

READING

READING PASSAGE 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on Questions 1–13, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

*Johnson's Dictionary*



For the century before Johnson's *Dictionary* was published in 1775, there had been concern about the state of the English language. There was no standard way of speaking or writing and no agreement as to the best way of bringing some order to the chaos of English spelling. Dr Johnson provided the solution.

There had, of course, been dictionaries in the past, the first of these being a little book of some 120 pages, compiled by a certain Robert Cawdray, published in 1604 under the title *A Table Alphabeticall* 'of hard usuall English wordes'. Like the various dictionaries that came after it during the seventeenth century, Cawdray's tended to concentrate on 'scholarly' words; one function of the *dictionary* was to enable its student to convey an impression of fine learning.

Beyond the practical need to make order out of chaos, the rise of dictionaries is associated with the rise of the English middle class, who were anxious to define and circumscribe the various worlds to conquer – lexical as well as social and commercial. It is highly appropriate that Dr Samuel Johnson, the very model of an eighteenth-century literary man, as famous in his own time as in ours, should have

published his *Dictionary* at the very beginning of the heyday of the middle class.

Johnson was a poet and critic who raised common sense to the heights of genius. His approach to the problems that had worried writers throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was intensely practical. Up until his time, the task of producing a dictionary on such a large scale had seemed impossible without the establishment of an academy to make decisions about right and wrong usage. Johnson decided he did not need an academy to settle arguments about language; he would write a dictionary himself; and he would do it single-handed. Johnson signed the contract for the *Dictionary* with the bookseller Robert Dodsley at a breakfast held at the Golden Anchor Inn near Holborn Bar on 18 June 1764. He was to be paid £1,575 in instalments, and from this he took money to rent 17 Gough Square, in which he set up his 'dictionary workshop'.

James Boswell, his biographer, described the garret where Johnson worked as 'fitted up like a counting house' with a long desk running down the middle at which the copying clerks would work standing up.

Johnson himself was stationed on a rickety chair at an 'old crazy deal table' surrounded by a chaos of borrowed books. He was also helped by six assistants, two of whom died whilst the *Dictionary* was still in preparation.

The work was immense; filling about eighty large notebooks (and without a library to hand), Johnson wrote the definitions of over 40,000 words, and illustrated their many meanings with some 114,000 quotations drawn from English writing on every subject, from the Elizabethans to his own time. He did not expect to achieve complete originality. Working to a deadline, he had to draw on the best of all previous dictionaries, and to make his work one of heroic synthesis. In fact, it was very much more. Unlike his predecessors, Johnson treated English very practically, as a living language, with many different shades of meaning. He adopted his definitions on the principle of English common law according to precedent. After its publication, his *Dictionary* was not seriously rivalled for over a century.

After many vicissitudes the *Dictionary* was finally published on 15 April 1775. It was instantly recognised as a landmark throughout Europe. 'This very noble work,' wrote the leading Italian lexicographer, 'will be a perpetual monument of Fame to the

Author, an Honour to his own Country in particular, and a general Benefit to the republic of Letters throughout Europe.' The fact that Johnson had taken on the Academies of Europe and matched them (everyone knew that forty French academics had taken forty years to produce the first French national dictionary) was cause for much English celebration.

Johnson had worked for nine years, 'with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academic bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow'. For all its faults and eccentricities his two-volume work is a masterpiece and a landmark, in his own words, 'setting the orthography, displaying the analogy, regulating the structures, and ascertaining the significations of English words'. It is the cornerstone of Standard English, an achievement which, in James Boswell's words, 'conferred stability on the language of his country'.

The *Dictionary*, together with his other writing, made Johnson famous and so well esteemed that his friends were able to prevail upon King George III to offer him a pension. From then on, he was to become the Johnson of folklore.