be able to identify modes of argument and even more subtle and obtuse but no less valid preformulative features. We will leave these latter features for articulation by scholars, and concentrate in the following lessons on preformulations. Learning to be conscious of these structures, to be able to identify them, and, yes, even to make discrete lists of them is justified and required--especially if the language being studied is a second one.

It is not possible in any list short of a dictionary to be adequately comprehensive. We are, therefore, limiting our aims in this volume to helping students become aware (1) that preformulations do exist as discrete items, (2) that competence in English or any language is impossible without an ability to handle these structures as the need arises. Once we are aware that they do exist in these terms, our competence in handling the language will probably be on its way to significant improvement.

A slightly more extended discussion of this structure--"Preformulations: A Needed Sea Change in Language Instructions"-- follows the exercises below. In that essay, I make the strong recommendation that the teaching of preformulations should begin in the very first class and never stop. In studying the use of syntax we are concerned with rules from an external source. In studying preformulations, we are studying English from the inside out. That is, we are using structures that have often been used before in exactly that structure and no other. It is our task to make certain that the preformulations and the elements of syntax work well together.

#### **A Method Based on Preformulations: Inside-Out**

In the more advanced items below, students might be confused by normally non-preformulations being treated as regular preformulations. The first comment I would like to make about this involves the fact that we are learning English from the inside out. That is, we are consciously beginning with a fixed number of preformulations. Often, these are recursive and often, interchangeable, increasing the number of such fixed phrasal structures considerably. It is my contention that we can use this pattern of internal acquisition as a model, and construct our own lists of both preformulations (P-Phrases) and preformulation-like phrases (PL-Phrases). That is exactly what I have done in some of the 100 items below. That is, some of them are P-Phrases, and others are PL-Phrases. The easiest way I can get you to do this is to express doubt as to your inherent ability to do so. A teacher might well doubt the ability of his or her students. Show us that we're wrong!

The reason I do this is to make feasible the transition to texts with a great many more P and PL Phrases. The 100 items are not themselves 100 rules, but rather the specific products of rules. If we begin in this way, we are not responsible for the application of any number of rules. We are responsible only for the memorization of the examples. (Personally, I do not think that it is possible to use rule governed structures without at least unconsciously becoming aware of the relevant rule.) When a child is learning a given language, he does start out by learning about "nouns" and then about "verbs" and then about "adjectives." He or she imitates other children and adults now and then. After a couple of years, he/she has imitated enough so that some regularity is noticed between what are rules and what are preformulations.

Children might say to themselves that a particular structure might be a "preformulation for which there is only one instance of a rule." Although children don't articulate such thoughts, it would be exactly true. Adult scientists--including linguists--might come somewhat closer to understanding that certain expressions can be articulated in only one way: for example, "The baby didn't really 'go to sleep': he cried and cried until he was unconscious." The latter are often found in the quite formal variety of language that might be called "Academic Discourse." As students in the university, it is most appropriate that we begin to be familiar with such a style, which does make possible the expression of great precision.

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# Preformulations and Language Acquisition:

## Exercises in English

by  
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### Lesson One

In the sentences below, many preformulations are identified by their appearance in **bold face**. Your task is to compose another sentence in the "A" blank that contains the exact preformulated structure that was used in the section underlined by "A". Please do the same in the "B" blank: that is, use the preformulated section underlined by "B".

Some of the sentences contain bold-faced phrases that are not in fact preformulations. We are treating them like preformulations because we have it as our goal to master the structures in these 100 items. Your instructor will explain.

#### Example:

Ex-1. Once in a while, I feel like leaving school.

