

**Middle-School Winners:
Why American Middle-School Students Should Take
the International Graduate Record Exam Seriously**

by Robert Oliphant

My name is Bob and I've discovered that lots of middle school students (ages 12, 13, and 14) worry about their parents going into big time debt for college expenses later on.¹ Nor is debt the only problem seeping into the awareness of middle schoolers these days.

The source of this nightmare stems far more from Asia than from our own teachers and politicians. It's Asia, after all, which is more and more scoring higher and higher on our own Graduate Record Examination — enough so that with over 300 Asian GRE test-taking locales, it's not surprising that thousands of well-scrubbed Asian candidates now earn American PhD-level degrees, along with invitations to stay in the USA working at high tech, big money jobs.

In the last six months, for instance, I've encountered three Asian MDs, each speaking broadcaster-quality standard American English and (get this!) having longish names with over 25 letters in them. So, by way of testing your own literacy waters, dear middle schoolers, why not produce your own phonetic transcription of the Gettysburg Address and then match your word-by-word results against a standard American dictionary like Webster's or Random House?

More ambitiously, why not build up your literacy chops by reading as many nonfiction prizewinners (Pulitzer, etc.) as you can handle from your local library? Your parents and friends can help you test your achievement by asking you questions like “In the first chapter (The Necessity of Politics) of Frances Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order*, which proper name appears first: (1) Hugo Chavez, (2) Mao Zedong, or (3) Viktor Yushchenko?” (answer: Mao Zedong).

independent move and check out GRE on the internet now before letting it slap you and your friends in the face later on.

Your parents and teachers, by the way, will probably tell you that American students truly ruled GRE scores ten years ago, along with their acceptance by our top graduate schools and high-tech jobs. Today, though, even your parents will probably agree that offshore Asian students have been mastering American dictionary English and earning higher and higher scores on the GRE, especially its eight subject tests, enough so to spark special studies regarding this national disaster and what to do about it.

The most recent and authoritative of these frightening studies, “The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States,” is available without cost to you via www.fgereport.org. Call it an “Asian threat” or “higher standards for American students,” American middle schoolers should each take a quick look at this short report as a starting wake-up call.

A: Accreditation. ...Money talks in many voices. For American college programs high scores in one of more of our eight GRE subject tests opens career doors, not just grad schools — just like a worldwide invitation to a fancy-dress winner’s banquet where everyone speaks American dictionary standard English.

By way of reassuring nervous employers and graduate schools, powerhouse snoopers like the American Chemical Society and other guardians offer independent inspection and accreditation of specific academic programs. But since the term “accreditation” is today used by many organizations, some of them with surprisingly low standards, it’s now the GRE and its foreign versions (India now offers one) that determines the competitive educational standing of young Americans — and their futures!

It should be emphasized here that the GRE can be taken by several times by candidates of all ages in a variety of convenient locations. In addition, our low-cost two-year community colleges actually offer major programs in our eight magical GRE subjects — biochemistry, biology, chemistry, computer science, literature in English, mathematics, physics, and psychology. To spell it out, young friends, since middle school grades

don't actually "count," why shouldn't you and your friends start thinking about GRE-prep programs of their own? Certainly, your local community college offers relevant courses — competently and cheaply!

N. Narrative Nonfiction. ...Middle school for most Americans can be a three-ring circus of self discovery and growing self confidence. The principal reason for this is that our letter grades in middle school, as opposed to high school, don't count — positively or negatively. Just as important, especially for boys, is the fact that our middle school years are usually emotionally far more stable than our automobile, sex, and aggressiveness crazies in high school. Even more important is the way in which most of us grow to think of ourselves as independent thinkers, doers, and readers during this time.

The most important sign of our personal-identity power shows up in our independent reading and vocabulary growth, much of it driven by personal choice reading, both fiction and nonfiction. In this connection, I want to establish my own objectivity by first noting my personal link to fiction as indicated by [my two published novels](#) (Prentice-Hall).

For middle schoolers, though, I truly feel that narrative nonfiction, especially biography and history, produces far more personal growth and self confidence. Given the relative freedom of the middle school years, my experience (including ESL students) indicates that any American youngster in the 12-13-14 years (the Boy Scout and Little League years) can and should follow a personal-choice reading program of at least one hundred library-certified works of narrative nonfiction, demonstrably so.

As we've seen, the demonstration requirement can be legitimately satisfied by our "what proper name appears first" tests. Though less secure than randomly chosen paragraphs, our proper-name tests can be produced very quickly by friends or family members. In addition, the emphasis upon names links up with cultural literacy and status. Certainly, many Americans still bully one another with how well they handle the New York Times name-emphasis daily crossword.

