PREPARING FOR THE ELLIOTT SCHOOL ORAL PROFICIENCY EXAM

**Overall.** Elliott School students who are taking the Foreign Language Oral Proficiency Exam and who are required to demonstrate "Intermediate High" proficiency must be able to speak in **cogent paragraphs** in a way that is easily understandable to a non-sympathetic listener at least 50 percent of the time when paragraphs are required. A non-sympathetic listener is one who is not used to dealing with foreigners and has no intrinsic interest in talking to you.

You are also expected to be able to narrate events, describe things, and explain things on typical familiar topics such as:

- Your own biography
- Your job and your job duties
- Your schoolwork and plans after graduation
- Your ideal job
- Interesting experiences you have had (both good and bad)
- Your plans for the future
- Everyday transactional problems (arguing about being overbilled for something, getting a grade changed, etc.)
- Narration of a chain of events — things that happened to you or straightforward news events.
- Explanations of how to do things: opening a bank account, registering for school, getting a passport, etc.

**What's a paragraph?** A paragraph is more than a group of sentences. It features cohesive devices. Its pace does not have to be fast. You can “think” as you go along. You can talk as slow as Diane Rheme. But when speakers show obvious **breakdown** due to missing vocabulary, “time traveling” (not maintaining the temporal integrity of a narration), and grammar bad enough to cause the listener to have trouble understanding, then the attempted paragraph is no longer a paragraph.

For example, to the question, **How does one go about getting a passport in the United States? Is this a complicated bureaucratic matter?**, the left answer below is a successful paragraph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful Paragraph</th>
<th>Non Paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No, it’s not that complicated. For most people it takes about two or three weeks....</td>
<td>You fill out passport form. You bring identification. And two photographs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>at worst, a month. Most people start by going to the post office. Uh, most of the</td>
<td>They must be proper. Identification: it is important: the birth metric.</td>
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<tr>
<td>time you have to bring enough official documentation to prove that you are who you</td>
<td>The social card. This is not too difficult. It is possible at postal station.</td>
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<td>say you are — those requirements have been tightened up since 9-11. So a simple</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>driver’s license won’t do. I think, um, these days you need a birth certificate and,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>uh... some sort of other ID... uh... like a social security card. But I might be</td>
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<td>wrong about this. Anyway, you show your documents to a clerk and fill out a form. Oh,</td>
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<td>and you have to have two pictures. And they’re pretty strict about the size, color,</td>
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<tr>
<td>and format of the pictures, like what kind of background it is. Oh, and the new</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing is that you’re not supposed to smile. So... anyway... you hand all that stuff in</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
along with a check for something like like $50. And then you wait... and wait... Well, actually, it usually is pretty quick... considering it's the government... As I said, about two weeks.

**What kind of pausing is allowed?** All speakers pause and repair. You are allowed a certain amount of language roughness and hesitation as long as the roughness and hesitation does not destroy the paragraph. Here are some examples. The speaker is explaining how to file a tax return.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptable non-linguistic pauses (hesitancy about information)</th>
<th>Acceptable language hesitation</th>
<th>Linguistic breakdown that kills the paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You need to get a form called 1040. You can get it at the post office or download it from the IRS site. Now, if you have a job, you'll get a form from your employer, a W-4... No, I mean a W-2. Or whatever. You'll need to fill out the 1040 and include the W-2 (I think that's what it is). The W-2 says how much money you earned. If your finances aren't very complicated, you can use a different simpler form, and you can file it online.</td>
<td>To pay your taxes, you have to give a form— send a form called 1040. You can get this form at a post office. Or you can download it on a computer. You should also have another form, which you get at work, the W—... W-2. You must also send in them— send them— send them in the W-2. This form tells how much money you received in this ye— I mean, the year before. So you send the form... the 1040 with the W-2. But the form 1040 is very complicated.</td>
<td>If you pay taxes, you must... must... you must write in... write out... a special form, 1040... from... online. Or the post box... uh, no... office. The post office. You answer the questions on the form. You also need documents... like... you need... it's called W-2. You get... Your work, you get it through... at work. And you attatch the W-2 to... No... attach. And, I think, you can it online. It's possible online. It's complicated to pay... pay taxes in the... in our country.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**It's not a grammar test.** You need enough grammar to support paragraph structures in a way that they can be understood by non-sympathetic listeners on concrete topics at least 50 percent of the time. But the grammar does not have to be perfect. However, when the grammar is so “dirty” that comprehension stops, so does the paragraph.

**Some typical questions.**

1. Describe your job. What are your duties?
2. What is a typical day like?
3. Have you been abroad? What did you do there? What was a typical day like?
4. What was your most interesting (best, horrific) experience (abroad, in undergraduate school, in graduate school)?
5. What experience do you think you missed (abroad, in undergraduate school, in graduate school)?
6. What are your main academic / free time interests?
7. How did you get interested in _____?
8. How does one apply for a job in your field?
9. Imagine I know nothing about the U.S. educational system. How do you get into college (graduate school)?
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of going to GW?
11. What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in ____?
12. What are the advantages and disadvantages of life in a big city like Washington?
13. Compare a college experience on an urban campus like GW to a typical spacious campus like a big state school (U of Md, U. of Va or any other school like that)?
14. A lot of campuses are big sports schools (football, basketball, etc.). What was the situation at your undergraduate school? What impact (if any) did the presence or absence of big sports have on campus?

15. Compare your undergraduate and graduate school experience. Is there a difference in the mentality of the students?

16. American politicians often talk about American exceptionalism. What do they mean by that?

17. What arguments have you heard for or against ____ (gun control, 18-year-olds being allowed to drink, the war on drugs, getting rid of the penny, etc., etc., etc.)? (This asks not necessarily for your defended opinion, just a retelling of what people think.)

