

**MERO IELTS**

**Academic Reading**

**Practice Test**

**20**

## Aphantasia: A life without mental images

Most people can readily conjure images inside their head – known as their mind’s eye. But this year scientists have described a condition, aphantasia, in which some people are unable to visualise mental images.

Niel Kenmuir, from Lancaster, has always had a blind mind’s eye. He knew he was different even in childhood. “My stepfather, when I couldn’t sleep, told me to count sheep, and he explained what he meant, I tried to do it and I couldn’t,” he says. “I couldn’t see any sheep jumping over fences, there was nothing to count.”

Our memories are often tied up in images, think back to a wedding or first day at school. As a result, Niel admits, some aspects of his memory are “terrible”, but he is very good at remembering facts. And, like others with aphantasia, he struggles to recognise faces. Yet he does not see aphantasia as a disability, but simply a different way of experiencing life.

Mind’s eye blind  
Ironically, Niel now works in a bookshop, although he largely sticks to the non-fiction aisles. His condition begs the question what is going on inside his picture-less mind. I asked him what happens when he tries to picture his fiancée. “This is the hardest thing to describe, what happens in my head when I think about things,” he says. “When I think about my fiancée there is no image, but I am definitely thinking about her, I know today she has her hair up at the back, she’s brunette. But I’m not describing an image I am looking at, I’m remembering features about her, that’s the strangest thing and maybe that is a source of some regret.”

The response from his mates is a very sympathetic: “You’re weird.” But while Niel is very relaxed about his inability to picture things, it is a cause of distress for others. One person who took part in a study into aphantasia said he had started to feel “isolated” and “alone” after discovering that other people could see images in their heads. Being unable to reminisce about his mother years after her death led to him being “extremely distraught”.

The super-visualiser  
At the other end of the spectrum is children’s book illustrator, Lauren Beard, whose work on the Fairytale Hairdresser series will be familiar to many six-year-olds. Her career relies on the vivid images that leap into her mind’s eye when she reads text from her author. When I met her in her box-room studio in Manchester, she was working on a dramatic scene in the next book. The text describes a baby perilously climbing onto a chandelier.

“Straightaway I can visualise this grand glass chandelier in some sort of French kind of ballroom, and the little baby just swinging off it and really heavy thick curtains,” she says. “I think I have a strong imagination, so I can create the world and then keep adding to it so it gets sort of bigger and bigger in my mind and the characters too they sort of evolve. I couldn’t really imagine what it’s like to not imagine, I think it must be a bit of a shame really.”

Not many people have mental imagery as vibrant as Lauren or as blank as Niel. They are the two extremes of visualisation. Adam Zeman, a professor of cognitive and behavioural neurology, wants to compare the lives and experiences of people with aphantasia and its polar-opposite hyperphantasia. His team, based at the University of Exeter, coined the term aphantasia this year in a study in the journal Cortex.

Prof Zeman tells the BBC: "People who have contacted us say they are really delighted that this has been recognised and has been given a name, because they have been trying to explain to people for years that there is this oddity that they find hard to convey to others." How we imagine is clearly very subjective – one person's vivid scene could be another's grainy picture. But Prof Zeman is certain that aphantasia is real. People often report being able to dream in pictures, and there have been reported cases of people losing the ability to think in images after a brain injury.

He is adamant that aphantasia is "not a disorder" and says it may affect up to one in 50 people. But he adds: "I think it makes quite an important difference to their experience of life because many of us spend our lives with imagery hovering somewhere in the mind's eye which we inspect from time to time, it's a variability of human experience."

#### Questions 1–5

Do the following statements agree with the information in the IELTS reading text?  
In boxes 1-5 on your answer sheet, write

TRUE if the statement agrees with the information  
FALSE if the statement contradicts the information  
NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this

1. Aphantasia is a condition, which describes people, for whom it is hard to see images in their imagination.
2. Niel Kenmuir was unable to count sheep in his head.
3. Many people with aphantasia struggle to remember personal traits of different people.
4. The author met Lauren Beard when she was working on a scene in her next book.
5. Different people expressed their satisfaction that the problem of aphantasia and hyperphantasia has finally been recognized.

#### Questions 6–8

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

Write the correct letter in boxes 6–8 on your answer sheet.

6. People with aphantasia are generally good at:
- A Remembering faces
  - B Remembering facts

- C Remembering traits
- D This condition has no advantages

7. Unlike Niel, Lauren:

- A Can visualise different objects
- B Can write books
- C Has aphantasia
- D Has no conditions

8. Adam Zeman wants to:

- A Cure aphantasia
- B Compare people with different conditions
- C Do researches
- D Learn more about aphantasia and hyperphantasia

Questions 9–14

Complete the sentences below. Write NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer.

