CAMBRIDGE
International Education

Cambridge O Level

ENGLISH LANGUAGE **1123/12**

Paper 1 Reading **May/June 2026**

INSERT **2 hours**

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INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading passages.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.

This document has **8** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

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Read **Text A** and answer **Question 1** and **Question 2** on the question paper.

Text A: The kite fighting tournament

The writer is looking back at his childhood in Kabul, Afghanistan.

1 My father, Baba, was one of the richest businessmen in Kabul. Everyone agreed that he had built the most beautiful house in the city. It was a huge mansion of marble floors, and crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings. At the bottom of our garden was the shack, dimly lit by a pair of oil lamps, where our servant, Ali, lived with his son, Hassan. Hassan and I were almost the same age and so inevitably we became friends, but I never stepped inside his home. While I went to school, Hassan stayed home, helping Ali with the chores.

2 When the sun disappeared and we finished playing for the day, Hassan and I parted ways. I headed to Baba's mansion, Hassan headed to his shack. I'd watch enviously as Ali greeted his son with a warm hug. Legend had it that my own father had wrestled a black bear with his bare hands. No one doubted this. I'd seen the jagged scars on his back, I would boast to the boys at school. But sometimes I dreamt about the bear fight. And in those dreams, I could never tell Baba from the bear.

3 Winter was every child's favourite season in Kabul. I loved it for the soft pattering of snow against my window at night, for the warmth of the cast-iron stove, for the way fresh snow crunched under my rubber boots, for turnip qurma and rice for lunch after a morning building snowmen. And of course, I loved winter for the kite fighting tournament. The streets filled with kite fighters tugging their strings, squinting up to the sky, trying to cut the opponent's kite line until only one kite remained in the sky – the winner's.

4 Hassan and I used to build our own kites. We went to the bazaar and bought bamboo, glue, string and paper, but it quickly became apparent that Hassan and I were better kite fighters than kite makers. Some flaw in our design always spelled its doom, so Baba took us to Saifo, the city's most famous kite maker, and bought us a kite and a spool of glass string sharp enough to cut down the other kites.

5 A few days before the tournament, Baba and I were having dinner. He was telling me again about his kite fighting victories when he said, casually, 'I'm wondering maybe you'll win the tournament this year. What do you think?' I was a good kite fighter and had almost won a few times, but that wasn't good enough for Baba. Winning was winning. Nonetheless, Baba's comment had planted a seed in my head: I would win that winter's tournament. I was going to fly that last kite. I'd show him once and for all that his son was worthy. But, the night before the tournament, I didn't sleep. I rolled from side to side, got up and sat on the balcony in the dark, a blanket wrapped around me. I was like a soldier trying to sleep the night before a battle. Fighting kites was a little like going to war and we had to be prepared.

6 On the morning of the tournament, Hassan and I gathered with the other kite fighters. Rooftops were jammed with spectators. I turned my gaze to our rooftop and found Baba sitting on a bench, wrapped in his woollen coat, sipping tea. I felt Baba watching me. Why was I putting myself through this when I knew the outcome? Suddenly, I wanted to withdraw. Go back home. But Hassan had already raised our red kite and was running. The spool rolled in my hands and he tossed the kite. I took a deep breath, pulled on the string and the kite rocketed to the sky to become a great paper bird flapping its wings. Hassan clapped his hands and raced back to me. I handed him the spool so I could manipulate the string and control the kite. Soon the sky was a sea of gliding kites like paper sharks looking for prey.

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7 And then the cutting commenced. The defeated kites whirled out of control. They fell from the sky like shooting stars with brilliant, rippling tails – but I was still flying! Hours later, there were just a few kites left. My legs ached, my neck was stiff but with each defeated kite, hope grew in my heart. Only five kites remained… then four… then three… and then… two – and I was still flying! It was just me and the other guy. The blue kite. And suddenly, just like that, hope became knowledge. I was going to win. It was just a matter of when.

8 I fed the string, pulled up, looped my red kite on top of the blue one. I held position. The blue kite knew it was in trouble. Sensing the end was near, the crowd were cheering, clapping, chanting. Then the moment came. The crowd erupted when the blue kite spun wildly like a tyre come loose from a speeding car, tumbling and plummeting down. My own kite sailed triumphantly in the empty sky. I blinked, tried to say something and then I was screaming and everything was alive and good. I saw Baba standing on our roof, pumping both of his fists. Hollering and laughing. And that was the single greatest moment of my twelve years of life, seeing Baba on that roof, proud of me at last.

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Read **Text B** and answer **Question 3** on the question paper.

Text B: Life without my smartphone

My smartphone was consuming too much of my life. What was supposed to be a convenience was becoming a compulsion: Scroll. Check. Swipe. Update. Scroll. Swipe.

So several weeks ago I did the unthinkable: I decided to ditch the smartphone, replacing it with a 'dumbphone'. With its black and white screen, it allows me to make calls, send texts (slowly) and not much else – but with the bonus of not requiring constant charging. I could, of course, have set myself time limits or deleted apps on my smartphone, as my friend Jo suggests, but I knew that I lacked her self-discipline. She thinks my reaction unnecessarily drastic.

The first thing I noticed was how my concentration improved. I feel more focused without the constant temptation to look at my phone and those time-sucking apps deliberately designed to hook us. The result is that I work far more productively and efficiently. Admittedly, many of my friends like Jo require the immediate connectivity of a smartphone for work, but I don't. Projects which would have taken me three hours to complete, with the constant distractions of my social media, can now be completed in half that time – an alarming reminder of how many unproductive hours I'd been devoting to my smartphone.

There's something truly liberating about not having a smartphone. The urgency to respond immediately to a notification is gone, as has the pressure to document my life, and ultimately my private life stays private.

I've also discovered the pleasure of doing nothing. Plus, longer periods of free time mean that I've more time for interests and hobbies: reading books, watching films uninterrupted and playing the guitar which has lain abandoned under my bed for the past few years.

Now that I'm no longer scrolling my life away, I'm free to look around. What do I see? People are opting out of the reality that's right in front of them. Everywhere I go people are staring at their smartphones. Couples in a restaurant gaze lovingly at their screens (if they're not taking a photo of what's on their plate). Meanwhile, I feel I'm living in the moment, looking out rather than looking down, and appreciating the world around me.

OK – so not all screentime is purposeless, as Jo points out. Going into the bank to make a transaction is time consuming, and without GPS it's a nuisance to scribble down directions or memorise a route. And Jo is usually patient when I ask her to book cinema tickets on her smartphone. True, there has been a social cost since I have to rely on friends to make that extra effort to contact me as I'm no longer part of their group chat. But when I meet Jo in a café, she respects my decision, keeps her phone out of sight, and I truly feel better connected with her as we give each other our full attention. No emoji can replace a genuine smile.

While it was nice to see a friend's exotic holiday destination or Jo's half marathon victory celebrated on screen, why did I also feel a sense of inadequacy? I'd been consuming this stuff relentlessly for years and now, away from the competition and constant comparisons with my life, I'm so much happier. Besides that, no more doomscrolling of bad news stories late at night means fewer negative thoughts and a better night's sleep!

A few weeks on, and I can report that my smartphone-free life feels good, and with sales of dumbphones growing, I can't be the only one rethinking their relationship with their smartphone.

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