18. How does one ____? (Get a driver’s license, open a bank account, file a tax return, register for classes, apply for a job, etc.)

19. Does everyone at your workplace always wear business dress? Are there any provisions for casual dress for any positions or situations? Explain your employer’s dress code and your feeling about it.

20. In many universities abroad attendance doesn’t really matter. If you pass the exams, you get your diploma. Based on your own personal experience, what is attendance policy like in American colleges? What about high school attendance?

21. Some people criticize America as a land of people wishing to remaining ignorant of foreign things. Based on your own personal anecdotal experience, what examples could you provide that support or cast doubt on this claim?

22. You are working on a development project. You have in your office a local intern who is simply not working out. He’s a very nice fellow, but... (1) He’s constantly late. (2) He loses things. (3) He fails to convey messages. (4) He’s technologically incompetent. Complain to another senior colleague and make up some examples to illustrate your point.

23. You were supposed to meet a VIP this morning. This meeting was very hard to arrange. You arrive late. Make your apologies and make up a story that might excuse your lateness. Suggest rescheduling the meeting if necessary.

24. Explain to your assistants their latest assignment: Go through the handwritten files of information on the current project. Make sure that all the data from the handwritten files have been entered into the office’s computer database. Check to see if there are any discrepancies between handwritten notes and information already written online. If there are discrepancies that look like more than explainable typos, the assistants should check with you first to find out which information is the correct version.

25. Your office printer is broken. Call up the maintenance company with whom you have a contract. When you get the answering machine, leave a message: your name, your organization’s name and number, the crux of the problem. Explain that you have a maintenance contract with the company and that your understanding is that the company is supposed to send someone out to you (you don’t have to lug the printer to them) and that there should be no extra charge for the repair.

26. Call up the local utility company. Explain to them that they double billed your organization for the same month of electric service. You’re not surprised. This double billing has been going on for three months. This is the third time you have had to call to get this corrected. Express your frustration.

27. Leave a message on the answering machine of someone with whom you were about to have a meeting. You have to cancel. Apologize and explain that you have an office emergency — the office is flooded! You will need to spend at least two days in cleanup and repairs. Perhaps the meeting can be scheduled next week. Be sure to remind the person you are calling of the necessary contact information.

28. You have a locally issued debit card. It was rejected this morning by a local merchant. But a few minutes later, it was accepted by someone else, but only after they ran the card twice. Before calling up the emergency number, you explain what happened to a friend and ask her advice as to whether she thinks you should panic.
The following items are examples of “retell” type narrations. You get the facts. You then have to lay them out. For Elliott School students these are taken from IA-type topics, usually involving the area where the target language is spoken.

29. You have been asked to explain the American electoral college to a foreign audience. This is a complicated topic, and for that reason you have brought a video that does that job for you. But in the Q&A period afterwards, you are asked what happens when the electoral college vote doesn’t match the popular vote. You respond mentioning the following set of facts. In fact, this has happened three (actually almost four times) in our country’s history. In 1876, Samuel Tilden beat Rutherford B. Hayes by 300,000 votes. But Hayes had more electoral votes and became president. In 1888, Grover Cleveland “defeated” Benjamin Harrison by 100,000 votes but was not elected president. Of course, most people remember the George W. Bush received fewer popular votes than Al Gore. But Bush was elected president. Finally, in 2000, George W. Bush was elected president. Finally, John Kennedy won both the popular and electoral vote in 1960. But his popular margin was narrow: 100,000 votes. Many suspected vote fraud in the state of Illinois. But his opponent, Richard Nixon decided not to question the results. (This paragraph is NOT to be translated. Just convey as much of the information as cogently as you can avoiding language that you do not know. Embellish if you wish. Eliminate factual information that you cannot say. Simplify expressions you don’t know. You are not being judged on the completeness of the information, just on whether you conveyed the gist and some details in a cogent way.)

30. You are asked by a foreign audience why the U.S. administration reacted in such an unprecedented way to Julian Assange’s Wikileaks. You respond that perhaps the reaction is not so unprecedented. After all, things like this have happened before. In 1971, a military analyst with access to secret information, Daniel Ellsberg, leaked documents about the War in Vietnam to the New York Times. The Nixon administration responded to that leak by trying to halt publication. The case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the Times. Members of the Nixon administration tried to retaliate against Ellsberg. They charged him with espionage. But the case was dismissed after it was learned that people in the government had illegally tapped Ellsberg’s phone and even broken into the home of his psychiatrist looking for compromising material. (This paragraph is NOT to be translated. Just convey as much of the information as cogently as you can avoiding language that you do not know. Embellish if you wish. Eliminate factual information that you cannot say.)

All these topics require simply narrations, descriptions, and explanations on non-theoretical, concrete topics. You might be asked to state personal opinions based on your own experience or concrete information provided to you. You do not have to cogently defend opinions, provide analysis, or delve into unfamiliar factual material (e.g. provide information you do not know or do not have available).

In nearly all cases, you are asked to speak about things based on your own personal experience, even if the topics touch on current events. (Example: Based on your own personal experience does the bureaucracy of your home town work well? Possible answer: “Sure. After all, our streets are clean. The city collects the trash on time. And amazingly enough when you call up to report a problem or ask a question a human being actually answers the phone.... eventually, anyway. Plus, you almost never have to call. You can find out almost everything on the city website.”)

Remember that this is not an exhaustive list. Just memorizing the answers to these questions will not work because trained testers can tell previously prepared speech, which is not accepted as valid evidence of the competence level that you are required to have.