Social and Cultural Components of Farting: Manners and Humor

Name Date Class

Reading

1 Everyone passes gas, but estimates of how often vary. The Cleveland Clinic, a US hospital, gives a range of 14 to 23 times a day, while in a 2026 study by CSIRO, Australia's national science agency, 6,416 adults who logged each time on a phone app recorded an average of five a day. Doctors describe intestinal gas as normal and not dangerous, although it can be painful. Yet in most social settings, passing gas in front of others counts as a **breach** of **etiquette**, and talking about it comes close to being a **taboo**. In a survey commissioned by Paddy Power Games, 19 percent of British respondents named farting in public as one of the most embarrassing things that could happen, and 34 percent said it had happened. Commissioned surveys are weak evidence, but they fit a wider pattern of **embarrassment**.

2 People manage this **norm** in predictable ways. They try to **restrain** the gas, leave the room, hope for silence, or joke about it, and when concealment fails, they often shift the **blame**. Several languages have proverbs about that last move. A Korean saying holds that the person who farted gets angry, meaning that someone who will not admit a fault blames others. A Japanese proverb links farts and house fires: with both, the fuss starts at the source, so the person who caused a problem is often the loudest to complain. Such sayings give people one more reason to be **discreet**.

3 Concern about this etiquette is old. The Roman biographer Suetonius says that the emperor Claudius was thought to have considered an edict allowing guests to break wind at the table, after hearing of a man who had risked his health by restraining himself out of modesty. Whether Claudius meant it seriously is unclear: he may have been joking, and Suetonius reports only that he was said to have thought of it. In the 1500s, Erasmus's handbook of manners for children warned that **fidgeting** on your seat gives the impression that you are farting. Bodily noises were already a topic in books on good behavior.

4 In Islamic law, the issue is **ritual**, not social. Passing wind is held to **invalidate** wudu, the state of ritual purity needed for prayer. A hadith collected by al-Bukhari says that a person who doubts whether it happened should not leave the prayer unless he hears a sound or smells an odor, and scholars use this text to stress that certainty is needed before ritual purity is considered broken. Here the concern is not embarrassment but the validity of worship.

5 Humor treats the same taboo differently. A Sumerian proverb about a young woman who never farts in her husband's lap survives on tablets from about 1900 BC, and a 2008 university study called it the oldest recorded joke, although it is a proverb whose intended meaning is unclear. Japanese artists painted comic fart battles, known as he-gassen, for centuries. A scroll at Waseda University is an 1846 copy of a work from 1680. Popular writers suggest that such scrolls may have been meant as **satire** of foreigners, but the artists are unknown, so this reading is speculative. In 1890s Paris, Joseph Pujol, known as Le Pétomane, starred at the Moulin Rouge. He was reported to have astonishing control of his abdominal muscles, and he may have drawn in air rather than passing intestinal gas.

6 Language shows how flatulence stands for other ideas. In Mandarin, fàngpì means to break wind, but it also works as a rude way of saying "nonsense." In such cases, a bodily function becomes a way to **ridicule** speech, or an **insult** aimed at the speaker. The Korean and Japanese proverbs above use it to expose guilt instead.

7 Careful conclusions must be modest. Anecdotes from different periods do not prove a universal rule, and systematic cross-cultural research appears to be scarce. Even counting may be affected by embarrassment. The CSIRO team let participants see only their own data, a design meant to reduce socially influenced reporting, and the researchers suggest that the higher, often-repeated estimates may have rested on limited evidence. The same act is framed as a matter of manners in European handbooks, ritual purity in Islamic law, blame in Korean and Japanese proverbs, and comedy in Sumer, Edo Japan, and Paris, and people seem to **tolerate** it most easily where it is private or comic. A survey that asked people in many countries the same questions would be the next test.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**breach**	_____	**A**	polite rules for how to behave
2	**etiquette**	_____	**B**	make fun of someone in a cruel way
3	**taboo**	_____	**C**	a rude remark that hurts someone
4	**embarrassment**	_____	**D**	moving around in a nervous way
5	**norm**	_____	**E**	careful not to attract attention
6	**restrain**	_____	**F**	accept something without complaining
7	**blame**	_____	**G**	a usual standard of behavior in a group
8	**discreet**	_____	**H**	something people avoid saying or doing
9	**fidgeting**	_____	**I**	the act of saying someone is at fault
10	**ritual**	_____	**J**	make something no longer valid
11	**invalidate**	_____	**K**	humor that criticizes people or ideas
12	**satire**	_____	**L**	a feeling of shame in front of others
13	**ridicule**	_____	**M**	hold back from doing something
14	**insult**	_____	**N**	a failure to keep a rule
15	**tolerate**	_____	**O**	a fixed set of actions in a ceremony

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

blame	**breach**	**discreet**	**embarrassment**	**etiquette**	**fidgeting**	**invalidate**	**norm**	**restrain**
ridiculed	**ritual**	**satire**	**taboo**	**tolerate**				

