Reading Passages

Passage One

This passage is excerpted from a 1986 article about the use of social studies textbooks in elementary schools.

The inherent difficulty of social studies content stems mainly from the heavy technical concept load of social studies textbook passages. Technical concepts are one- or two-word “ideas” which have specialized meaning in social studies (for example: government, delta, immigrants, interdependence, economy, constitution, federal, cotton belt, division of labor, and political party.) These words may have little or no meaning for students unless specific vocabulary or concept development lessons precede their first encounter with such terms. Yet basal social studies textbooks are notorious for heavy technical concept load and “thin” discussion of topics, making even the most careful independent reading low in potential benefit.

Hard-to-pronounce names of cities, faraway countries, and foreign language names contribute to the complexity of textbook content. Many adult readers are stopped by these words, yet social studies is neither complete nor accurate without them.

Add to the above problems frequent references to long periods of time or huge distances, and it becomes even more apparent why children have trouble learning from their social studies textbooks. What must a child of 9 or 10 think when the book says, “Our country was founded over 200 years ago”—or perhaps worse, “long, long ago”? What do expressions such as “far to the north,” or “over a thousand miles to the east,” mean to students who are not sure which direction is which and who have never traveled further than across the state or out of town?

1. The word inherent (line 1) means

(A) naturally occurring
(B) worst
(C) least important
(D) intentional
(E) minor

2. According to the author of this passage, which of the following does not contribute to the ineffectiveness of social studies textbooks?

(A) difficult terminology
(B) references to long periods of time
(C) uninteresting topics
(D) words that are difficult to pronounce
(E) skimpy explanations of topics
3. The author’s main argument is that
   (A) social studies texts have no place in the classroom.
   (B) social studies texts should be rewritten so that they are easier to understand.
   (C) children today are not as intelligent as children in the past.
   (D) the difficulties of social studies texts are necessary hurdles that must be overcome.
   (E) the authors of social studies texts know nothing about children.

4. In the last paragraph of the passage, the author drives his point home with
   (A) rhetorical questions
   (B) imagery
   (C) hyperbole
   (D) symbolism
   (E) an oxymoron

**Passage Two**

This passage is excerpted from a 2003 article about the impact of electronic communication on writing.

Word processing and e-publishing have brought about interesting developments in the way writers write. In general, the malleable nature of electronic text has made the physical process of composing more “elastic” in that writers are quicker to commit thought to writing and to reorganize content because it is simple to make changes on the electronic screen. Even young children find it easy to insert and manipulate images and video or audio clips in their texts. In addition, writers who publish on the Web perceive it as a new rhetorical space that provides options for using non-linear, alternative structures, making it necessary for them to anticipate how audiences might physically navigate through their hypertext compositions. This consciousness creates complex perspectives and a heightened awareness of traditional rhetorical elements in a way that text alone never could.

5. The word “malleable” (line 2) means
   (A) inflexible
   (B) simplistic
   (C) pliable
   (D) insincere
   (E) complex

6. The author of this passage suggests that word processing and e-publishing have made the writing and reading of text
   (A) more complex than ever before.
   (B) quicker than ever before.
   (C) more simple than ever before.
   (D) more decorative than ever before.
   (E) more organized than ever before.
Passage Three

This passage is excerpted from a 2002 article about ecosystems.

When someone asks us where we are from or what we do, most of us mention the town or city where we live, our occupation, where we attended school, or our family heritage. We respond in terms of human communities, cultures, and geopolitical boundaries. We seldom, if ever, describe ourselves in terms of our ecological status in the natural world. We humans have so completely ordered, designed, and defined our physical environs and social milieu that our ecological connections have slipped from consciousness. Perhaps this is why we seem so unaware of our impact on nature and our rapid destruction of natural systems. We simply do not perceive ourselves as being part of the natural order of beings.

