

## 6 CORRELATION STREET

### Always Read The Question

Richard, a statistics student of mine, handed in his answer to a line-of-best-fit exercise the other day. The task began:

***The 1980 and 2000 catalogue prices, in pence,  
of five British postage stamps are as follows:***

Is it me, or are we in danger here of being whisked away into the wonderful world of mathematics question-speak? Bearing in mind my place of work, what is the chance that Richard is into stamps? Am I wrong to wonder whether the writer of the question is or knows a philatelist? The problem goes on:

***One stamp was valued at £5 in 1980 and at £62 in 2000. Comment.***

The setter's idea was to encourage some reference to the regression line, but Richard gave this baffled but pithy answer:

***What loser spends £62 on a stamp?***

Our learners have to negotiate more than mathematics when they attempt one of our examinations. The rubric can be a trial in itself, the language of the questions may be unfamiliar, and above all, the questions may embody a culture that is almost completely alien to our youngsters. Would philately be in that culture somewhere?

So should examiners try instead to be hipper than hip, totally 'chilled' with current student thinking? In my experience young people swiftly rumble the authority figure aspiring to be trendy. Maybe they would rather have questions about £62 stamps than be asked about buying an *Arctic Monkeys* CD, only the examiner would doubtless feel some strange compulsion to call it an *Antarctic Gibbons* CD. No better than bringing in Stanley Gibbons, then.

Take this (fairly recent) mechanics exam question that I came across the other day. It concerns a packing case and its owner's desire to shift it. Who should set about this task? Time to rent a cheerful cockney chappie...

**Alf tries to move it by pulling with a force of 600 N...**

Alf is clearly something of a cowboy in the crate-shifting world, because he quickly discovers he needs assistance.

**Alf is now joined by Bert and Chas...**

Thank God! But surely if Chas is involved, it won't long before...

**Dave joins the other three and pulls with a force of  $(100i + pj)$ ...**

What do students learn from this? Firstly, only men can shift packing cases, and only then if their names follow in strict alphabetical order, and only then if they wear cloth caps and whistle through gaps in their teeth. Why don't these helpful blokes just get their whippets to shift the crate

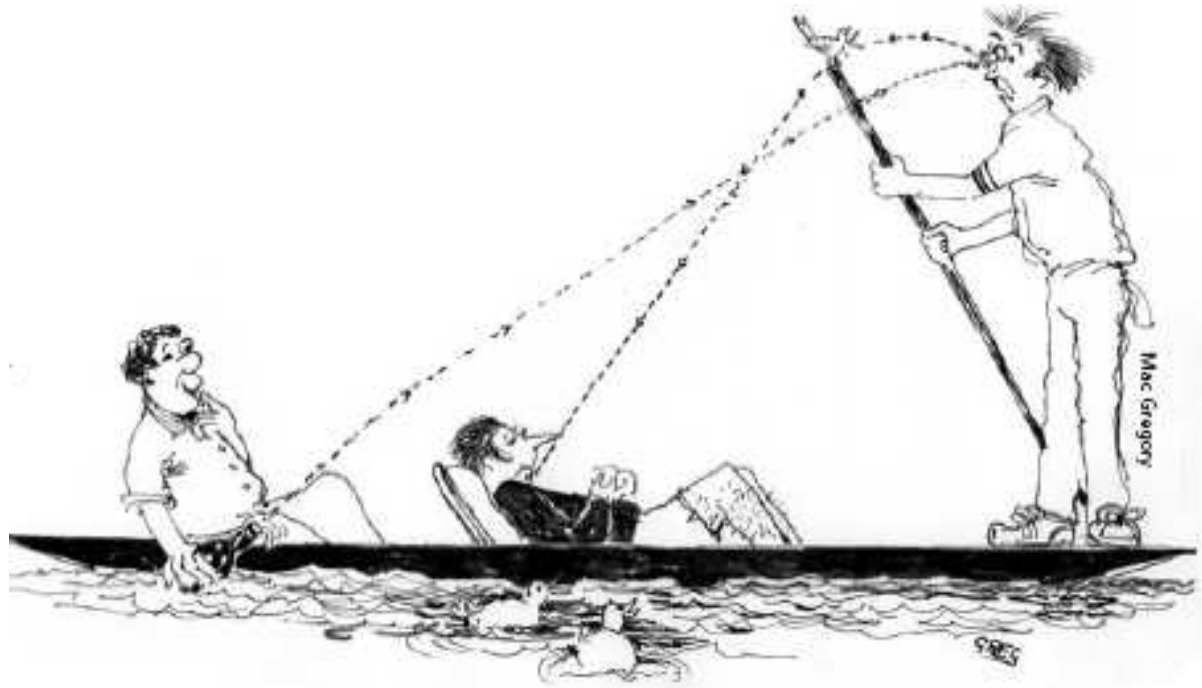
while they tuck into one of Edna's breakfasts at the greasy spoon just around the corner?

It is tempting to write some kind of riposte from across the class divide.

*Justin lies at one end of 12 ft. punt. He is holding a bottle of Bollinger in the water to cool. Suddenly the bottle's cork is expelled with a velocity of 10 m/s at an angle of 32 degrees. Miles is standing pole in hand at the other end of the punt, and he is 1.67m tall. The cork strikes him on the forehead while still rising. The cork returns directly towards the centre of the punt. Here it would strike Tristan on the chin, if only he had one...*

Oh, the more I think about it, the harder the examiner's job becomes.

You can't please all of the people all of the time, and doubtless I have failed to manage this too. Maybe I need to apologise to anyone out there called Alf. Or Justin. And anyone who collects stamps. Or owns a whippet. (Can I stop now please?)



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