

# Take the Impossible “Literacy” Test Louisiana Gave Black Voters in the 1960s

By *Rebecca Onion*

This Supreme Court’s decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* overturned Section 4(b) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which mandated federal oversight of changes in voting procedure in jurisdictions that have a history of using a “test or device” to impede enfranchisement. Here is one example of such a test, used in Louisiana in 1964.

After the end of the Civil War, would-be black voters in the South **faced an array of disproportionate barriers to enfranchisement**. The literacy test—supposedly applicable to both white and black prospective voters who couldn’t prove a certain level of education but in actuality disproportionately administered to black voters—was a classic example of one of these barriers.

The **website** of the Civil Rights Movement Veterans, which collects materials related to civil rights, hosts **a few samples** of actual literacy tests used in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s.

In many cases, people working within the movement collected these in order to use them in voter education, which is how we ended up with this documentary evidence. *Update: This test—a word-processed transcript of an original—was linked to by Jeff Schwartz, who worked with the Congress of Racial Equality in Iberville and Tangipahoa Parishes in the summer of 1964. Schwartz wrote about his encounters with the test in [this blog post](#).*

Most of the tests **collected here** are a battery of trivia questions related to civic procedure and citizenship. (Two from the Alabama test: “Name the attorney general of the United States” and “Can you be imprisoned, under Alabama law, for a debt?”)

But this Louisiana “literacy” test, singular among its fellows, has nothing to do with citizenship. Designed to put the applicant through mental contortions, the test’s questions are often confusingly worded. If some of them seem unanswerable, that effect was intentional. The (white) registrar would be the ultimate judge of whether an answer was correct.

**The State of Louisiana**

**Literacy Test (This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education.)**

**Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.**

1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.
2. Draw a line under the last word in this line.
3. Cross out the longest word in this line.
4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line.
5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line.
6. In the space below draw three circles, one inside (engulfed by) the other.
7. Above the letter X make a small cross.
8. Draw a line through the letter below that comes earliest in the alphabet.  
Z V S B D M K I T P H C
9. Draw a line through the two letters below that come last in the alphabet.  
Z V B D M K T P H S Y C
10. In the first circle below write the last letter of the first word beginning with “L”.  
1 2 3 4 5
11. Cross out the number necessary, when making the number below one million.  
10000000000
12. Draw a line from circle 2 to circle 5 that will pass below circle 2 and above circle 4.  
1 2 3 4 5
13. In the line below cross out each number that is more than 20 but less than 30.  
31 16 48 29 53 47 22 37 98 26 20 25

In William Faulkner's 1938 novel [\*The Unvanquished\*](#), the implacable Colonel Sartoris takes drastic action to stop the election of a black Republican candidate to office after the Civil War, destroying the ballots of black voters and shooting two Northern carpetbaggers. While such dramatic means of voter suppression occurred often enough in the Reconstruction South, tactics of electoral exclusion refined over time, such that by the mid-twentieth century the Jim Crow South relied largely on nearly impossible-to-pass literacy tests to impede free and fair elections.

These tests, were "supposedly applicable to both white and black prospective voters who couldn't prove a certain level of education" (typically up to the fifth grade). Yet they were "in actuality disproportionately administered to black voters." Additionally, many of the tests were rigged so that registrars could give potential voters an easy or a difficult version, and could score them differently as well. For example, the [Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement](#) describes a test administered in Alabama that is so entirely subjective it measures the registrar's shrewdness and cunning more than anything else.

14. Draw a line under the first letter after "h" and draw a line through the second letter after "j".

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q

15. In the space below, write the word "noise" backwards and place a dot over what would be its second letter should it have been written forward.

16. Draw a triangle with a blackened circle that overlaps only its left corner.

17. Look at the line of numbers below, and place on the blank, the number that should come next.

2 4 8 16 \_\_\_\_

18. Look at the line of numbers below, and place on the blank, the number that should come next.

3 6 9 \_\_\_\_ 15

19. Draw in the space below, a square with a triangle in it, and within that same triangle draw a circle with a black dot in it.

20. Spell backwards, forwards.

21. Print the word vote upside down, but in the correct order.

22. Place a cross over the tenth letter in this line, a line under the first space in this sentence, and circle around the last the in the second line of this sentence.

23. Draw a figure that is square in shape. Divide it in half by drawing a straight line from its northeast corner to its southwest corner, and then divide it once more by drawing a broken line from the middle of its western side to the middle of its eastern side.

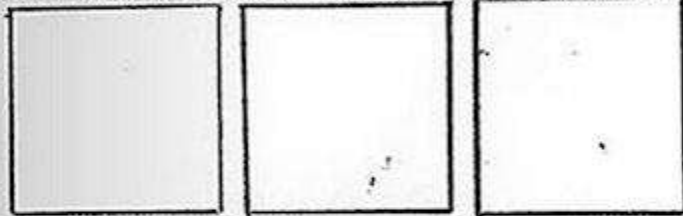
The test here from Louisiana consists of questions so ambiguous that no one, whatever their level of education, can divine a “right” or “wrong” answer to most of them. And yet, as the instructions state, “one wrong answer denotes failure of the test,” an impossible standard for even a legitimate exam. Even worse, voters had only ten minutes to complete the three-page, 30-question document. The Louisiana test dates from 1964, the year before passage of the [Voting Rights Act](#), which effectively put an end to these blatantly discriminatory practices. (Though last year’s Supreme Court decision in [Shelby vs. Holder](#) means that such tests, or even more slippery means, could ostensibly return in those parts of the country that have made little progress since the sixties).

24. Print a word that looks the same whether it is printed frontwards or backwards.

25. Write down on the line provided, what you read in the triangle below:



26. In the third square below, write the second letter of the fourth word.



27. Write right from the left to the right as you see it spelled here.

28. Divide a vertical line in two equal parts by bisecting it with a curved horizontal line that is only straight at its spot bisection of the vertical.

29. Write every other word in this first line and print every third word in same line, (original type smaller and first line ended at comma) but capitalize the fifth word that you write.

30. Draw five circles that one common inter-locking part.

