

Sample Reading Passage and Questions

AGE 13

Elephant Seals

Elephant seals cannot always be found together or even on land. In fact, for most of the year they prefer to be alone and at sea. But there are two reasons these seals gather on shore each year.

One is to escape the stinging effect of saltwater when they molt, or shed their old hair for new hair. At this time large patches of skin are also shed with the old hair. That is what makes them so sensitive to salt. The other reason elephant seals come ashore is to give birth to their young and to mate.

During the mating season, the seals are as heavy as they will ever be during the year. Females may weigh as much as 1,700 pounds. Males may weigh close to 6,000 pounds and be 17 feet long.

Much of the weight of these animals is fat, which they gain from their diet of squid and other seafood. This fat insulates them from the cold and provides the energy for the long periods when they eat nothing at all. But unfortunately for the seals, their blubber is also a very rich source of oil. The fat from a large male may yield up to 210 gallons of oil.

Although the animals are huge, they can be approached without fear, for on land they move fairly slowly. Unlike many other types of seals, elephant seals have little fear of people. Thus, when large-scale hunting of seals began around 1850, it didn't take long to kill most of them. By the 1890's scientists supposed that these seals had been hunted off.

In 1911 it was a great surprise when a small herd of about 100 seals was found on a Mexican island near the coast of Baja California. This discovery was reported to the Mexican government, which immediately stationed soldiers on the island with orders to shoot anyone harming the seals. As you can

imagine, the seals prospered and within another sixty years the size of the herd had greatly increased.

One feature of elephant seal behavior may have aided this remarkable comeback. The males engage in savage fighting that leaves one bull "King of the Beach." The winner is a champion prizefighter in the elephant seal world and, as a reward, he will have more "wives" on his part of the beach than any other bull. Farther down the beach, however, there are also other champions. This type of grouping helps the seals, for the strength of the most powerful bulls is passed on to the baby elephant seals. And in a vast ocean where these pups have to outswim an occasional white shark or killer whale, speed and strength are important.

Most of the fighting among males takes place in early December. They arrive at the Mexican island and other areas several weeks before the females so their problems will be settled before their wives arrive. From this time until they leave in March, the bulls eat nothing at all. They stay on shore and live only on the food and water contained in their stored fat.

Females arrive on the beaches in late December. Several days later each gives birth to a pup that weighs about 90 pounds. For one month the mother seal also eats nothing at all. In fact, she does very little other than nurse her pup. By the end of this 30-day period the pup may have tripled its weight, now weighing close to 300 pounds. At that time the mother leaves the pup to survive by itself. She then mates. One year later she gives birth to another pup.

And so the story goes, just as it did for thousands of years before the hunters arrived. Now, with the hunters gone and the seals recovered, this story should continue for thousands of years more.

Sample question 3 asked students to recognize the overall informative purpose of the passage and the emphasis on the seals' appearance and habits.

What is the main purpose of this article?

- A To explain why elephant seals are important to humans
- B To convince the reader that elephant seals are not harmful to humans
- C To describe the appearance and habits of elephant seals
- D To convince the reader that laws should be made to protect elephant seals

Percentage of correct responses for 13-year-old students at each performance level: 2008

Overall	Below level 200	Level 200	Level 250	Level 300
63	32	55	67	82

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.

Sample question 4 asked students to identify a specific cause of seal behavior presented in the passage.

Why do elephant seals come ashore each year?

- A To eat and store up food
- B To escape the winter migration of the white sharks and to avoid the cold water
- C To rest up from their hard life at sea and hibernate
- D To escape the saltwater and to give birth to their young

Percentage of correct responses for 13-year-old students at each performance level: 2008

Overall	Below level 200	Level 200	Level 250	Level 300
74	26	52	88	99

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.



Sample Reading Passage and Questions

AGE 17

Travels with Charley in Search of America

Even the cabin was dismal and damp. I turned the gas mantle high, lit the kerosene lamp, and lighted two burners of my stove to drive the loneliness away. The rain drummed on the metal roof. Nothing in my stock of food looked edible. The darkness fell and the trees moved closer. Over the rain drums I seemed to hear voices, as though a crowd of people muttered and mumbled offstage. Charley was restless. He didn't bark an alarm, but he growled and whined uneasily, which is very unlike him, and he didn't eat his supper and he left his water dish untouched—and that by a dog who drinks his weight in water every day and needs to because of the outgo. I succumbed utterly to my desolation, made two peanut-butter sandwiches, and went to bed and wrote letters home, passing my loneliness around. Then the rain stopped falling and the trees dripped and I helped spawn a school of secret dangers. Oh, we can populate the dark with horrors, even we who think ourselves informed and sure, believing nothing we cannot measure or weigh. I knew beyond all doubt that the dark things crowding in on me either did not exist or were not dangerous to me, and still I was afraid. I thought how terrible the nights must have been in a time when men knew the things were there and were deadly. But no, that's wrong. If I knew they were there, I would have weapons against them, charms, prayers, some kind of alliance with forces equally strong but on my side. Knowing they were not there made me defenseless against them and perhaps more afraid.

Sample question 5 asked students to use their understanding of the narrator's words in the passage to recognize the nature of his fear.

Which of the following best describes the man's fear?

- A He was worried that his dog was becoming ill.
- B He kept having fearful thoughts even though he knew there was no danger.
- C He suspected that there were dangerous animals outside.
- D He heard voices of people trying to break into the cabin.

Percentage of correct responses for 17-year-old students at each performance level: 2008

Overall	Below level 250	Level 250	Level 300	Level 350
84	58	84	97	99

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.



Sample question 6 is a constructed-response question that asked students to interpret the overall mood or feeling of a short literary passage and then to explain how the writer of the passage created the mood. Responses to this question were rated with a 5-level scoring guide in one of the following categories:

- 5 – Mood identified and substantiated with multiple pieces of evidence
- 4 – Mood identified and substantiated
- 3 – Mood identified and substantiated with minimal evidence
- 2 – Mood identified without substantiation
- 1 – Unable to identify mood

The following sample response was rated as level 5 because it correctly identified the mood of the passage and provided multiple pieces of evidence. Overall, 3 percent of 17-year-olds provided responses that were rated as level 5.

Think about the article again. Write down a few words that describe the mood or feeling of the story.

dismal, eerie, mysterious, dark

Explain how the writer created this mood.

The writer created this mood through description of the setting. The cabin is described as dismal and lonely, and the rain on the roof along with the unknown creatures outside the cabin give it an eerie mood. Also, the fact that the main character knows he shouldn't be scared yet still is is somewhat mysterious because maybe subconsciously he knows that he should be afraid. The strange behavior of the dog supports this argument as well.

Percentage of level 5 responses for 17-year-old students at each performance level: 2008

Overall	Below level 250	Level 250	Level 300	Level 350
3	#	#	5	16

Rounds to zero.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.

The following sample response was rated as level 3 because it provided minimal evidence of how the author created the mood. Overall, 74 percent of 17-year-olds wrote responses that were rated as level 3 or better.

Think about the article again. Write down a few words that describe the mood or feeling of the story.

The mood of the story is creepy

Explain how the writer created this mood.

The writers mood was created because of where the story took place. who wouldn't feel scared in the dark woods?

Percentage of level 3 or better responses for 17-year-old students at each performance level: 2008

Overall	Below level 250	Level 250	Level 300	Level 350
74	44	73	89	97

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2008 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.