



BRAINIACS OLYMPIAD

3RD BRAINIACS OLYMPIAD BRAINIACS TALK CATEGORY 1 (GRADES 7–8) SAMPLE PAPER



Topic 1 “The best lessons are learned outside the classroom.”

Topic 2 “Being popular matters less than being useful.”

Topic 3 “We learn more from people we disagree with than from people we agree with.”

Topic 4 “Young people should be given more responsibility, not more protection.”

Topic 5 “A promise kept is worth more than a gift given.”

Sample Responses

Category 1 - Grades 7 and 8

Five sample responses follow, one for each topic above. They illustrate the range judges should expect: one response below the award threshold, two solid responses, and two responses in the top band. Each is followed by a judge's note explaining the score against the rubric. Word counts assume a delivery pace of roughly 130 words per minute.

Sample	Topic	Band	Score
1	Topic 1	Weak	40 / 100
2	Topic 2	Good	80 / 100
3	Topic 3	Good	73 / 100
4	Topic 4	Great	93 / 100
5	Topic 5	Great	96 / 100

SAMPLE 1 - BAND: WEAK

“The best lessons are learned outside the classroom.”

Transcript

Good morning everyone. My topic today is that the best lessons are learned outside the classroom. I think this is a very important topic and I am going to talk about it now.

So, first of all, school is important. In school we learn maths, science, English, history and many other subjects. Teachers work very hard for us and I think we should respect them a lot. Without school we would not know how to read or write, and that would be very bad for our future.

But also, outside the classroom is important too. For example, when I play football with my friends, I learn teamwork. Teamwork is a very important skill that everybody needs in life. Also when I help my mother in the kitchen, I learn how to cook. Cooking is also a life skill and many people cannot cook these days, which is a problem.

Another example is travelling. When people travel, they see new cultures and they meet new people from different countries. This teaches them many things that books cannot teach them. So I think travelling is very educational and everybody should travel if they can.

Also there is the internet. Nowadays you can learn almost anything on the internet. There are YouTube tutorials for everything. Some people learn coding from YouTube and then they become very successful and get good jobs. This shows that you do not always need a classroom to learn something.

Also sports teach discipline. And volunteering teaches kindness. And having a part time job teaches responsibility. There are so many examples that I could give.

In conclusion, both are important in their own way. School gives us knowledge and the outside world gives us experience. So I think we need a balance between the two of them, and that is my opinion on this topic. Thank you very much for listening to my speech.

Judge's note

Content and Insight (2 - Weak). The speech never actually takes a position on the claim. It lists benefits of school, then benefits of everything else, and concludes that 'both are important' - which is the safest possible answer and engages with nothing. The examples (football, cooking, travel, YouTube) are the first four that occur to anyone and are not developed past a single sentence each. The word 'best' in the topic is never addressed at all.

Structure and Argument (2 - Weak). There is an opening and a closing, but the middle is a list rather than an argument. Paragraphs four to six could be reordered or deleted without changing anything, which is the clearest sign that no argument is being built. No counter-argument is considered.

Delivery and Communication (2 - Weak). Heavy reliance on filler openers ('So, first of all', 'Also', 'Another example is'). The candidate signposts that they are about to speak rather than speaking. Sentences are simple and repetitive in shape.

Timing. At roughly 2 minutes 25 seconds this finishes well over 30 seconds below the 4-minute lower bound.

What would fix it. Pick one side and defend it. If the honest view is that both matter, the speech still needs a claim - for example, that the classroom teaches you facts but only the world outside teaches you what to do when the facts run out. One well-developed example beats six undeveloped ones.

SAMPLE 2 - BAND: GOOD

“Being popular matters less than being useful.”

Transcript

There is a boy in my class that almost nobody notices. He is not funny, he is not loud, and he is definitely not popular. But when the projector in our classroom stopped working three weeks ago, and the teacher was pressing every button on the remote, he walked to the back of the room, checked one cable, and fixed it in about forty seconds. Then he sat back down and nobody said anything.

I want to argue today that being useful matters more than being popular, and I want to be honest about why that is not an easy thing to say at thirteen.

My first reason is that popularity is something other people decide about you, and usefulness is something you decide about yourself. If I want to be popular, I have to guess what a group of people wants me to be, and then try to be that. I have almost no control over whether it works. But if I want to be useful, I only have to find something that needs doing and get good at it. One of those things depends on other people's opinions. The other one depends on me. I would rather build my life on the one I can actually control.

