

Abitur 2023: Englisch

B: Text comprehension and analysis

Complete the following tasks using your own words as far as is appropriate. Quote correctly.

1. Outline how and why direct communication with strangers has changed.
2. Analyse the writer's line of argumentation and its intended effects, as well as three different types of stylistic devices he uses to get his message across.

C: Composition

Choose one of the following topics and write a coherent text laying out your ideas.

1. People love being asked questions about themselves. Discuss.
2. "I've found that luck is quite predictable. If you want more luck, take more chances." (Brian Tracy, born 1944, CanadianAmerican motivational speaker and author) Comment on this statement.

Text:

One Saturday morning, I took my 5-year-old son to the playground. A few minutes into his "ninja training" regimen, he attracted a fan. The other boy was younger, but the plastic glint of my son's dollar-store sword slicing evil from the air proved irresistible. He edged closer and mimicked his moves, until they began to play together, shouting "Ya!" in unison, kicking with the verve of Rockettes¹. I smiled at the child's father on the next bench and made an effort at playground banter, asking the boy's age and whether they lived nearby. But after a few half-answers he pointed to the [earbuds] in his ears.

What could I do?

I picked up my phone and scrolled through the news. A fast-casual restaurant chain was experimenting with replacing its cashiers with "virtual cashiers" connected by video link from Nicaragua and paid around \$3 an hour. As I sat there, willingly ignoring and being ignored by the only other adult nearby, the story struck me as just another example of how modern life keeps us insulated from strangers.

Not so long ago, it was impossible to go through life without speaking, in some way, to a variety of

strangers in your life: The bus driver, barista, security guard, receptionist, butcher, government clerk, store cashier and restaurant server were all humans who required at least the bare minimum of conversation. If you were at a playground a generation ago, halfheartedly watching some swing-set drama, ignoring the casual greetings of another parent would be extremely rude.

When I lived in New York City a decade ago, I couldn't spend 10 minutes outside without speaking to someone. That's the thing I loved about the place: how New Yorkers will kibitz 2 and comment and carry on a conversation in line for pizza, on the sidewalk or in the subway; ask for directions or compliment a particularly awesome hat of someone they have never met, without any awkwardness. Today, you can spend a week in New York, shopping, traveling, eating and working, and never utter a sound to another human being, or even take your headphones off.

It shouldn't be this way. Engagement with strangers is at the core of our social contract. Most religious faiths instruct us to welcome the strangers we encounter, and there's good reason for this. If we engaged only with the people we knew, our world would be small. That leap of faith toward the unknown other is what allows us to grow beyond the family unit, tribe or nation. Everyone you converse with who is not a biological relative – your best friend, neighbor, lover, spouse or even that chatty taxi driver from last weekend – was a stranger before you spoke to that person. Anytime we ignore strangers in our vicinity, whether because of fear, bigotry or the everyday convenience and efficiency of digital technology, we weaken that contract.

[...] [S]trangers are actually one of the richest and most important resources we have. They connect us to the community, teach us empathy, build civility and are full of surprise and potentially wonder.

"I've spent many years studying the people who are the furthest out of our social networks, and they really do add a richness to our life that we miss when we're not there," said Gillian Sandstrom, a senior lecturer at the University of Essex, whose research has demonstrated how the small, transactional relationships we create by talking to strangers are important pillars of our social and emotional well-being.

[...] Sandstrom [...] forces herself to speak to strangers every day, despite identifying as an introvert. "But they form this tapestry that when we're not there, our life feels kind of empty."

A study published last fall showed that despite our fears of awkwardness, deep, meaningful conversations with strangers are not only easier than expected but also left participants feeling better about themselves.

In some ways, our recent aversion to strangers is a byproduct of technological evolution. Sure, newspapers and magazines, cassette players and televisions were all potential distractions, but none of them fully normalized ignoring other people in the way that smartphones have. E-commerce sites and third-party restaurant delivery apps incentivize us against entering stores and restaurants filled with strangers. Some digital technology goes further, like the [taxi-app] feature that allows you to preemptively mute a driver's attempt at friendly conversation.

Then came the pandemic, and suddenly, each physical encounter with a stranger carried the potential of death. We were ordered to stay home, avoid public spaces and speak only within our trusted bubbles. We sought refuge in the distance that digital technology allowed us, watching movies, attending exercise classes and having meetings all without entering a theater, gym or office. [...] Our world grew inward and suspicious, our fears exacerbated by the latest news about fresh variants and rising crime rates not seen in decades. "Stranger danger," that discredited catchphrase of the milk-carton3 /unmarked-van kidnapping past, seemed to creep back into our present.

Strangers are intimidating for a reason. Even when they are not physically threatening, they can make us feel uneasy, inhabiting awkward silences. Digital technology promises to fill those silences with more hardware and software to insulate us from those we do not know, like the robo-barista vending machine that opened near me last year, which serves lattes through a little window with nary a syllable of chit or chat.

But a future where coffee is served by robots is not an improvement on the coffee shop. It ignores a central purpose of the neighborhood cafe, a place for hot drinks and human interaction.

At the playground, I glanced up from my phone and saw my son and the other boy yammering away 4 as if they'd known each other for years. The other father looked up too and seemed genuinely surprised at this instant relationship. He walked over, knelt and asked his son who he was playing with.

"I don't know his name," the boy said, as his tiny fingers clutched one of my son's [toy] figures, "but he's my friend."

— From: David Sax, "Why Strangers Are Good for Us", in:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/12/opinion/strangers-talking-benefits.html> (abridged and adapted for exam purposes, last visited: December 09, 2022)

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