 ‘Politics and the English Language’ by George Orwell

Set one:

1. George Orwell argues against the ‘belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes’ (para. 1). Explain why you do or do not agree with Orwell’s position.
2. Why does Orwell object to ‘ready-made phrases’ and ‘mixed metaphors’ (para. 12)?
3. In paragraph 12, Orwell says that every writer ‘ask[s] himself at least four questions: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?’ What do you think of these questions? Do you agree or disagree that they are the most essential questions for writers to ask themselves? Explain why.
4. What does Orwell mean when he asserts, ‘But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt the thought’ (para. 16)?
5. Do you agree with Orwell that ‘correct grammar and syntax… are of no importance so long as one makes one’s meaning clear’ (para. 18)? Explain. If you do agree, cite examples from your own experience or reading that support your position.

Set two:

1. What is Orwell’s thesis? Does he actually state it, or is it implied?
2. How effective is Orwell’s analogy of the cause and effect of alcohol abuse to the demise of language (para. 2)?
3. In each of the following paragraphs – paragraphs 4, 5, 12, 15, and 16 – Orwell uses at least one metaphor or simile. Identify each figure of speech. Then explain how it works and whether you find it rhetorically effective.
4. Orwell develops his ideas through extensive use of examples. Try rewriting paragraph 5, 6, 7, or 8 without examples. How does the effect of the paragraph change?
5. What is the purpose of the additional information provided in Orwell’s footnotes for paragraphs 7 and 8? Why do you think Orwell chose to put the information in footnotes rather than in the main text?

Set three:

1. Orwell wrote this essay before he was well known for his novels. He uses the first person, yet he does not directly state his qualifications to speak on language. How does he establish ethos? Should he have been more direct?
2. How would you describe the overall organization of this essay? Examine its movement, from the examples in the opening to the rules in the ending.
3. What is Orwell’s purpose in writing this essay? How might its historical context of post-World War II affect that purpose? Cite specific passages to support your response.
4. How would you describe the tone of Orwell’s essay? Can you sum it up in one word, or does the essay range from one tone to another? Cite specific passages to support your response.
5. Find examples in the essay where Orwell is guilty of the four faults that characterize the writing he is criticizing.

Adapted from a resource at TeacherWeb.com by Ventura HS but page no longer available.