1 The company was fined for a _____ of safety rules.

2 It is poor _____ to check your phone at dinner.

3 Talking about death is a _____ in some families.

4 He blushed with _____ when he forgot her name.

5 Silence in the library is a social _____ .

6 She tried to _____ her laughter during the speech.

7 The manager took the _____ for the mistake.

8 The detective made _____ inquiries.

9 The bored child kept _____ in her chair during the long ceremony.

10 Washing before prayer is an important _____ .

11 A mistake in the form can _____ the whole application.

12 The show is a _____ of modern politics.

13 The other students _____ his accent.

14 The school will not _____ bullying.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What contrast does the reading draw in the first paragraph between the medical view of passing gas and the social view? What is the limit of the survey evidence?

2 How do people manage the social norm about flatulence, according to the second paragraph? Describe what the Korean and Japanese proverbs say about blame.

3 What do the passages from Suetonius and Erasmus suggest about the age of this etiquette? Why does the reading hedge its account of Claudius?

4 Explain why the reading says that the Islamic case is about ritual and not social embarrassment. What role does certainty play?

5 Compare the Sumerian proverb, the Japanese scrolls, and the performances of Le Pétomane. What limits does the reading place on each?

6 How does the Mandarin word fàngpì show that flatulence can stand for other ideas?

7 Why does the reading say that even studies of how often people pass gas may be affected by embarrassment?

8 The reading draws a limited pattern from its cases. State the pattern and explain why the writer calls it limited.

9 Evaluate the range of evidence in the reading (ancient texts, art, surveys, proverbs, religious rulings). Which types are strongest and which are weakest for the claims made?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"People in all cultures find farting embarrassing."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes there is firm evidence that the he-gassen scrolls were satire of foreigners."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer include a religious ruling, a proverb, and a comic scroll in the same reading? What effect does this have on the reader?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The reading says that passing gas is dangerous.

2 **T / F** The reading treats the survey commissioned by a company as weak evidence.

3 **T / F** The Korean proverb says that the person who farted gets angry.

4 **T / F** The reading says that people never try to restrain the gas.

5 **T / F** Suetonius reports that Claudius was said to have thought of an edict about breaking wind at table.

6 **T / F** Erasmus's handbook warned that fidgeting on a seat might give the impression of farting.

7 **T / F** In the Islamic case, the reading says the main concern is embarrassment.

8 **T / F** The reading says that the satire interpretation of the he-gassen scrolls is certain.

9 **T / F** The Waseda University scroll is an 1846 copy of a work from 1680.

10 **T / F** The reading claims that every society treats flatulence in the same way.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 How would you describe the etiquette around passing gas in your own culture? Is it the same at home, at work, and in public?

2 The reading says that gas is normal but talking about it is close to a taboo. Why do societies treat some normal bodily functions as taboo?

3 What are the strategies people use when they cannot hide it: leaving, joking, blaming? Which do you think is the most acceptable, and why?

4 The Korean and Japanese proverbs are about blame. Does your language have a saying with a similar idea? What does it show about the culture?

5 Claudius reportedly considered an edict allowing flatulence at the table. Would a rule like this help or harm social life? Why?

6 Erasmus wrote a manners handbook for children. Should children be taught etiquette about bodily functions? At what age, and how?

7 In the Islamic case, the concern is ritual purity, not embarrassment. What other rules in religions or traditions link the body to ritual?

8 The reading warns that the satire reading of the he-gassen scrolls is speculative. How should we interpret old jokes and artworks when the artists are unknown?

9 Humor about bodily functions appears in many periods. Why do you think it is so common, and does it change how serious topics are discussed?

10 Le Pétomane was a star performer. Is it surprising that a taboo subject could become entertainment? What other taboo subjects became entertainment?

11 The Mandarin word fàngpì is used as an insult. Which bodily words are used as insults in languages you know, and why?

12 Commercial surveys are weak evidence. How can readers judge the reliability of surveys about embarrassing topics?

13 Should schools, offices, and public transport have rules about odors and sounds, or should people simply tolerate them? Give reasons.

14 The reading limits its conclusion because cross-cultural research is scarce. What kind of study would you design to compare attitudes across countries?

Language Focus: Modals of Speculation About the Past

To say what was possibly true in the past, use may, might, or could plus have and the past participle (may have been, could have happened). The form shows that the writer is not sure. Negative forms (may not have, could not have) show doubt or impossibility.

In the reading:

- "…he **may have been joking**, and Suetonius reports only that he was said to have thought of it."
- "…such scrolls **may have been meant** as satire of foreigners…"
- "…he **may have drawn** in air rather than passing intestinal gas."

Practice: Rewrite with a modal of speculation: *"Perhaps the artist wanted to make fun of foreigners."* Begin with *The artist…*

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Notes