My second reason is that popularity does not survive a change of room. The most popular person in my school will walk into a new school, or a new city, or a new job, and start again from zero, because popularity is made of relationships that only exist in one place. Usefulness travels. If you can fix things, or explain things, or calm people down when they are panicking, that works in every room you will ever walk into. Popularity is rented. Usefulness is owned.

Now I want to be fair to the other side, because I think there is a real argument there. Popularity is not only vanity. Popular people get listened to. If you want to start a recycling programme at school, or stop people being bullied, the sad truth is that it works better if a popular person says it than if an unpopular person says it. Influence is a real tool and popularity gives you that tool.

But here is my answer. Influence that comes from popularity has to be spent carefully, because it runs out the moment people stop liking you. Influence that comes from being useful does not, because people are not following you, they are following the thing you can do. The boy who fixed the projector will get asked again next time. That is a kind of influence too, and it is a steadier one.

There is one more thing I would say. Usefulness has a habit of turning into popularity anyway, just slowly, and in the right order. The person everybody actually wants on their team is not the funniest person, it is the person who does the work. But it almost never happens the other way round. Popularity does not make anybody useful.

So when I have to choose, and I think all of us have to choose more often than we admit, I would rather be the person somebody looks for when something is broken than the person everybody looks at when nothing is happening. Thank you.

Judge's note

Content and Insight (4 - Strong). The position is clear, held throughout, and supported by two distinct reasons rather than one reason repeated. The counter-argument about influence is genuine and is answered rather than waved

away. It is a very well-executed conventional take - what keeps it at 4 rather than 5 is that 'usefulness lasts, popularity fades' is the take most thoughtful candidates will land on, and the speech does not go past it.

Structure and Argument (4 - Strong). Excellent shape: concrete opening image, thesis, two reasons, counter-argument, rebuttal, return to the opening image at the close. The signposting is visible ('My first reason', 'My second reason') which is slightly mechanical but keeps the listener oriented.

Delivery and Communication (4 - Strong). Sentences vary in length and the short ones land ('Popularity is rented. Usefulness is owned.'). Reads as spoken English rather than written English, which is what this component rewards.

Timing. Comfortably inside the 4 to 5 minute range.

What would lift it to a 5. Complicate the position. For instance: is there a kind of usefulness that is really just people-pleasing, and how would you tell the difference? A speech that finds the hard case inside its own argument moves from Strong to Exceptional.

SAMPLE 3 - BAND: GOOD

“We learn more from people we disagree with than from people we agree with.”

Transcript

I agree with the statement that we learn more from people we disagree with than from people we agree with, and I will explain three reasons why I believe this is true.

The first reason is that agreement does not make you think. When somebody says something I already believe, my brain does something very lazy. It says yes, correct, next. I do not check the reasoning, I do not look for evidence, I do not ask myself how I know. I just enjoy it. Scientists have a name for this, confirmation bias, which means we are much less careful with information that flatters us than with information that annoys us. So the strange result is that the people who agree with me are the people I listen to least carefully, even though I like them the most.

The second reason is that disagreement shows you the shape of your own opinion. Before somebody argues with me, I usually do not know why I think what I think. I just think it. It is only when someone asks me why, and I open my mouth and nothing good comes out, that I discover my opinion was mostly borrowed from my father or from a video I watched. That is uncomfortable but it is information. Every argument I have lost has told me something true about myself that no compliment has ever told me.

My third reason is about the future. The world we are going into is not going to be full of people who agree with us. School can feel like a place where everyone has roughly the same background and roughly the same opinions, and it is easy to mistake that for how the world is. It is not. If I only ever practise talking to people who already think what I think, then I am practising a skill I will almost never need, and failing to practise the one I will need constantly, in every workplace and every country I ever end up in.

I should say that disagreement only works under certain conditions. If the person shouting at me on the internet is not interested in the truth, I will not learn anything from them, I will just get upset. So I am not saying all disagreement is educational. I am saying disagreement with someone serious is educational.

Some people would say that we learn a lot from people we agree with, for example a teacher who shares your values, or a coach, and I understand this point. When somebody agrees with your goals they can help you reach them faster.

But I still think disagreement teaches more, because a teacher who agrees with you can add to what you already have, and a person who disagrees with you can show you that what you already have is wrong. Those are not the same size of lesson. Adding is useful. Correcting is more useful, because it is the only one that can save you from going a long way in the wrong direction.

