
VII. English Language Arts,
Reading Comprehension, Grade 8

Grade 8 English Language Arts Reading Comprehension Test

The spring 2015 grade 8 English Language Arts Reading Comprehension test was based on grades 6–12 learning standards in two content strands of the *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy* (March 2011) listed below. Page numbers for the learning standards appear in parentheses.

- Reading (*Framework*, pages 47–52)
- Language (*Framework*, pages 64–67)

The *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy* is available on the Department website at www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html.

ELA Reading Comprehension test results are reported under two MCAS reporting categories, **Reading** and **Language**, which are identical to the two framework content strands listed above.

The tables at the conclusion of this chapter indicate each released and unreleased common item’s reporting category and the standard it assesses. The correct answers for released multiple-choice questions are also displayed in the released item table.

Test Sessions and Content Overview

The grade 8 ELA Reading Comprehension test included two separate test sessions. Each session included reading passages, followed by multiple-choice and open-response questions. Selected common reading passages and approximately half of the common test items are shown on the following pages as they appeared in test booklets.

Reference Materials

During both ELA Reading Comprehension test sessions, the use of bilingual word-to-word dictionaries was allowed for current and former English language learner students only. No other reference materials were allowed during any ELA Reading Comprehension test session.

Grade 8 English Language Arts

READING COMPREHENSION

DIRECTIONS

This session contains two reading selections with fourteen multiple-choice questions and two open-response questions. Mark your answers to these questions in the spaces provided in your Student Answer Booklet.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was an African American poet who wrote in the late 1800s and early 1900s. His poem “Sympathy” speaks of the feelings of a bird in a cage. Read the poem and answer the questions that follow.

SYMPATHY

- I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
 When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
 And the river flows like a stream of glass;
5 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,¹
 And the faint perfume from its chalice² steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!
- I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
10 For he must fly back to his perch and cling
 When he fain³ would be on the bough⁴ a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
 And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!
- 15 I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
20 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

¹ *opes* — opens

² *chalice* — a cup or goblet

³ *fain* — gladly

⁴ *bough* — branch

- 1 Which of the following words **best** describes the feeling created by the description in line 3?
- A. peaceful
 - B. surprised
 - C. impatient
 - D. suspenseful
- 2 In line 4, the phrase “like a stream of glass” suggests the water is
- A. cold.
 - B. deep.
 - C. dirty.
 - D. smooth.
- 3 In line 5, what do the “first bird” and the “first bud” **most likely** represent?
- A. the cage
 - B. the springtime
 - C. the bud’s beauty
 - D. the bird’s ancestor
- 4 How is the first stanza **most** different from the rest of the poem?
- A. The stanza suggests the bird is bored with his life.
 - B. The stanza describes how the bird looks, rather than how he acts.
 - C. The stanza suggests the bird is unwise for wanting his life to change.
 - D. The stanza describes what the bird likely desires, rather than what he experiences.
- 5 Which of the following words **best** describes the tone of the poem?
- A. fearful
 - B. apologetic
 - C. passionate
 - D. wondering
- 6 Which meaning of the word *faint* is used in line 6?
- A. exhausted
 - B. whispered
 - C. lacking courage
 - D. barely noticeable

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Question 7 is an open-response question.

- Read the question carefully.
- Explain your answer.
- Add supporting details.
- Double-check your work.

Write your answer to question 7 in the space provided in your Student Answer Booklet.

- 7 Based on the poem, explain why the speaker feels sympathy for the bird. Support your answer with relevant and specific details from the poem.

“Eureka!” means “I have found it!” Read this article about the role that chance has played in important discoveries. Then answer the questions that follow.

