



Annual Examinations for Secondary Schools 2022

YEAR 9

**ENGLISH
READING COMPREHENSION**

Who invented canned food? Who first thought of pensions? Whose idea was it that the first row on a typewriter should read QWERTYUIOP? These are things I didn't know I didn't know, and didn't know that I wanted to know, until I read Tim Harford's splendid book. Harford is a journalist, broadcaster and, above all, economist, whose quest it is to popularise **his** often dusty and mathematical craft.

This one is a sequel to his bestselling Fifty Things That Made The Modern Economy, which went for the obvious things: the wheel, the steam engine, the internet. Harford must have realised that he was only scratching the surface of such a rich and fertile topic.

This book has to work slightly harder for its effects, but it means Harford is operating in slightly less obvious territory, explaining the provenance of things **you** had never really thought about, or in a few cases hadn't even heard of. It's the perfect meal for the famished trivia hound. Harford says he is 'an admirer of the things that tend to pass unnoticed. From the brick to the "Like" button, the inventions that fill the pages of this book are often taken for granted.'

None more so, of course, than the pencil, which actually comes from a Latin word meaning tail. That's because Roman writing brushes were made from tufts of fur from an animal's tail. The modern pencil has been around for 450 years, and it's a small masterpiece of engineering: graphite from Sri Lanka, mixed with Mississippi clay, sulphuric acid, animal fats and all sorts. The eraser isn't actually rubber, but made from sulphur chloride reacted with rapeseed oil, tinted pink with cadmium sulphide. And how to make the thing? The wood from the pencil is in two halves, with grooves down the middle. Pop the graphite in the grooves, glue the two halves together, and there you have it. Sounds simple, but it's actually quite complex, an ancient process made cheap and routine by modern technology. The resultant pencils sell for pennies and we never give them a second's thought.

Take the postage stamp. **This** was effectively invented by a man called Rowland Hill, a former schoolmaster who was incensed by the way the Post Office then worked. In 1837, it wasn't the person who sent the letter who paid for postage, it

30 was the person who received it. The formula was complex and often prohibitively expensive. So if you were handed a letter and you saw it was from your boring Aunt Mabel telling you about her cats again, you just refused to receive it and the postman had to take it away with him again.

Hill was so cross he wrote pamphlets, lobbied the government and made a thorough
35 nuisance of himself. The Post Office rejected all **his** proposals outright. So what did the government do? They put Hill in charge. It was an inspired move. Hill's postage stamp idea was so successful that every other country in the world quickly adopted it. That's why only British stamps do not have their country of origin printed on them, because we invented them. (We do have to have the monarch's head on
40 them, as a compromise.)

These are numbers one, four and five of Harford's list of 50, **which** also includes spectacles, the mail-order catalogue and Santa Claus. Spectacles were invented in the late 13th century and instantly revolutionised the lives of millions, especially the middle-aged and old. Even now, an estimated 2.5 billion people in the world
45 need glasses but don't have them. That's a third of the world's population!

As for Santa, there's an estimated \$35 billion wasted every year on Christmas presents people don't want. That's roughly what the World Bank lends to developing countries each year.

Harford is a fine, perceptive writer, and an effortless explainer of tricky concepts.
50 His book teems with good things, and will expand the mind of anyone lucky enough to read it.

Adapted from [UK Home | Daily Mail Online](#)