So in conclusion, I have given three reasons. Agreement makes us lazy, disagreement reveals our reasoning, and the future will require it. This is why I believe we learn more from the people who disagree with us, even though we usually enjoy them much less. Thank you for listening.

Judge's note

Content and Insight (4 - Strong). Genuinely good thinking. The confirmation bias point is used correctly rather than name-dropped, and the observation that we discover our opinions are borrowed only under pressure is the strongest moment in the speech. The condition placed on the claim - that the disagreement has to be serious - shows real care.

Structure and Argument (4 - Strong). Three clear reasons, a qualification, and a counter-argument with a rebuttal. The weakness is ordering: the qualification arrives before the counter-argument, so the middle sags slightly and the third reason gets less development than the first two.

Delivery and Communication (3 - Adequate). This is what holds the score down. The opening is a table of contents rather than a hook, the closing restates the three reasons in list form, and the phrasing throughout ('I will explain three reasons why', 'in conclusion, I have given three reasons') reads like an essay being spoken aloud rather than a speech. The content deserves a better performance than it gets.

Timing. Inside the range.

What would fix it. Same argument, different mouth. Open on the specific argument the candidate lost - the one with the father, or the video - and let the reasons emerge from that story instead of being announced in advance. Nothing about the thinking needs to change to move this into the Silver band.

SAMPLE 4 - BAND: GREAT

“Young people should be given more responsibility, not more protection.”

Transcript

When my grandmother was fourteen, she was sent alone on a two-day train journey to bring money to her aunt in another city. When I was fourteen, my school sent a letter home asking parents to confirm in writing that I was allowed to walk two hundred metres to the sports field.

I am not telling you that story to say the old days were better. My grandmother's journey was not a gift, it was a shortage - there was nobody else to send. But it does show me something about the argument I want to make today, which is that young people should be given more responsibility, not more protection, and that the reason is not that we deserve it. It is that protection has a cost, and almost nobody counts it.

Here is what I mean by cost. When an adult removes a risk from a young person's life, everybody can see what has been prevented. Nobody can see what has not been learned. If I am never allowed to manage my own money, no one ever finds out how bad I would have been at it - and neither do I, until the stakes are much higher and the mistake is much more expensive. Protection does not remove the mistake. It postpones it, to a moment when it will cost more.

That is my first argument. Responsibility given early is cheap. The exact same responsibility given late is expensive. A thirteen-year-old who loses fifty of their own money learns almost the same lesson as a twenty-three-year-old who loses fifty thousand, except that one of them recovers by the weekend.

My second argument is about what protection tells us about ourselves. Rules are messages. When a school decides that we cannot be trusted to cross a road, organise an event, or handle a disagreement without an adult standing between us, we hear that. And we are reasonable people, so we believe it. The most damaging thing about excessive protection is not what it stops us from doing. It is that it is a very convincing argument, made every day, that we are not capable - and it is being made by the people we trust most.

Now the serious objection. Some protections are not about capability at all. Child labour laws, age limits on gambling, safeguarding rules - these exist because adults with power exploited young people who had none, and the protection is aimed at those adults, not at us. I fully accept that. I am not arguing against protection from other people. I am arguing against protection from ourselves.

So how do you tell the two apart? I would use one test. Ask what happens if the young person fails. If the failure would be permanent - if it would end a life, or a body, or a future - then protect, and do not apologise for it. But if the failure would only be embarrassing, or expensive in small amounts, or disappointing to an adult, then that is not a danger. That is a lesson with a price tag, and it is the cheapest one we will ever be offered.

Most of what is currently taken away from people my age fails that test easily. We are not being protected from ruin. We are being protected from inconvenience - usually the adults' inconvenience, because supervising us is faster than teaching us.

My grandmother did not become capable because someone believed in her. She became capable because someone needed her. I think that is the thing we are actually short of. Not confidence, and not protection. Being needed. Thank you.

Judge's note

Content and Insight (5 - Exceptional). This goes well beyond the obvious take. Three moves lift it: reframing protection as a cost that is invisible rather than a benefit that is visible; the point that rules function as messages about capability; and the concession on safeguarding, which is not a token nod but a genuine distinction between protection from others and protection from oneself. The failure test in paragraph seven gives the audience something portable to take away.

Structure and Argument (5 - Exceptional). The opening anecdote is immediately complicated by the candidate themselves ('her journey was not a gift, it was a shortage'), which buys enormous credibility. Two arguments, a serious objection, a distinction that resolves it, an application of that distinction, and a closing that reinterprets the opening image. Nothing is decorative.

