Why the Other Queue Always Moves Faster

Educational reading passage. Named speakers and quotations are fictional illustrations.

[1] Imagine you are in a crowded supermarket on a Saturday afternoon. You study the checkouts carefully, choose the queue that looks shortest, and settle in to wait. Within a minute, the queue beside yours begins to move steadily forward, while the customer in front of you discovers that one of her items has no price label. By the time an assistant has been called to check it, the shoppers who joined the other queue after you are already packing their bags. If you had chosen differently, you tell yourself, you would have been home by now.

[2] Almost everyone has had this experience, and many people are convinced that they are simply unlucky. However, mathematicians and psychologists who have studied queuing argue that luck has very little to do with it. The feeling that the other line always moves faster is partly a matter of probability and partly a trick played by the human mind.

[3] Consider the mathematics first. Suppose a shop has three checkouts open and you join one of them. In a simplified example, assume each queue is equally likely to finish first and there are no ties. The chance that yours will be the fastest is then one in three. In other words, on two occasions out of every three, at least one other queue will beat yours. The odds are against you before you have taken a single step, and the more checkouts there are, the worse those odds become. For a shopper who visits the supermarket twice a week, that adds up to dozens of small defeats in a single year.

[4] Small, unpredictable delays make matters worse. A customer might decide to pay with a pile of coins, a card may be declined, or a machine might run out of receipt paper. Each of **these events** can hold up a queue for several minutes, and because they occur at random, no shopper can predict which line will be affected. A queue that looks short may contain one customer with a complicated problem, whereas a longer one may consist of people buying only a few items each.

[5] Psychology adds a further twist. Researchers have found that people are far more likely to notice and remember the moments when they are overtaken than the moments when they overtake others. When your queue is moving, your attention is on the cashier and the items in your basket; when it stops, you start looking around, and that is precisely when the faster queues catch your eye. As a result, the frustrating moments are stored vividly in memory, while the satisfying ones are quickly forgotten.

[6] Time spent waiting also feels longer than it really is, particularly when we have nothing to do. Imagine an airport that lengthens the walk to baggage collection without changing when bags arrive. Passengers spend more of the same overall interval walking and less of it standing beside the belt. They may find the wait less frustrating because walking feels like progress. Many shops place screens or play music near their queues for the same reason: a mind that is entertained pays less attention to the clock.

[7] Some organisations have tried to remove the problem altogether. Many banks and post offices now ask everyone to wait in a single line that feeds several counters, and some fast-food restaurants have adopted a similar system. A shared line can reduce average waiting time in some circumstances, although it cannot guarantee a shorter wait for every customer. It can also feel fairer: in a first-come, first-served system without priority exceptions, the person who has waited longest is called to the next available counter. It also removes the anxiety of having to choose a queue in the first place.

[8] So is there anything shoppers can do? Experts who study queues suggest a few simple habits. Rather than counting the people in a line, look at how full their baskets are, since one large trolley usually takes longer than several small baskets. Notice whether a cashier seems experienced, because a confident worker can serve customers noticeably faster than a nervous beginner. Above all, accept that you will sometimes lose. Switching queues halfway does not guarantee a shorter wait: you may lose your place, and either line could encounter another delay.

[9] The next time you find yourself stuck behind a customer searching for a coupon, it may help to remember that you are not cursed. You are simply experiencing the laws of chance and the habits of the human brain at the same time. If nothing else, that knowledge might make the wait a little less annoying.

Words to help you

checkout [1] — the place in a shop where you pay

probability [2] — how likely it is that something will happen

declined [4] — not accepted

overtaken [5] — passed by someone who was behind you

vividly [5] — very clearly

cursed [9] — always followed by bad luck

Questions — 16 marks

1. (para 1) "If you had chosen differently, you tell yourself, you would have been home by now." What feeling does this sentence show? (1 mark)

A. anger at the customer in front

B. surprise that the other queue is faster

C. worry about getting home late

D. regret about the queue you chose

2. (para 2) According to paragraph 2, what TWO things explain the feeling that the other line always moves faster? (2 marks)

(i) _____

(ii) _____

3. (para 3) Decide whether each statement is True, False or Not Given. Circle the answer. (3 marks)

Statement			
(a) In the simplified example, each queue has a one-in-three chance of finishing first. (para 3)	True	False	Not Given
(b) Opening more checkouts makes it more likely that your queue will be the fastest. (para 3)	True	False	Not Given
(c) Most supermarkets open only three checkouts at busy times. (para 3)	True	False	Not Given

