

Linguistics Olympiad: 20 Top Tips

1. For questions to do with phonetics/phonology, remember the main differences between sounds (voiced/unvoiced, place of articulation, is it a stop or a fricative?)
2. For questions to do with the formation of words (morphology) - look at the number of syllables, whether certain syllables are open (end in a vowel) or closed (end in a consonant), whether syllables are heavy (lots of consonants) or light (more vowels) and what sort of sounds occur near each other.
3. The key to questions about why different nouns receive different endings is usually going to be working out how the given language classifies its nouns. This can be simple masculine/feminine or more unusual systems based on the culture of the people who speak the language. A common differentiating factor is animate/inanimate.
4. In English there's just singular and plural, but you'll frequently find languages that have dual, triple and other different ways of counting the number of people for grammatical purposes.
5. The key to solving number system questions is 9 times out of 10 going to be working out what base is being used. The base will most likely be between 3 and 9.
6. If a question talks about possession, the key is likely to be alienable/inalienable possession.
7. Ignore diacritics at your peril! They are there for a reason.
8. If you can find more than one possible answer, the simpler one will likely be the correct one. Languages tend towards simplicity.
9. Other cultures don't see the world the way we do, so don't trust that the English translation you're given will exactly correspond to the words of the new language. This is especially true for family relationships!
10. Read everything on the page - hints are often hidden in the footnotes or in the opening paragraph.
11. Try not to write all over your copy of the paper when doing rough working, as it can make it confusing later on. You can ask for more rough paper but you're only allowed one set of questions!
12. Patterns you see are rarely coincidences. If you have a hunch, just roll with it and see where it leads you.
13. Although it seems like it might take a lot of time to rewrite data in different orders, it usually doesn't and this is one of the most helpful things you can do.
14. Be precise in your answer and make sure that what you say accounts for all the data, not just 90% of it.
15. Ergativity can often crop up - this is when a language treats the **subject** of an intransitive verb the same as the **object** of a transitive one, as opposed to nominative-accusative languages, which treat both subjects the same.
16. If you're not getting anywhere with a problem, move on and come back to it. Don't waste time getting frustrated on one question, especially because every year there's usually at least one question that nobody can do, anyway!
17. Nothing should be taken for granted in your solution, explain every single deduction you made, including stating the word order.
18. Although the Olympiad is a brilliant and fun experience and you'll be doing a whole host of activities, make sure that you get a good night's sleep the night before the individual and team contests, as there is nothing worse than feeling shattered from having stayed up too late.
19. I realise I now sound like a parent, but stay hydrated! Aside from the fact that it will help you concentrate, Bulgaria is boiling hot in the summer and it's important to keep drinking water.
20. Finally, don't let anyone intimidate you or throw you off your game. There will be a lot of people who will tell you how they've done twenty thousand hours of preparation or other such lies - they're just trying to psych you out. Everyone is on an equal playing field because nobody knows what's going to come up! So if anyone tries to pretend otherwise, don't believe them. You have all the skills you need, and you're going to be just fine.