Could you have *passed?*

A real Louisiana voter literacy test from 1964.

Louisiana gave a test like this one to anyone who wanted to register to vote and could not prove a fifth grade education. It has 30 questions and a 10-minute limit. The instructions say one wrong answer means failure.

Try it yourself before you read about how it was graded.

01	Print pages 2 to 4, or work on a screen with a pencil and paper.
02	Set a timer for 10 minutes.
03	Do exactly what each statement says, nothing more, nothing less.
04	Remember: one wrong answer meant failure.

When you are done, turn to page 5 to see how the test was really graded.

The State of Louisiana

Literacy Test (This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education.)

Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.

1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.
2. Draw a line under the last word in this line.
3. Cross out the longest word in this line.
4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line.
5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line.
6. In the space below, draw three circles, one inside (engulfed by) the other.

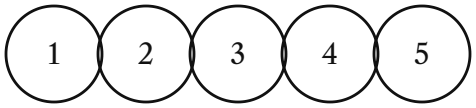
7. Above the letter X make a small cross.
8. Draw a line through the letter below that comes earliest in the alphabet.

   Z V S B D M K I T P H C

9. Draw a line through the two letters below that come last in the alphabet.

   Z V B D M K T P H S Y C

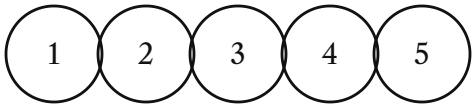
10. In the first circle below write the last letter of the first word beginning with "L."



11. Cross out the number necessary, when making the number below one million.

    10000000000

12. Draw a line from circle 2 to circle 5 that will pass below circle 2 and above circle 4.



13. In the line below cross out each number that is more than 20 but less than 30.

    31 16 48 29 53 47 22 37 98 26 20 25

14. Draw a line under the first letter after “h” and draw a line through the second letter after “j.”

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q

15. In the space below, write the word “noise” backwards and place a dot over what would be its second letter should it have been written forward.

16. Draw a triangle with a blackened circle that overlaps only its left corner.

17. Look at the line of numbers below, and place on the blank, the number that should come next.

2 4 8 16 _ _ _ _ _

18. Look at the line of numbers below, and place on the blank, the number that should come next.

3 6 9 _ _ _ _ _ 15

19. Draw in the space below, a square with a triangle in it, and within that same triangle draw a circle with a black dot in it.

20. Spell backwards, forwards.

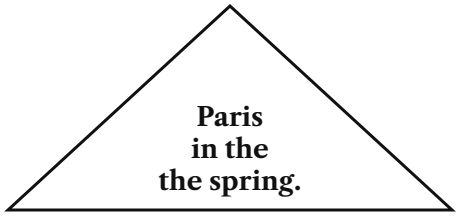
21. Print the word vote upside down, but in the correct order.

22. Place a cross over the tenth letter in this line, a line under the first space in the sentence, and a circle around the last the in the second line of this sentence.

23. Draw a figure that is square in shape. Divide it in half by drawing a straight line from its northeast corner to its southwest corner, and then divide it once more by drawing a broken line from the middle of its western side to the middle of its eastern side.

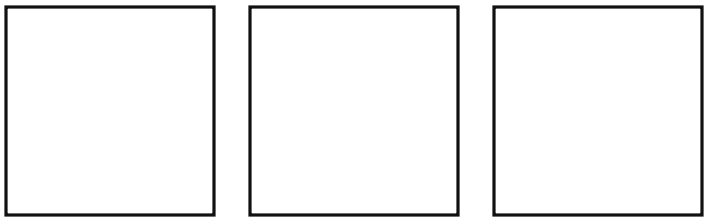
24. Print a word that looks the same whether it is printed frontwards or backwards.

25. Write down on the line provided, what you read in the triangle below:



_____ _____

26. In the third square below, write the second letter of the fourth word.



27. Write right from the left to the right as you see it spelled here.

28. Divide a vertical line in two equal parts by bisecting it with a curved horizontal line that is only straight at its spot bisection of the vertical.

29. Write every other word in this first line and print every third word in the same line, [original type smaller and first line ended at comma] but capitalize the fifth word that you write.

30. Draw five circles that one common inter-locking part. [sic]

AFTER YOU TRY IT

Why this test was designed to *fail people*

The Louisiana literacy test looks like a school quiz. It was built so that one person, the registrar who gave it, could decide who passed.

The questions were written so loosely that an examiner could call almost any answer right or wrong, whenever he liked. People the county commissioners wanted kept from voting were going to fail no matter what they wrote. Most were Black applicants. Some were lower-class white residents who were out of favor with county officials.

A Black applicant could be failed for a single spelling or punctuation mistake. Many examiners also changed the rules in the middle of the test, or read the trick questions their own way.

Q1, 4, 5	Question 5 says to “circle” something. Questions 1 and 4 say to “draw a line around” something. If the examiner insisted a circle was not a line, the applicant failed.
Q10	“The first word beginning with ‘L’”: the first word in this sentence, or the first word on the page?
Q24	A word like BOB looks fine. But if the examiner expected “backwards” to mean mirror-writing, the B’s would be flipped, and the answer counted as wrong.
Q25	Past the trick in the triangle, the examiner might have expected the word “down” on the line.
Q27	Only the word “right”, or “right” plus the words after it? And if you printed instead of writing in cursive (“I said write, not print!”), you failed.
The clock	Thirty complicated questions in 10 minutes. That limit could easily be waived for white voters.

> *There were limitless ways to fail this test, and the registrar, backed by a white-controlled county government, held complete power over whether every applicant passed or failed.*

At Abule we read the source, then *decide what we think.*

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Test text: "The State of Louisiana Literacy Test," reproduced from http://rights.teachingmatters.org/files/images/african/1965_test.html (Teaching Matters, rights.teachingmatters.org). The wording is kept as in the source, including its original errors ("the the," "last the," "[sic]").

Explainer (page 5): adapted in Abule's words from "Grading The Louisiana Literacy Test" at the same source. The facts are the source's.

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