The Convenience Society, or con for short

The other day I took my younger children to a Burger King for lunch and there was a line of about a dozen cars at the drive-through window. Now, a drive-through window is not a window you drive through, but a window you drive up to and collect your food from, having placed your order over a speakerphone along the way; the idea is to provide quick takeaway food for those in a hurry.

We parked, went in, ordered and ate and came out again, all in about ten minutes. As we departed, I noticed that a white pickup truck that had been last in the queue when we arrived was still four or five cars back from collecting its food. It would have been much quicker if the driver had parked like us and gone in and got his food himself, but he would never have thought that way because the drive-through window is supposed to be speedier and more convenient.

Americans have become so attached to the idea of convenience that they will put up with almost any inconvenience to achieve it. The things that are supposed to speed up and simplify our lives more often than not have the opposite effect and I started wondering why this should be.

Americans have always looked for ways to increase comfort. It is an interesting fact that nearly all the everyday inventions that take the difficulties out of life – escalators, automatic doors, passenger lifts, refrigerators, washing machines, frozen food, fast food – were invented in America, or at least first widely used here. Americans grew so used to seeing a constant stream of labour-saving devices, in fact, that by the sixties they had come to expect machines to do almost everything for them.

The moment I first realized that this was not necessarily a good idea was at Christmas of 1961 or '62, when my father was given an electric carving knife. It was an early model and not as light as the ones you can buy today. Perhaps my memory is playing tricks on me, but I have a clear impression of him putting on goggles and heavy rubber gloves before plugging it in. What is certainly true is that when he sank it into the turkey it sent pieces flying everywhere and then the blade hit the plate with a shower of blue sparks and the whole thing flew out of his hands and shot across the table and out of the room, like a creature from a *Gremlins* movie.

My father was always buying gadgets that proved to be disastrous – clothes steamers that failed to take the wrinkles out of suits but caused wallpaper to fall off the walls in whole sheets, or an electric pencil sharpener that could consume an entire pencil (including the tips of your fingers if you weren't quick) in less than a second.

But all of this was nothing compared with the situation today. Americans are now surrounded with items that do things for them to an almost absurd degree – automatic cat-food dispensers, refrigerators that make their own ice cubes, automatic car windows, disposable toothbrushes that come with their own ration of toothpaste. People are so addicted to convenience that they have become trapped in a vicious circle: the more labour-saving devices they buy, the harder they need to work; the harder they work, the more labour-saving appliances they feel they need.

When we moved into our house in New Hampshire it was full of gadgets installed by earlier owners, all of them designed to make life a little easier. Most, however, were completely useless. One of our rooms, for instance, came equipped with automatic curtains. You flicked a switch on the wall and four pairs of curtains effortlessly opened or closed. That, at least, was the idea. In practice what happened was that one opened, one closed, one opened and closed repeatedly and one did nothing at all for five minutes and then started to produce smoke. We didn't go anywhere near them after the first week.

Automatic curtains, electric cat-food dispensers and clothes steamers only *seem* to make life easier. In fact, all they do is add expense and complication to your existence.

2 What point is the author making with the story of his experience at Burger King?

A Fast food restaurants are not very fast.

B Some aspects of modern life are not always as convenient as they are intended to be.

C The driver of the pickup truck had parked in the wrong place.

D The queues at the drive-through windows are usually very long.

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3 What does the author tell us about everyday inventions in America?
A They were all invented there.
B They make life less exciting.
C People assumed they would make life more comfortable.
D There aren't as many now as there used to be.

4 What does the author mean by 'Perhaps my memory is playing tricks on me' (line 23)?
A He is sometimes very forgetful.
B He cannot remember all the details.
C What he says might not be completely true.
D He remembers having fun.

5 What does 'the whole thing' in line 26 refer to?
A the turkey
B the plate
C the rubber gloves
D the carving knife

6 What does the author say about labour-saving devices today?
A People cannot stop buying them.
B People try to do ridiculous things with them.
C They are better than the ones in the sixties.
D They help people to do more work.

7 What does 'them' in line 40 refer to?
A earlier owners
B the gadgets
C houses in New Hampshire
D the writer's family

8 What are we told about the automatic curtains?
A They had been brought from a previous house.
B Some of them worked as they were supposed to.
C The room where they were fitted was never used.
D The author and his family decided not to use them.