Delivery and Communication (4 - Strong). Confident, controlled, and well paced, with the density of the argument handled by short summarising sentences. Marked at 4 rather than 5 because paragraphs three and four carry a heavy load of abstract reasoning and the pace does not slow to let it land; a listener who blinks in the wrong place loses the cost argument.

Timing. Inside the range, using the upper end well.

Note for judges. This is a good anchor for the top band because it does not rely on unusual vocabulary or performance skill. It scores where it does on thinking, which is what Content and Insight is meant to reward.

SAMPLE 5 - BAND: GREAT

“A promise kept is worth more than a gift given.”

Transcript

My father promised me he would come to my school play. He did not buy me anything that month, because it was a bad month. He arrived late, stood at the back, and I could see him from the stage. I do not remember a single line I said that evening. I remember exactly where he was standing.

The topic asks whether a promise kept is worth more than a gift given, and I want to argue that it is - but not for the reason people usually give. The usual reason is that promises are emotional and gifts are material, and emotions are deeper. I do not find that convincing, because gifts can be enormously emotional. My argument is different. A promise and a gift are two different kinds of thing, and only one of them tells you anything about the future.

Consider what a gift actually proves. It proves that at one moment, someone thought of you and had the means to act. That is real and it is lovely. But it is finished. A gift is a completed fact, and completed facts do not make predictions.

A kept promise is different, because a promise is a statement about a future that has not happened yet, made by a person who does not know what that future will contain. When my father promised to come, he did not know he would be tired, or that the traffic would be bad, or that something at work would fall apart that afternoon. He promised anyway. So when he arrived, what I received was not an evening of his time. What I received was evidence - evidence that this is a person whose words survive contact with reality.

That is why I say a kept promise is worth more. It is not worth more because it feels nicer. It is worth more because it is information you can use. After a kept promise, I know something about tomorrow. After a gift, I only know something about yesterday.

Now let me take the other side seriously, because there is a version of it that is strong. Some gifts are not really gifts, they are sacrifices. A parent working a second job to buy something they cannot afford is not making a gesture, they are spending part of their life. Surely that is worth more than a promise cheaply kept - showing up to something you wanted to attend anyway.

I accept that completely, and I think it actually proves my point. What makes that gift so valuable is not the object. It is the invisible promise underneath it, the one that was never spoken out loud: I will put you first even when it costs me. We are moved by the sacrifice because we can see the promise behind it. So even in the strongest case for gifts, the thing doing the work is a promise.

And there is a warning in this too, which I think is the part people my age most need to hear. If a kept promise is evidence, then a broken one is evidence as well. It is not neutral. A person who breaks small promises easily is telling you something reliable about how they will behave when the promises get large, and we usually choose not to hear it, because they are charming, or apologetic, or because they buy us something afterwards. Gifts can be used to pay off broken promises. It is a bad exchange rate, and most of us accept it anyway.

So I would put it like this. A gift says: I thought of you. A kept promise says: you can build something on me. Both are worth having. Only one of them is worth building on.

My father has bought me better things than that evening. I could not tell you what any of them were. Thank you.

Judge's note

Content and Insight (5 - Exceptional). The candidate explicitly rejects the obvious argument in paragraph two and replaces it with a sharper one - promises are predictive, gifts are retrospective - and then holds that frame consistently to the end. The handling of the counter-argument is the strongest single move in this pack: rather than defeating the sacrifice objection, the speech absorbs it, showing that what makes a sacrificial gift moving is an unspoken promise. The turn to broken promises as evidence adds a second layer that most candidates would never reach.

Structure and Argument (5 - Exceptional). Tight and cumulative. Every paragraph does something the previous one made necessary. The closing pair of lines is a genuine callback rather than a summary, and the final sentence lands the entire argument in nine words without stating it.

Delivery and Communication (5 - Exceptional). Controlled pacing, deliberate use of the short sentence, and no filler. The opening resists the temptation to explain itself. Language is plain throughout - there is no advanced vocabulary anywhere in this speech, which is worth noting to judges: the top band is reached through thinking and control, not through complicated words.

Timing. Inside the range.

Note for judges. Use this as the anchor for a 5 on Content and Insight at Category 1 level. The distinguishing feature is not maturity of subject matter but that the candidate argues against the easy version of their own position before defending the hard one.