9. Niel's colleagues describe him as a..... person.
10. Only a small fraction of people have imagination as..... as Lauren does.
11. Hyperphantasia is..... to aphantasia.
12. Many people spend their lives with..... somewhere in the mind's eye.
13. Prof Zeman is..... that aphantasia is not an illness.
14. Prof Zeman strongly believes that aphantasia is not a.....

### **As More Tech Start-Ups Stay Private, So Does the Money**

Not long ago, if you were a young, brash technologist with a world-conquering start-up idea, there was a good chance you spent much of your waking life working toward a single business milestone: taking your company public. Though luminaries of the tech industry have always expressed skepticism and even hostility toward the finance industry, tech's dirty secret was that it looked to Wall Street and the ritual of a public offering for affirmation — not to mention wealth.

But something strange has happened in the last couple of years: The initial public offering of stock has become *déclassé*. For start-up entrepreneurs and their employees across Silicon Valley, an initial public offering is no longer a main goal. Instead, many founders talk about going public as a necessary evil to be postponed as long as possible because it comes with more problems than benefits. "If you can get \$200 million from private sources, then yeah, I don't want my company under the scrutiny of the unwashed masses who don't understand my business," said Danielle Morrill, the chief executive of Mattermark, a start-up that organizes and sells information about the start-up market. "That's actually terrifying to me."

Silicon Valley's sudden distaste for the I.P.O. — rooted in part in Wall Street's skepticism of new tech stocks — may be the single most important psychological shift underlying the current tech boom. Staying private affords start-up executives the luxury of not worrying what outsiders think and helps them avoid the quarterly earnings treadmill. It also means Wall Street is doing what it failed to do in the last tech boom: using traditional metrics like growth and profitability to price companies. Investors have been tough on Twitter, for example, because its user growth has slowed. They have been tough on Box, the cloud-storage company that went public last year, because it remains unprofitable. And the e-commerce company Zulily, which went public last year, was likewise punished when it cut its guidance for future sales.

Scott Kupor, the managing partner at the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, and his colleagues said in a recent report that despite all the attention start-ups have received in recent years, tech stocks are not seeing unusually high valuations. In fact, their share of the overall market has remained stable for 14 years, and far off the peak of the late 1990s. That unwillingness to cut much slack to young tech companies limits risk for regular investors. If the bubble pops, the unwashed masses, if that's what we are, aren't as likely to get washed out.

Private investors, on the other hand, are making big bets on so-called unicorns — the Silicon Valley jargon for start-up companies valued at more than a billion dollars. If many of those unicorns flop, most Americans will escape unharmed, because losses will be confined to venture capitalists and hedge funds that have begun to buy into tech start-ups, as well as tech founders and their employees. The reluctance — and sometimes inability — to go public is spurring the unicorns. By relying on private investors for a longer period of time, start-ups get more runway to figure out sustainable business models. To delay their entrance into the public markets, firms like Airbnb, Dropbox, Palantir, Pinterest, Uber and several other large start-ups are raising hundreds of millions, and in some cases billions, that they would otherwise have gained through an initial public offering.

"These companies are going public, just in the private market," Dan Levitan, the managing partner of the venture capital firm Maveron, told me recently. He means that in many cases, hedge funds and other global investors that would have bought shares in these firms after an I.P.O. are deciding to go into late-stage private rounds. There is even an oxymoronic term for the act of obtaining private money in place of a public offering: It's called a "private I.P.O." The delay in I.P.O.s has altered how some venture capital firms do business. Rather than waiting for an initial offering, Maveron, for instance, says it now sells its stake in a start-up to other, larger private investors once it has made about 100 times its initial investment. It is the sort of return that once was only possible after an I.P.O.

But there is also a downside to the new aversion to initial offerings. When the unicorns do eventually go public and begin to soar — or whatever it is that fantastical horned beasts tend to do when they're healthy — the biggest winners will be the private investors that are now bearing

most of the risk. It used to be that public investors who got in on the ground floor of an initial offering could earn historic gains. If you invested \$1,000 in Amazon at its I.P.O. in 1997, you would now have nearly \$250,000. If you had invested \$1,000 in Microsoft in 1986, you would have close to half a million. Public investors today are unlikely to get anywhere near such gains from tech I.P.O.s. By the time tech companies come to the market, the biggest gains have already been extracted by private backers.

Just 53 technology companies went public in 2014, which is around the median since 1980, but far fewer than during the boom of the late 1990s and 2000, when hundreds of tech companies went public annually, according to statistics maintained by Jay Ritter, a professor of finance at the University of Florida. Today's companies are also waiting longer. In 2014, the typical tech company hitting the markets was 11 years old, compared with a median age of seven years for tech I.P.O.s since 1980. Over the last few weeks, I've asked several founders and investors why they're waiting; few were willing to speak on the record about their own companies, but their answers all amounted to "What's the point?"