4. (para 4) What do "**these events**" in paragraph 4 refer to? Name TWO of them. (1 mark)

5. (para 4) Why can a short queue sometimes be slower than a long one? Answer in your own words. Answer in complete sentences. (2 marks)

6. (para 5) Complete the table. (2 marks)

When your queue …	you are looking at …
is moving	(a) _____
has stopped	(b) _____

7. (para 6) In the airport example, why might passengers find the wait less frustrating even if they do not get their bags any sooner? Answer in your own words. Answer in complete sentences. (2 marks)

8. (para 7) Which benefit does paragraph 7 say the single-line system CANNOT guarantee? (1 mark)

A. Customers feel they are treated more fairly.
B. Every customer has a shorter wait.
C. Without priority exceptions, customers are called in arrival order.
D. Customers no longer need to choose a queue.

9. (para 9) What is the writer's tone in paragraph 9? (1 mark)

A. annoyed
B. worried
C. comforting and light-hearted
D. serious and critical

10. (whole passage) Should more shops in Hong Kong use a single line that feeds several counters? Give your opinion and ONE reason from the article. Answer in complete sentences. (1 mark)

Comprehension answers

Question 1

D

Para 1: the shopper thinks about what would have happened with a different choice. A is tempting because the customer in front causes the delay, but the sentence is about the shopper's own choice.

Question 2

(i) probability / maths (ii) a trick of the human mind

(i) chance, the odds (ii) psychology, how the brain works

Para 2, last sentence

Question 3

(a) **True** (b) **False** (c) **Not Given**

(a) Para 3: "only one in three". (b) Para 3: "the more checkouts there are, the worse those odds become". (c) Para 3 uses three checkouts as an example. It never says how many most shops open.

Question 4

Any TWO of: a customer paying with lots of coins; a card not being accepted; a machine running out of receipt paper.

Para 4, sentence 2

Question 5

A short queue may have one customer with a difficult problem that takes a long time. A long queue may be made up of people who are each buying only a few things.

Any answer that gives both points. One mark for each point.

Para 4, last sentence

Question 6

(a) the cashier and the items in your basket (b) the other queues / the faster queues around you

(a) the cashier / your shopping — either one is enough (b) other lines

Para 5

Question 7

Walking can feel like progress. Spending less time standing idle can make the wait feel less frustrating even when the bags arrive at the same time.

Any answer that says walking felt like progress, or that waiting with nothing to do feels longer. Award one mark for walking feeling like progress and one for less idle waiting feeling less frustrating.

Para 6

Question 8

B

Para 7: the system "cannot guarantee a shorter wait for every customer". A, C and D are all stated in para 7.

Question 9

C

Para 9: "you are not cursed"; "might make the wait a little less annoying". A is tempting because the paragraph mentions annoyance, but the writer is calming the reader down.

Question 10

Own answer. Example: Yes, I think more shops should use it, because customers feel they are treated more fairly when customers are called in arrival order when there are no priority exceptions.

Yes or No, with ONE reason from para 7 (fairness; no need to choose a queue; it cannot guarantee a shorter wait for every customer).

Para 7

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Grammar Usage

Answer every question on this page.

PART C Modal verbs

Fill in one suitable modal expression in each blank. No list is given.

To All Members of the Orchestra

Until this year the hall was booked for exams every Thursday, so we 1 _____ rehearse on that evening at all. Every player 2 _____ sign the register before taking anything out of the store. You 3 _____ prop the fire door open, not even for a moment. Some of you might 4 _____ stay late on the Wednesday before the concert. Two suggestions rather than rules: you 5 _____ thank Mr Ho, who tuned every instrument in his own time, and you 6 _____ leave a case unlabelled in the corridor. There is a light on in the practice room, so somebody 7 _____ still be working – nothing else would explain it.

PART D Sentence transformation

Rewrite each sentence with a modal verb so that the meaning stays the same.

1. It was a mistake for the secretary not to check the hall booking.

_____

_____

2. Perhaps Paul left his music on the stand.

_____

_____

3. I am certain Mr Ho tuned the piano, because the lid is still open.

_____

4. It is impossible that Lucy heard the announcement; she was in the store room.

_____

_____

Answers **C** 1 could not / couldn't · 2 must / has to · 3 must not / mustn't · 4 have to / need to / be able to · 5 should / ought to / could · 6 should not / shouldn't / ought not to · 7 must **D** 1 The secretary should have checked the hall booking. · 2 Paul might / may have left his music on the stand. · 3 Mr Ho must have tuned the piano. · 4 Lucy cannot / could not have heard the announcement.

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