

Example for web page of *Critical Reasoning: A Practical Introduction, Third Edition*

The Slow Lane

It is worth considering whether the driving age should be raised.

Britain is, on the whole, one of the safer nations in the world for drivers and the accident rate for those behind the wheel and their passengers is falling. There is, however, one notable exception to this welcome trend. The number of death[s] and injuries among young drivers, especially young men, is truly shocking and shows little sign of improvement. This is true for many countries, but it seems to be starker in Britain.

A few statistics illustrate the scale of this problem. More than a thousand young drivers will be killed or seriously maimed in the course of this year. Young men aged between 17 and 19 are ten times more likely to be killed on the roads than drivers who are in the 35 to 54 category. Worse still, the more young people there are travelling together in a car the greater the chance that they will either harm themselves or prove a menace to other drivers or pedestrians. Yet, after the age of 25, British drivers are safer and, a few years later, much safer than our neighbours.

Speed is, inevitably, a principal cause of death or injuries, but it is not the only one. In many cases it is simply a tragic matter of inexperience. The current test does not familiarise young people with conditions such as driving at night or on motorways. All too often, the first time that this is attempted involves transporting a number of friends back from a local public house after closing time – hardly the ideal notion of driving training. Ministers are thus right to look again at the nature of the test and when it is taken.

The Department for Transport had been inclined to insist on a much larger number of practice hours before a test can be taken, but has backed away from this measure in part out of the concern that youngsters would find driving lessons with trained professionals too

expensive and take tuition from amateur friends and relatives instead. This would not be sensible.

Three fresh proposals have entered the frame: raising the age at which a full driving licence can be secured to 18, banning younger drivers from motorways or imposing an alcohol limit of zero on these motorists but not older drivers.

Of the options which are available, raising the age when the test can be taken from 17 to 18 is the most radical but probably the more credible idea. It should be combined with other measures, such as making the driving test harder and making it reflect the reality of the circumstances in which young people are likely to find themselves on the road. The age at which motorcycles can legally be ridden would have to be raised as the death rate among the young on two wheels is worryingly high too. It would be a bizarre policy to encourage youngsters on to motorbikes.

There is also an argument, in theory, for preventing young people from either driving alone or with too many other youngsters in their charge, as a number of other countries do. Enforcing these strictures in practice might be unduly challenging. It would be better to make it the norm to fail the driving test at the first attempt and to aim to produce older and wiser drivers.

The status quo is surely not acceptable. If the school-leaving age is to be increased to 18 in the next decade and the legal age for purchasing cigarettes raised too, then consistency as well as kindness implies a higher age for acquiring a driving licence. Ministers should be prepared to be bold to save hundreds of lives needlessly ended.

(The Times, 6 August 2007)

Answer the following questions in relation to the article ‘The Slow Lane’.

- 1 The article recommends raising the age at which a driving test can be taken from 17 to 18. What is the problem for which this measure is claimed to be part of the solution?
- 2 What causes of the problem does the article identify?
- 3 What assumption must be made in order to accept that raising the driving age will have the desired effect?
- 4 If the article has correctly identified the causes of the problem, will raising the driving age have the desired effect? Give reason(s) for your answer.
- 5 If raising the driving age did have the desired effect, can you suggest any reasonable objections to it?
- 6 Offer two points of criticism of the reasoning in the penultimate paragraph.
- 7 Evaluate the support that the final paragraph gives to the recommendation to raise the driving age.

Answers to questions

- 1 The problem is that young male drivers (between the ages of 17 and 19) suffer a shockingly high rate of injury and death.
- 2 Causes identified:
 - Speed
 - Inexperience
 - The driving test failing to familiarise drivers with driving at night or on motorways
 - Driving with many other young people in the car.
- 3 It must be assumed that if the driving age is raised, young men who have recently passed their driving test will drive more safely.
- 4 The policy will not necessarily deal with the problem of inexperience, unless young people are required to have more practice hours before taking a test, which the article rejects. Nor will it necessarily result in young drivers driving at safer speeds or more safely when they have a number of passengers, unless it is correct to assume that a young man of 18 will drive more responsibly than he would have done at 17 – a questionable assumption since the age range of those drivers at high risk of death or injury is given as 17 to 19 years. The article recommends that the driving test should be changed in order to reflect the conditions in which young people are likely to be driving, so it does not suggest that raising the age can, by itself, solve the problem of lack of familiarity with certain driving conditions. Yet it could be questioned whether raising the age would be necessary, if changes were made to the driving test.
- 5 It could be objected that, since the problem is principally one involving young male drivers, raising the driving age would unfairly penalise young females.
- 6 First, the penultimate paragraph states that it might be too challenging to enforce preventing young people from driving alone or with many other young people in the car. Yet it also states that other countries do this, which suggests that it may be

feasible. Second, it assumes that older drivers will be wiser because they are older, even though they may be only one year older, and still in the high risk age group.

- 7 The final paragraph argues for changing the driving age to 18 on the grounds of consistency with other legal age barriers. There are two problems with this as a justification for raising the driving age. First, if consistency is the criterion, this could justify *either* raising the driving age to 18 *or* setting the school leaving age and the legal age for purchasing cigarettes at 17. Second, the legal age for giving consent to sexual activity is 16, so why not choose to make the driving age consistent with this? Hence, appealing to consistency does not give strong support to the recommendation to raise the driving age to 18.