What to expect in the exam

In Part 2 of the Reading paper, the eight multiple-choice questions may test some or all of the following:

- a detailed understanding of the text: *see questions 3,6* and *8 above* (the most common type of question).
- a general understanding of the text: *see question 1* (this type of question comes last in the exam).
- an understanding of the writer's purpose: *see question 2.*
- an understanding of reference words in context: *see questions 5* and *7* (these are often pronouns such as *'it'* or *'they'*).
- the ability to decide meaning from context: *see question 4.*

Reacting to the text

Do you agree with Bill Bryson when he says that 'the things that are supposed to speed up our lives more often than not have the opposite effect'?
Have you ever had a device or appliance which created problems for you?
Are there any devices or appliances you think should or will be invented in the future?

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Language focus 1: Comparisons

Complete the following sentences from the text. If a word is given in brackets, write the correct form of that word.

1 It would have been much _____ (quick) if the driver had parked like us.

2 The drive-through window is supposed to be _____ (speedy) and _____ _____ (convenient).

3 The things which are supposed to simplify our lives _____ often _____ not have the opposite effect.

4 The electric carving knife was an early model and not _____ light _____ the ones you can buy today.

5 The electric pencil sharpener could consume an entire pencil in _____ _____ a second.

6 But all of this was nothing compared _____ the situation today.

7 The _____ labour-saving devices they buy, the _____ (hard) they need to work.

8 The gadgets were designed to make life a little _____ (easy).

Now check your answers in the reading text.

A Comparative and superlative adjectives

1 What are the comparative and superlative forms of the adjectives *quick, speedy* and *convenient* in sentences **1** and **2** above?

2 What are the comparative and superlative forms of the following adjectives?

clean *hot* *strange* *clever*
good *bad* *far*

3 In sentences **1** and **8** above, Bill Bryson uses *much* to talk about a big difference (*much quicker*) and *a little* to talk about a small one (*a little easier*). Are the following used for big or small differences?

a bit *far* *significantly* *a lot* *slightly*

B Other comparative expressions

1 To talk about people or things that are the same in some way we can use *as* + adjective or adverb + *as*.

They're just as silly as each other.

In negative sentences, which talk about differences, *so* can be used instead of the first *as*.

She's not so fit as she used to be.

2 *The... , the...*
The structure *the* + comparative is used to talk about things which occur together.

The more labour-saving devices they buy, the harder they need to work.

Read more about comparisons on pages 207 and 208 of the Grammar reference.

Practice

1 Match each sentence **1–6** with a sentence **a–f** which expresses a similar idea. The first one has been done for you.

1 She's far lazier than anyone else. *c*
2 She works a lot less than she ought to. ___
3 She's not quite as lazy as she used to be. ___
4 She doesn't have as many problems as she used to. ___
5 She's the least successful student in the class. ___
6 The more she works, the more success she has. ___

a She doesn't work nearly as much as she should.
b She has fewer difficulties than before.
c Everyone works much harder than her.
d She's more successful when she works harder.
e She's slightly more hardworking than before.
f No one does as badly as she does.

2 Using some of the comparative structures you have just studied, write eight sentences about yourself. Compare yourself with a friend or friends, a member of your family and/or yourself as you used to be.

3 Match each line of dialogue **1–6** with an appropriate response **a–f**. The first one has been done as an example.

1 That's the third time this week. It really needs repairing. *d*
2 When would you like to discuss this? ___
3 Where have you been? It's 10 o'clock! ___
4 It doesn't hurt, but I'll make an appointment. ___
5 It was overbooked? What happened then? ___
6 Can I bring a friend? ___

a Better late than never.
b It's better to be safe than sorry.
c The sooner the better.
d No sooner said than done.
e The more the merrier.
f Things went from bad to worse.

4 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word in **bold**.

1 The film wasn't nearly as good as I thought it would be. **far**
The film _____ I thought it would be.

2 She's happier than she used to be. **sad**
She isn't _____ was before.

3 I've never had such a boring time on holiday! **enjoyable**
This is _____ holiday I've ever had!

4 If you work harder now, you won't have to do so much later. **the**
The harder _____ you'll have to do later.

5 Kate has slightly more experience than the others. **quite**
The others don't have _____ Kate.

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