A

B

A. Once in a while, I get afraid of final exams.

B. Al said that he felt like dropping algebra.

1. I have been working on this math problem all night. Now, I am about ready to give up.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

2. This medicine has been found to be safe and effective.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

3. At first glance, language seems to have appeared from out of the blue

A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Monkeys can't be said to have words for predators such as snakes and eagles.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

5. He said that the essence of music was harmonious sounds.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Chimpanzees do not seem to possess either words or a system of grammar.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

7. If that were not the case, no one would get married.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

8. If we are willing to face it, depression can make us better at what we do.

A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_



C. \_\_\_\_\_

9. That chemical is said to have played a role in the evolution of all living things.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

10. Words and syntax alone cannot, Coreil said, account for the great precision of which communication is capable.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

## Lesson Two

In the items (1-10 and 11 - 100) designated by your instructor, you will now have a second task: you will take one part of one item (A or B) and combine it with (A or B) of another sentence according to your teacher's instructions .

Example: 1. He went to sleep before his sister broke down crying.

A

B

2. The other day I saw him sleeping on the job.

A

B

3. Her father broke down crying the other day.

(1-B, 2-A)

\*\*\*\*\*

11. Some scientists are said to deny that which they cannot explain.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

12. "There is," she said, "as much chance of happiness by choosing a spouse from an unseen list."

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

13. In a study he conducted last year, Al reported that some plants seem to have the ability to think.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

14. He said that his friend claimed "the amazing ability to single-handedly" defeat the enemy.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

15. The importance of cooperation was underlined by the lecturer.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

16. The perfection of speech may have been the deciding factor in the evolution of man.

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

17. He approved the transfer of the two most promising students to the advanced class.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

18. Most of the students I know are studying medicine or are aspiring to do so.

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

19. Monkeys spend an inordinate amount of time grooming one another.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

20. Please, load the rifles regardless of whether or not you know the name of a particular firearm.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

21. The terrible suffering of that war could have been prevented by a word of kindness.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

22. By that time, Al had become intimate with a woman for whom he had never felt love.  
A B C D

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

D. \_\_\_\_\_

23. I will have graduated from college by the time that she stops running around and gets serious.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

24. She had already made up her mind to leave when he didn't come home last night.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

25. Sue ran away from home and sought refuge with her aunt who seemed to be out of a Dickens novel.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

26. One would think that she would know better than to get married again..

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

27. He had a good deal of money but very little common sense.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

28. She headed for New York soon after graduation and lived the rest of her life there.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

29. He was able to turn these painful experiences--wounds, if you will-- into valuable lessons.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

30. By August, the campaign was in full swing , but the candidate was shaking in his boots.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

31. Dr. Jose said that once Al's cold was gone, he would be able to play football.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

32. When Jane gets home, she will have to wash dishes.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

33. There would seem to be <sup>A</sup> a limit to the number of failures <sup>B</sup> that a given school can experience <sup>C</sup>  
and not lose all credibility. <sup>D</sup>

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_

34. The doctor said that he had done everything that he could do for James. <sup>A</sup> "Now," he said, "it's <sup>B</sup>  
a matter of time."

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

35. It's up to her <sup>A</sup> whether we go or stay. <sup>B</sup>

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

36. John is not to decide <sup>A</sup> how many students are needed <sup>B</sup> to get the football field in shape. <sup>C</sup>

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_

37. The doctor said that the patient is not to be disturbed <sup>A</sup> for any reason whatsoever. <sup>B</sup>

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

38. My brother used to tell me <sup>A</sup> all kinds of things that were not true. <sup>B</sup>

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

39. This experiment has cost dearly in terms of money as well as human effort.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

40. Consider the following as an example of a polite command: You may leave if you wish.

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

41. There need be no rush to justice, as far as Jane is concerned.

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

42. I was wrong to bring it up and you have nothing to apologize for.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

43. That is to say, you would do well to study more.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

44. He is none too reliable when it comes to getting up early.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

45. Max has been fired. So have I.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

46. To leave without having settled the argument would have been a mistake.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_  
C. \_\_\_\_\_

47. Don't believe that pack of lies: he wouldn't tell the truth if his soul depended on it.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

48. We're off to see New York City; would you care to come along?  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

49. By the time she receives her Ph.D., Jane will have studied for eight years after undergraduate school. A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

50. Sue was a failure at every sport she attempted. but she is considered a genius at computers.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

51. This long-awaited book contains a larger selection to which are added more recent poems.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

52. For more than one reason this answer is not very satisfying.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
B. \_\_\_\_\_

53. When prompted by the automated tone, enter your Express Service Code.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

54. If a program stops responding, click "End Task".

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

55. You must activate your card immediately as your current card will no longer work.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

56. The soldiers were said to have left the battlefield.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

57. The teacher admitted that he "was familiar with the theory only insofar as it held promise."

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

58. The meaning given to the word *professor* was "a person able to make a profession of faith

A

B

in the midst of a dangerous world" (Palmer, 1990).