Initial public offerings were also ways to compensate employees and founders who owned lots of stock, but there are now novel mechanisms — such as selling shares on a secondary market — for insiders to cash in on some of their shares in private companies. Still, some observers cautioned that the new trend may be a bad deal for employees who aren't given much information about the company's performance. "One thing employees may be confused about is when companies tell them, 'We're basically doing a private I.P.O.,' it might make them feel like there's less risk than there really is," said Ms. Morrill of Mattermark. But she said it was hard to persuade people that their paper gains may never materialize. "The Kool-Aid is really strong," she said.

If the delay in I.P.O.s becomes a normal condition for Silicon Valley, some observers say tech companies may need to consider new forms of compensation for workers. "We probably need to fundamentally rethink how do private companies compensate employees, because that's going to be an issue," said Mr. Kupor, of Andreessen Horowitz. During a recent presentation for Andreessen Horowitz's limited partners — the institutions that give money to the venture firm — Marc Andreessen, the firm's co-founder, told the journalist Dan Primack that he had never seen a sharper divergence in how investors treat public- and private-company chief executives. "They tell the public C.E.O., 'Give us the money back this quarter,' and they tell the private C.E.O., 'No problem, go for 10 years,'" Mr. Andreessen said.

At some point this tension will be resolved. "Private valuations will not forever be higher than public valuations," said Mr. Levitan, of Maveron. "So the question is, Will private markets capitulate and go down or will public markets go up?" If the private investors are wrong, employees, founders and a lot of hedge funds could be in for a reckoning. But if they're right, it will be you and me wearing the frown — the public investors who missed out on the next big thing.

Questions 15-18

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

15. How much funds would you gain by now, if you had invested 1000\$ in the Amazon in 1997?

- A \$250,000
- B close to \$500,000
- C it is not stated in the text
- D no funds

16. Nowadays founders talk about going public as a:

- A necessity
- B benefit
- C possibility
- D profit

17. In which time period was the biggest number of companies going public?

- A early 1990s
- B late 1900s and 2000s
- C 1980s
- D late 1990s

18. According to the text, which of the following is true?

- A Private valuations may be forever higher than public ones.
- B Public valuations eventually will become even less valuable.
- C The main question is whether the public market increase or the private market decrease.
- D The pressure might last for a long time.

Questions 19-23

Complete the sentences below. Write ONLY ONE WORD from the passage for each answer.

- 19. Skepticism was always expected by the.....of tech industry.
- 20. The new aversion to initial offerings has its.....
- 21. Selling shares on a secondary market is considered a.....mechanism.
- 22. Workers' compensation might be an.....
- 23. The public investors who failed to participate in the next big thing might be the ones wearing the.....

Questions 24-27

Do the following statements agree with the information in the IELTS reading text?

- TRUE                   if the statement agrees with the information
- FALSE                 if the statement contradicts the information
- NOT GIVEN          if there is no information on this

24. Private investors are bearing most of the risk.
25. Not many investors were willing to speak on the record.
26. The typical tech company hitting the markets in 1990s was 5 years old.
27. Marc Andreessen, the firm's co-founder, expressed amazement with divergency in how investors treat public.

### Reading Passage 3

When you think about it, kissing is strange and a bit icky. You share saliva with someone, sometimes for a prolonged period of time. One kiss could pass on 80 million bacteria, not all of them good. Yet everyone surely remembers their first kiss, in all its embarrassing or delightful detail, and kissing continues to play a big role in new romances. At least, it does in some societies. People in western societies may assume that romantic kissing is a universal human behaviour, but a new analysis suggests that less than half of all cultures actually do it. Kissing is also extremely rare in the animal kingdom.

So what's really behind this odd behaviour? If it is useful, why don't all animals do it – and all humans too? It turns out that the very fact that most animals don't kiss helps explain why some do. According to a new study of kissing preferences, which looked at 168 cultures from around the world, only 46% of cultures kiss in the romantic sense. Previous estimates had put the figure at 90%. The new study excluded parents kissing their children, and focused solely on romantic lip-on-lip action between couples.

Many hunter-gatherer groups showed no evidence of kissing or desire to do so. Some even considered it revolting. The Mehinaku tribe in Brazil reportedly said it was “gross”. Given that hunter-gatherer groups are the closest modern humans get to living our ancestral lifestyle, our ancestors may not have been kissing either. The study overturns the belief that romantic kissing is a near-universal human behaviour, says lead author William Jankowiak of the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Instead it seems to be a product of western societies, passed on from one generation to the next, he says. There is some historical evidence to back that up.