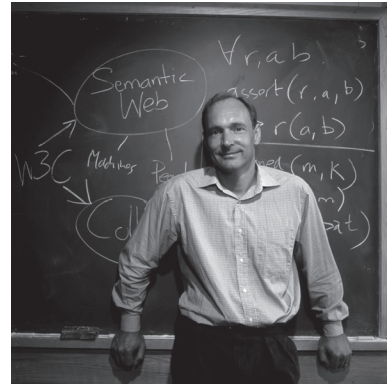
Eureka!

by Ken Chowder

1 **Y**OU WOULDN'T THINK something as unscientific as accident could have played much of a role in the life of Tim Berners-Lee, the brilliant British physicist and computer scientist who in 1991 invented the World Wide Web. He conceived it and still controls a lot of how it operates from his unimposing office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1999, *Time* placed Berners-Lee on its list of the “100 Persons of the Century.” No fewer than seven different universities have awarded him honorary degrees.

2 But the great breakthrough engineered by this icon of cyberspace did occur, in part, by chance. “There was an element of serendipity,”¹ says Arthur Molella, director of the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. “At first, he was just noodling around, trying to find a way to organize his research files. So he began to develop a tool just for his own personal use.”

3 The “tool” was a software program that, as Berners-Lee puts it, was “really useful for keeping track of all the random associations one comes across in real life, and [which] brains are supposed to be



Tim Berners-Lee sought a way to organize his notes. So he created the World Wide Web. “But I hate spam,” he says, and now directs the W3 Consortium, which regulates the Web and combats cyber nuisances.

so good at remembering—but sometimes mine wouldn’t.” He called it Enquire, and it worked so well, creating effective linkages between huge amounts of information, that it eventually became the basis for the revolution we now casually refer to as the Web. “It would be akin to a carpenter building a little cabinet for himself,” Molella says, “and suddenly discovering he could store the entire world inside the thing. There was quite a bit of luck in it.”

4 The element of chance has helped produce many of the most important

¹ *serendipity* — finding something valuable without seeking it

innovations in modern life. Many are created by it; others become successful because of it, and some fail for the same reason. As Mark Twain, an inventor himself, once scribbled in his notebook: “Name the greatest of all the inventors. Accident.” If you don’t believe it, go into your kitchen and look around. There might be a Teflon pan on the stove, a microwave oven above it, Post-its sticking out of cookbooks, matches in a drawer; Coke, Popsicles and ketchup stashed in a refrigerator. Accident played a role in their invention.

5 Happenstance² works in many ways. One is the observed event: the “invention” is the way the mind seizes upon an inconspicuous occurrence. The best known of these is Alexander Fleming’s role in the discovery of penicillin. One day in 1928 some mold drifted through an open window in a London hospital and landed in Fleming’s petri dish, where he’d placed a culture of staphylococcus bacteria. What Fleming did next got him and two colleagues a Nobel Prize in 1945: he looked through the microscope. What he saw was the mold efficiently destroying the germs. Presto! The creation of penicillin began with that unlikely turn of events.

6 But Robert Friedel, historian of technology at the University of Maryland, cautions that “serendipity is no accident.” What’s important about an unintended event, Friedel asserts, is the creative way it is used. As Louis Pasteur once said, “Chance favors only the prepared mind.”

7 Any of us might happen to see a cat pull feathers through a birdcage; but when Eli Whitney saw that, he got the idea of how to comb cotton mechanically. Hence the cotton gin. “Some people are just more likely to pay attention when they see something,” says Rini Paiva of the National

Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio. “If you have a certain type of brain, you might see something weird and say, ‘Hey, what can I do with this?’”

8 Take Percy Lebaron Spencer. A hero of World War II for his work in developing radar, Spencer obtained more than 120 patents in his lifetime. One day shortly after the war, he was walking through his lab at the Raytheon Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he stopped briefly by a magnetron—the tube that produces the high-frequency microwaves that power radar. “He was working on things like missile-defense systems,” Paiva says. “But just that second he got a strange feeling. He realized that a candy bar in his jacket pocket had melted.” Odd, Spencer thought. Immediately, he performed a makeshift experiment: he put some popcorn kernels in front of the magnetron. Soon, popcorn was popping all over the place. “There’s actually a drawing of a bag of popcorn in one of Spencer’s patents,” Paiva says. “Other people might just make a note or two in a lab notebook and let it go. But right away



A chocolate bar in his pocket melted by radar gave Percy Spencer (above) a vision: microwave ovens.