All of us live within ecological systems, or “ecosystems,” and through our commerce, food distribution, and use of natural resources we each indirectly participate in the custodianship of many ecosystems worldwide. Ironically, we are simultaneously the most potent forces within most ecosystems, and yet nearly oblivious to the ecological effects of our daily lifestyles. There has never been a time when a deep understanding of ecosystems and our roles within them has been more critical. Indeed, the world’s freshwater ecosystems are so degraded that their ability to support plant and animal life, including humans, is viewed by many as being in peril. Learning about ecosystems is more than an expected focus in biology classes; it has become a study in survival.

Ecosystems are functional units of interacting abiotic, biotic, and cultural (anthropogenic) components. All natural ecosystems are open systems where energy and matter are transferred in and out through the complex interactions of energy, water, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, and other cycles. Unfortunately, many scientists contend, we humans have disrupted the balance of transfers across ecosystem boundaries. In addition to learning our place within ecosystems, we must learn to become better stewards and managers of ecosystems.

7. The author’s tone in this passage can best be described as

(A) apologetic
(B) scolding
(C) warning
(D) encouraging
(E) unconcerned

8. The first two sentences of this passage are primarily intended to

(A) capture the reader’s attention with an anecdote.
(B) demonstrate our unawareness of our place in the natural world.
(C) cause the reader to think about his or her own role in society.
(D) emphasize the importance of a person’s background.
(E) show ways in which we are all different.

9. The author’s attitude in this passage is represented by all of the following phrases except

(A) “must learn to become better stewards and managers of ecosystems.”
(B) “oblivious to the ecological effects of our daily lifestyles.”
(C) “rapid destruction of natural systems.”
(D) “indirectly participate in the custodianship of many ecosystems worldwide.”
(E) “disrupted the balance of transfers across ecosystem boundaries.”
Passage Four

This passage is excerpted from a 1922 novel about a Midwestern American’s journey to the front of World War I.

Claude backed the little Ford car out of its shed, ran it up to the horse-tank, and began to throw water on the mud-crusted wheels and windshield. While he was at work the two hired men, Dan and Jerry, came shambling down the hill to feed the stock. Jerry was grumbling and swearing about something, but Claude wrung out his wet rags and, beyond a nod, paid no attention to them. Somehow his father always managed to have the roughest and dirtiest hired men in the country working for him. Claude had a grievance against Jerry just now, because of his treatment of one of the horses.

Molly was a faithful old mare, the mother of many colts; Claude and his younger brother had learned to ride on her. This man Jerry, taking her out to work one morning, let her step on a board with a nail sticking up in it. He pulled the nail out of her foot, said nothing to anybody, and drove her to the cultivator all day. Now she had been standing in her stall for weeks, patiently suffering, her body wretchedly thin, and her leg swollen until it looked like an elephant’s. She would have to stand there, the veterinary said, until her hoof came off and she grew a new one, and she would always be stiff. Jerry had not been discharged, and he exhibited the poor animal as if she were a credit to him.

Mahailey came out on the hilltop and rang the breakfast bell. After the hired men went up to the house, Claude slipped into the barn to see that Molly had got her share of oats. She was eating quietly, her head hanging, and her scaly, dead-looking foot lifted just a little from the ground. When he stroked her neck and talked to her she stopped grinding and gazed at him mournfully. She knew him, and wrinkled her nose and drew her upper lip back from her worn teeth, to show that she liked being petted. She let him touch her foot and examine her leg.

When Claude reached the kitchen, his mother was sitting at one end of the breakfast table, pouring weak coffee, his brother and Dan and Jerry were in their chairs, and Mahailey was baking griddle cakes at the stove. A moment later Mr. Wheeler came down the enclosed stairway and walked the length of the table to his own place. He was a very large man, taller and broader than any of his neighbors. He seldom wore a coat in summer, and his rumpled shirt bulged out carelessly over the belt of his trousers. His florid face was clean shaven, likely to be a trifle tobacco-stained about the mouth, and it was conspicuous both for good-nature and coarse humour, and for an imperturbable physical composure. Nobody in the county had ever seen Nat Wheeler flustered about anything, and nobody had ever heard him speak with complete seriousness. He kept up his easy-going, jocular affability even with his own family.