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

60. Through their own experiments, students understood that a stimulus is tied to a response.



A. A B  
 \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

61. It remains to be seen if these developments have any effect whatsoever.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

62. How this can be done depends on financing and on the motivation of teachers.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

63. While there are excellent colleges here, there is little interest in education.

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

64. Education has always been highly appreciated, regardless of class backgrounds

A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

65. Academic levels of deaf students are comparable to those of their hearing peers.

A

A. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

66. There is no denying that adult monkeys have cognitive skills

A B

that surpass those of human infants.

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

67. But to claim that Man is cognitively inferior to monkeys would be unwarranted.  
A B C

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_

68. Their impact on each other was profound: they were lovers, but more,  
A B  
they were soulmates.  
C

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_

69. The process of which Minnis speaks requires low boundaries of the self.  
A1 B A2

- A1-A2. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

70. "Give me liberty," he said, "or give me death."  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

71. Before I had a chance to warn the family, they had departed on the train.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

72. This question is nowhere as pointed as in issues of guilt or innocence.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

73. Jane takes issue with the assumption that it is a matter of black or white.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

74. Following the dictates of human nature is not always the right way to go.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

75. It turns out that some simple experiments yield imagination-defying results.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

76. Each of us listens to the others and then does what he or she thinks is right..

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

77. Will Durant's family had hoped that he would become a priest.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

78. "Kushner said the belief that a writer alone is the wellspring of

A

B

his or her creativity is a debilitating myth," John-Steiner wrote.

C

D

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

D. \_\_\_\_\_

79. Compositions should have a thesis and the main supports in the introduction.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

80. Freire held that if social change is to occur, it must come from the oppressed group.  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

81. What is impressive is the manner in which parallel change occurs in different languages.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

82. We aren't tempted to think that, by trying hard to fly, we can grow wings.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

83. Black holes are an instance of extensive theory preceding evidence  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

84. We aren't tempted to think that, by trying hard to fly, we can grow wings.  
A B C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

85. Black holes are an instance of extensive theory preceding evidence  
A B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

86. That is to say, if one made the same measurements on different systems,  
A B

we could not predict the results.

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

87. Vygotsky relied heavily on the ideas of Europeans and Americans

A

in arriving at his theories

which have been very well received around the globe.

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

88. He imagined himself riding through space so to speak.

A

B

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

89. The Red Cat is the cafe of choice, frequented by students and professors alike.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

90. At that moment, the first sound of the Freudian message echoed

A

B

across the world.

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

91. Although the book is a science of morality, Aristotle is mindful  
A B  
that happiness requires practical wisdom in addition to philosophical virtue.  
C D

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_

92. If I had known of your low estimation of honor, I would have asked you to leave.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

93. After Al had dated Ann for two years, her father inquired about his intentions.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

94. Prudence is the habit of knowing how to act to secure goals in a principled way.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

95. By next summer, I will have graduated and begun work on my master's degree.  
A B

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_

96. The remainder of this article      will focus on a program

A

B

that has been implemented by your instructor.

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

97. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1984      rekindled a national debate

A

B

on the "literacy crisis".

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

98. "I told you not to go." Al's mother said, "but you went anyway.

A

B

That will cost you half of a month's allowance."

C

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

C. \_\_\_\_\_

99. "I never want to see you again,"      Sue said with red cheeks and swollen eyes.

A

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

100. There are all manner of problems on the SAT,  
A  
but not a whole lot that I can't answer correctly.

B

A. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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