As we'll see, personal-choice narrative nonfiction builds speed-reading skill (ideally at least a page per minute). Its most dramatic impact centers

upon vocabulary growth, but even more valuable is the strengthening of personal identity that personal-choice readers quickly acquire and keep — usually for the rest of their lives.

D: Dictionaries and Testing. ... In the last 20 years the American standard spoken English has conquered Planet Earth, especially in its international unabridged version. My computer screen, for instance, offers the full-service *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (RHWUD) for worldwide use backed up by Dictionary.Com for free computer access. Since this is a primary learning tool for ambitious Asian learners, serious American middle schoolers deserve to know how far dictionary study can take them on their own — measurably and impressively.

Let's start with vocabulary growth, which is still respected and praised in our spelling bees and in our crossword puzzles, especial the *New York Times* Daily Crossword Puzzle. Since crossword puzzles offer letter and definition clues, RHWUD offers over 900,000 spelling-definition combinations, each of which can be calibrated in terms of its relative difficulty.

By way of illustration: The first spelling-definition combination of SINCE would have a difficulty-rating of 6 (5 letters plus its first definition "from then till now." In contrast the rating for its eighth definition would be 13 (5 + 8). Along the same lines, the first definition for accidentalism (listed under the category "medicine") would call for a rating of 14 (def. 1 + 13 letters). Granted the simplicity of this ranking system, it certainly represents a step forward for both classroom and solitary vocabulary learners.

Spelling questions, spoken and written, can be ranked according to both their number of letters and the number of non-phonetic letters. For example, PHONETIC has only 8 letters. But its phonetic transcription in RHWUD, /feuh net"ik/ has four phonetic-transcription letters (f-e-u-k) that do not occur in its regular American spelling versions. Hence its spelling difficulty level would be described as 9 (5 + 4).

The purpose here is not to slam traditional spelling bees. Rather, I hope what's here comes across as an indication of how our own American

vocabulary has become this planet's worldwide communication system. True, our indiscriminate borrowing of words from Greek and Latin (phonetic and accidentalism) may come across as foolish. But their antiquity has helped American science, especially medicine, to unify our planet far more than our military exploits or even our come-and-go popular culture.

Simply put, if American English dictionaries can open career doors to Asian students, why shouldn't same dictionaries should be able to offer even better opportunities to young Americans — quickly, permanently, and measurably?

Dictionaries and proper-name literacy. Practically considered the New York Times crossword puzzle should be called a “crossword-crossname puzzle, since close to half of its items ask for proper names, e.g., the “father of his country: nine letters” (WASHINGTON). Since nonfiction reading can focus upon proper names, we can focus upon dictionary-listed proper names and ask simply for chronological knowledge, e.g., “Which according to RHWUD is listed as “born first, (1) Benjamin Franklin, (2) George Washington, or (3) Robert E. Lee.”

Dictionaries, phonetic awareness, confident public speaking. Since dictionary-based spoken American English, has clearly conquered the planet, American middle schoolers should master standard dictionary pronunciation — measurably so. Our best test simply calls for recognizing how many non-spelling letters are used in the RHWUD transcription, e.g. 3 non-spelling letters for MANY /mEn"EE/, as opposed to none for BEST /best/.

As indicated by the growing respect for the POETRY OUT LOUD yearly national contests, the world importance of standard spoken American English now called for standard pronunciation and forceful articulation, along with the ability to speak effectively on television, on the telephone, and in person. Consequently, being able to transcribe phonetically should be your own first step toward memorizing and reciting (loudly) lots of both poetry and prose (President Reagan's favorite was “The Cremation of Sam McGee”).

By way of a test, I urge you to ask the next e-voice you hear where they are physically located. If you do, I think you'll be surprised how many

“American” salespeople and trouble shooters are actually speaking from South America, India, Philippines, etc. – often far more clearly and forcefully than the average American college graduate.

Nonfiction reading for personal growth and dictionary-based testing for personal confidence — why shouldn’t this combination just as well as it did for Abraham Lincoln and millions of other American young people in years past?

H: High School Problems. ...When it comes to football and dramatics, the American high school is still filled with splendid opportunities. But serious middle schoolers will often be surprised, even shocked, by what they encounter with the giant spurts in physical growth that squirm uncomfortably in often tottering classroom furniture.