As soon as he was seated, Mr. Wheeler reached for the two-pint sugar bowl and began to pour sugar into his coffee. Ralph asked him if he were going to the circus. Mr. Wheeler winked. “I shouldn’t wonder if I happened in town sometime before the elephants get away.” He spoke very deliberately, with a State-of-Maine drawl, and his voice was smooth and agreeable. “You boys better start in early, though. You can take the wagon and the mules, and load in the cowhides. The butcher has agreed to take them.”

Claude put down his knife. “Can’t we have the car? I’ve washed it on purpose.”

“And what about Dan and Jerry? They want to see the circus just as much as you do, and I want the hides should go in; they’re bringing a good price now. I don’t mind about your washing the car; mud preserves the paint, they say, but it’ll be all right this time, Claude.”
10. Claude’s attitude toward Jerry is one of

(A) respect.
(B) resentment.
(C) jealousy.
(D) camaraderie.
(E) indifference.

11. The expression “imperturbable physical composure” (paragraph 4, line 9) suggests that Nat Wheeler

(A) has a hard time keeping his face clean.
(B) is terribly overweight.
(C) cannot be irritated.
(D) is always in a great mood.
(E) always appears calm by his facial expressions.

12. Which statement by Mr. Wheeler represents an example of verbal irony?

(A) “You can take the wagon and the mules, and load in the cowhides.”
(B) “I shouldn’t wonder if I happened in town sometime before the elephants get away.”
(C) “They want to see the circus just as much as you do, and I want the hides should go in; they’re bringing a good price now.”
(D) “I don’t mind about your washing the car; mud preserves the paint, they say, but it’ll be all right this time, Claude.”
(E) “And what about Dan and Jerry?”
Answers and Explanations

1. The correct answer is A. Because of the highly technical language of social studies, the difficult terminology discussed in this paragraph is a naturally occurring problem.

2. The correct answer is C. The passage specifically mentions all of the other problems, but at no time does the author suggest that social studies is not interesting.

3. The correct answer is D. The author states that the difficulties of the texts are inherent (or natural) and that social studies texts would be “neither complete nor accurate without” difficult words. Rather than passing judgment on the texts or on their authors, the author identifies necessary hurdles that must be overcome.

4. The correct answer is A. The author uses two rhetorical questions, or questions meant to make a point rather than to be answered.

5. The correct answer is C. The word “elastic” provides a good context clue, as does the statement that “it is simple to make changes on the electronic screen.” The word “malleable” suggests that the words on the screen are pliable, or can be easily altered.

6. The correct answer is A. This question is a little tricky because the author utilizes many of the words that are in the wrong answer choices (such as quicker, simple, and reorganize). None of these terms, however, represents his point. The use of alternative structures, images, and other nontraditional rhetorical elements makes electronic communication more complex than traditional texts.

7. The correct answer is C. The author is certainly not apologetic, encouraging, or unconcerned. Although some of his words seem scolding, his overall purpose is more to warn than to scold. Therefore, warning is a better choice than scolding.

8. The correct answer is B. Although the opening sentences of the passage may do any of the things listed in the answer choices, their intended purpose is to show that we are oblivious to our place in nature. The focus of the rest of the first paragraph reinforces this purpose.

9. The correct answer is D. All of the other answer choices contain negative words and phrases that warn of threats to ecosystems.

10. The correct answer is B. Claude resents Jerry because Jerry injured a horse that is special to Claude. Evidence of Claude’s resentment can be seen in his description of Jerry’s carelessness and of the horse’s resulting injuries.

11. The correct answer is E. The sentence following the expression sums up its meaning: no one had ever seen Mr. Wheeler flustered. Although C is also a tempting choice, the author doesn’t say that Mr. Wheeler can’t be irritated, just that he never looks irritated.

12. The correct answer is D. Verbal irony involves saying the opposite of what you really mean. Mr. Wheeler teases Claude by suggesting that he would rather have a dirty car.

Note: We suggest that you re-read the sample questions and the rationale behind arriving at the correct response several times to be sure that you understand the concepts fully.