Kissing as we do it today seems to be a fairly recent invention, says Rafael Wlodarski of the University of Oxford in the UK. He has trawled through records to find evidence of how kissing has changed. The oldest evidence of a kissing-type behaviour comes from Hindu Vedic Sanskrit texts from over 3,500 years ago. Kissing was described as inhaling each other's soul. In contrast, Egyptian hieroglyphics picture people close to each other rather than pressing their lips together. So what is going on? Is kissing something we do naturally, but that some cultures have suppressed? Or is it something modern humans have invented? We can find some insight by looking at animals.

Our closest relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, do kiss. Primatologist Frans de Waal of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, has seen many instances of chimps kissing and hugging after

conflict. For chimpanzees, kissing is a form of reconciliation. It is more common among males than females. In other words, it is not a romantic behaviour. Their cousins the bonobos kiss more often, and they often use tongues while doing so. That's perhaps not surprising, because bonobos are highly sexual beings. When two humans meet, we might shake hands. Bonobos have sex: the so-called bonobo handshake. They also use sex for many other kinds of bonding. So their kisses are not particularly romantic, either.

These two apes are exceptions. As far as we know, other animals do not kiss at all. They may nuzzle or touch their faces together, but even those that have lips don't share saliva or purse and smack their lips together. They don't need to. Take wild boars. Males produce a pungent smell that females find extremely attractive. The key chemical is a pheromone called androstenone that triggers the females' desire to mate. From a female's point of view this is a good thing, because males with the most androstenone are also the most fertile. Her sense of smell is so acute, she doesn't need to get close enough to kiss the male.

The same is true of many other mammals. For example, female hamsters emit a pheromone that gets males very excited. Mice follow similar chemical traces to help them find partners that are genetically different, minimising the risk of accidental incest. Animals often release these pheromones in their urine. "Their urine is much more pungent," says Wlodarski. "If there's urine present in the environment they can assess compatibility through that."

It's not just mammals that have a great sense of smell. A male black widow spider can smell pheromones produced by a female that tell him if she has recently eaten. To minimise the risk of being eaten, he will only mate with her if she is not hungry. The point is, animals do not need to get close to each other to smell out a good potential mate. On the other hand, humans have an atrocious sense of smell, so we benefit from getting close. Smell isn't the only cue we use to assess each other's fitness, but studies have shown that it plays an important role in mate choice. A study published in 1995 showed that women, just like mice, prefer the smell of men who are genetically different from them. This makes sense, as mating with someone with different genes is likely to produce healthy offspring. Kissing is a great way to get close enough to sniff out your partner's genes.

In 2013, Wlodarski examined kissing preferences in detail. He asked several hundred people what was most important when kissing someone. How they smelled featured highly, and the importance of smell increased when women were most fertile. It turns out that men also make a version of the pheromone that female boars find attractive. It is present in male sweat, and when women are exposed to it their arousal levels increase slightly. Pheromones are a big part of how mammals chose a mate, says Wlodarski, and we share some of them. "We've inherited all of our biology from mammals, we've just added extra things through evolutionary time."

On that view, kissing is just a culturally acceptable way to get close enough to another person to detect their pheromones. In some cultures, this sniffing behaviour turned into physical lip contact. It's hard to pinpoint when this happened, but both serve the same purpose, says Wlodarski. So if you want to find a perfect match, you could forego kissing and start smelling people instead. You'll find just as good a partner, and you won't get half as many germs. Be prepared for some funny looks, though.

Questions 28-35

Do the following statements agree with the information in the IELTS reading text?

In boxes 28-32 on your answer sheet, write

- TRUE if the statement agrees with the information
- FALSE if the statement contradicts the information
- NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this

- 28. Both Easter and Wester societies presume that kissing is essential for any part of the world.
- 29. Our ancestors were not likely to kiss.
- 30. Chimpanzees and bonbons kiss not for the romance.
- 31. There are other animal, rather than apes, that kiss.
- 32. Scent might be important in choosing your partner.
- 33. Wlodarski surveyed several men to figure out the importance of kissing.
- 34. Majority of the microorganisms passed by kissing are beneficial for the body.
- 35. According to a Hindu text, kissing is a means to exchange souls.

Questions 36-39

Complete the sentences below. Write NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer.

- 36. According to the Mehinaku tribe, kissing is.....
- 37. Human tradition is to.....when they meet.
- 38. A male black widow will mate with the female if only she is.....
- 39. Humans benefit from getting close due to the fact that we have an.....of smell.

Question 40

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

- 40. Passage 3 can be described as:
  - A Strictly scientific text
  - B Historical article
  - C Article from a magazine
  - D Dystopian sketch