² *happenstance* — a situation due to chance

Percy Spencer was thinking about what this could be used for—a microwave oven.”

9 It’s not just scientists hanging around high-tech labs whom accident favors. Hans Lippershey, a 17th-century Dutch eyeglass maker, simply happened—so the story goes—to look through two lenses one day and notice that objects at a distance were greatly magnified. When he put the lenses in a tube, he created the world’s first telescope. John Walker was a pharmacist, not a scientist. One day in 1826 he was mixing potassium chlorate and antimony sulfide together with a stick, but the mixture stuck to the stick. When he tried to scrape the stuff off against the stone floor, it burst into flames. Walker quickly produced for sale the first friction matches, or, to use his catchy name, “sulphuretted peroxide strikables.”

10 Inspiration can take a lot longer to strike than a match. Frank Epperson was an 11-year-old boy at the dawn of the 20th century when he accidentally left a mixture of soda powder and water out on the back porch one cold night. In it was the stick he’d used as a mixer. Next morning, Epperson found the soda water frozen around the stick. Nearly 20



In 1973 Frank Epperson’s granddaughter Nancy helped celebrate 50 years of his “frozen drink on a stick.”

years passed before he realized that by adding some flavoring, he could concoct a frosty treat, and with that he began to manufacture what he called “Eppsicles.” Eventually the name changed, and he earned royalties on more than 60 million Popsicles. (That success inspired the creation of the Fudgsicle, the Creamsicle and the Dreamsicle.)

11 Sometimes Lady Luck delivers the invention but not the fortune that should go with it. One day in 1839, a failed hardware salesman was tinkering at his boardinghouse in Woburn, Massachusetts. He’d been hauled off to debtor’s prison so often that he called it his “hotel.” Even there, he kept doing experiments, doggedly trying to make a useful material out of a substance from Brazil called rubber. People bought it for erasing—“rubbing” out mistakes. Because it became brittle in the cold and melted in high heat, that was about all it was good for. The amateur inventor tried mixing it with numerous chemicals all without success, until that day in Woburn when he blended rubber with sulfur—and happened to drop the mixture onto a hot stove. After he cleaned it up, he realized that the rubber had suddenly become more solid, yet was still flexible.

12 Charles Goodyear had vulcanized rubber, a process that gives it useful properties, such as strength, elasticity and stability. (Today it is used in everything from automobile tires to golf balls.) But that practical discovery did little to help Goodyear himself. His many patents were regularly violated; when he died in 1860, he was more than \$200,000 in debt.

13 In one common scenario, inventors are hard at work trying to make one thing when accident intervenes to create something else. The first practical synthetic dye was “invented” when an 18-year-old student

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in London was trying to synthesize an antimalarial drug; the material that led to throwaway tissues was first intended as a filter for gas masks.

- 14 In the late 1960s, 3M Company researcher Spence Silver was trying to create a superglue but ended up with the opposite—a glue that wouldn't dry, wouldn't melt and hardly stuck to anything.

It could just barely hold two pieces of paper together. What the devil could he use the stuff for? Silver never did come up with a good answer, but five years later a fellow employee, Art Fry, began using the glue on small scraps of paper, making bookmarks for his church hymnal. It took another eight years before “Post-it” sticky notepaper became an overnight sensation.

“Eureka!” by Ken Chowder, from *Smithsonian* magazine (September 2003). Text copyright © 2003 by Ken Chowder. Reprinted by permission of the author. Photograph 1 copyright © Andrew Brusso/CORBIS. Photograph 2 reprinted by permission of Raytheon Company. Photograph 3 copyright © Bettmann/CORBIS.

- 8 According to paragraphs 1–3, what was Berners-Lee doing when he conceived of the World Wide Web?

- A. building a cupboard
- B. brainstorming with friends
- C. attempting to get organized
- D. trying to make profitable goods

- 9 In paragraph 4, what is the **most likely** reason the author says to “go into your kitchen and look around”?