Overall America’s 4-year high schools today can fairly be called “crime cities,” especially when we look at the statistics in a driver’s handbook like that of California. As of 2012, for instance, Californian high schoolers (ages 15-19) now account for nearly 50 percent of the traffic convictions each year, half of which are for actual speeding. Even more shocking is our high schoolers’ record of two and a half times the number of fatal collisions for the average driver.

Practically considered, current state statistics for high schoolers regarding sex, drugs, alcohol, violence, and general self destructiveness are relatively hard to come by. Surely today’s middle schoolers and their parents have cause to take our current driving statistics seriously as indications that the middle school years are potentially far more productive than today’s high schools.

I: Industriousness. ...It should be apparent here that I have stayed clear of flattering terms like intelligence and aptitude. The reason is that my informal surveys of honest working stiffs I know (lawyers, stockbrokers, etc.) indicate that nearly all of them still agree with the statement, “Persistence and Industriousness trump brains seven days out of every week.”

To me this kind of consensus indicates that any middle schooler has an inherent right to take themselves seriously and give what’s here an honest try. For starters that calls for reading at least 20 respectable works of nonfiction (ideally Pulitzer prizewinners), backed up by appropriate self testing (spoken or written).

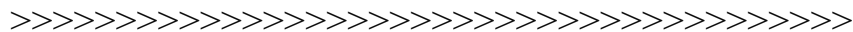
It’s a pleasure to acknowledge here my gratitude to Charles Karelis, a director of the Fund for Post Secondary Education (later President of Colgate), who very kindly encouraged my two grants demonstrating that foreign students in remedial courses can read at least 15 books per semester and outperform English department students in tests of dictionary-based knowledge of proper names.

As well, I want to thank my dear wife and my great grandchildren in the middle school category. It’s their good humor and intellectual honesty which convinces me what’s here will fly for others in the pre-high school group.

What’s here up to this point is quite short: just a shade over 2,000 words as I count them. Assuming a casual reading speed of 400 words per printed page (and why not?), this sales pitch takes up only five minutes.

What follows is back up material: useful but not essential at this point. As indicated throughout, it’s our middle schoolers themselves that will make this venture take wings. Certainly, it’s middle school where our sense of personal identity takes shape, along with our intellectual interests — enough so to ring a bell with adults of all ages.

So, let the festivities begin, I say. Here’s hoping our new vocabulary — GRE, Asian, nonfiction reading, and dictionary-based testing — takes hold and sparks some optimism, especially for middle schoolers and their parents.



Appendix: Five Free Backup Books for Middle Schoolers. ...I’m very grateful to my friend Richard Phelps (a testing expert) for making my work handily available to the public via the Nonpartisan Education Review. This means that the following five books can be accessed under the single

access label Robert Oliphant [ALZHOPE](#): (1) Big Vocab, (2) Recitation Whiz, (3) SpeakSharp, (4) WordEdge, and (5) Shakespeare in the Head for Health.

By way of description, Richard appended the following note: “The author, Robert Oliphant (PhD Stanford, 1962) drew upon his Reality Orientation research at the VA Hospital in Sepulveda, California for his best-known anti-Alzheimer’s book, *A Piano for Mrs. Cimino*. The film version, which is still being shown worldwide, won an award from the American Cinema Editors; Bette Davis was awarded the Golden Nymph prize at Monte Carlo for her portrayal of Esther McDonald Cimino.”

As indicated by their breezy titles, these are short, readable booklets, each of which develops one or more of the subjects covered in this short work. This means, as I see it, that any middle schooler, boy or girl, can easily access any one of these booklets, duplicate it, and suck up whatever is attractive in its contents, and measure how much progress has been achieved week by week and month by month.

I want to emphasize here, young friends, that as middle schoolers each of you is fundamentally in the personal-progress business, not in the education business. As pointed out earlier, your grades don’t even count the way high school and college grades count. Yet your personal intellectual growth during these three years is measurably extraordinary, far more so than your physical maturation.

I also want to emphasize that this booklet is not meant for classroom use or middle school reform — like many other Americans I feel our middle schools are doing better than our high schools and colleges. As presented here it’s a work of personal hope and encouragement. All it asks is some personal time and some personal honesty regarding measuring whatever progress is taking place.

As noted earlier, our basic premise here is that concentration trumps brains seven days out of the week. As a veteran of WW2 and the GI Bill, the premise sure worked for me and 16 million other Americans. So, I honestly feel this plain-folks attitude is still worth respecting and putting to use — along with a little bit of luck, of course.



¹ This was chillingly charted by Tiffany Hsu in the *Los Angeles Times*, "[One in five households burdened by student debt, a record](#)" (September 28, 2012)