- A. to convince his readers he is speaking the truth
- B. to suggest that some devices could be improved
- C. to point out that many new devices are related to cooking
- D. to provide readers with motivation to think of their own ideas

- 10 According to the article, which of the following was **most** important to the invention of the cotton gin?

- A. religion
- B. medicine
- C. an animal
- D. the weather

- 11 Which of the following would be the **best** heading for paragraph 7?

- A. How New Ideas Become Patented
- B. How the Mind Creates through Observation
- C. How Untried Methods Often Meet Resistance
- D. How History Was Influenced by Everyday Contraptions

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- 12 According to the article, how was Charles Goodyear **most** different from other inventors in the article?
- A. He kept his discoveries hidden from colleagues.
 - B. He did not understand the impact of his discoveries.
 - C. He made discoveries that were important to the world.
 - D. He did not achieve financial success through his discoveries.
- 13 Which of the following sentences **best** supports the main idea of the article?
- A. “He conceived it and still controls a lot of how it operates from his unimposing office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.” (paragraph 1)
 - B. “No fewer than seven different universities have awarded him honorary degrees.” (paragraph 1)
 - C. “The creation of penicillin began with that unlikely turn of events.” (paragraph 5)
 - D. “He’d been hauled off to debtor’s prison so often that he called it his ‘hotel.’” (paragraph 11)
- 14 How is the article **mainly** organized?
- A. in chronological order
 - B. by order of importance
 - C. by comparison and contrast
 - D. through a series of examples
- 15 What is the definition of *scenario* as it is used in paragraph 13?
- A. disaster
 - B. sacrifice
 - C. situation
 - D. presentation

ELA Reading Comprehension

Question 16 is an open-response question.

- Read the question carefully.
- Explain your answer.
- Add supporting details.
- Double-check your work.

Write your answer to question 16 in the space provided in your Student Answer Booklet.

- 16** Based on the article, explain what Louis Pasteur meant when he said, “Chance favors only the prepared mind.” Support your answer with relevant and specific information from the article.

Grade 8 English Language Arts
Reading Comprehension
Spring 2015 Released Items:
Reporting Categories, Standards, and Correct Answers*

| Item No. | Page No. | Reporting Category | Standard | Correct Answer (MC)* |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 94 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 | A |
| 2 | 94 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 | D |
| 3 | 94 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 | B |
| 4 | 94 | <i>Reading</i> | 5 | D |
| 5 | 94 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 | C |
| 6 | 94 | <i>Language</i> | 4 | D |
| 7 | 95 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 | |
| 8 | 99 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 | C |
| 9 | 99 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 | A |
| 10 | 99 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 | C |
| 11 | 99 | <i>Reading</i> | 5 | B |
| 12 | 100 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 | D |
| 13 | 100 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 | C |
| 14 | 100 | <i>Reading</i> | 5 | D |
| 15 | 100 | <i>Language</i> | 4 | C |
| 16 | 101 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 | |

* Answers are provided here for multiple-choice items only. Sample responses and scoring guidelines for open-response items, which are indicated by the shaded cells, will be posted to the Department's website later this year.

Grade 8 English Language Arts
Reading Comprehension
Spring 2015 Unreleased Common Items:
Reporting Categories and Standards

| Item No. | Reporting Category | Standard |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 17 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 |
| 18 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 |
| 19 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 |
| 20 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 |
| 21 | <i>Language</i> | 4 |
| 22 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 |
| 23 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 |
| 24 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 |
| 25 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 |
| 26 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 |
| 27 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 |
| 28 | <i>Reading</i> | 2 |
| 29 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 |
| 30 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 |
| 31 | <i>Reading</i> | 6 |
| 32 | <i>Reading</i> | 9 |
| 33 | <i>Language</i> | 4 |
| 34 | <i>Reading</i> | 9 |
| 35 | <i>Reading</i> | 4 |
| 36 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 |
| 37 | <i>Reading</i> | 3 |
| 38 | <i>Reading</i> | 1 |
| 39 | <i>Language</i> | 4 |
| 40 | <i>Language</i> | 1 |