

Unit 2. Reading comprehension: short-answer questions



Objectives:

- To demonstrate understanding of written texts, and of the words and phrases within them
- To summarise and use material for a specific context
- To select appropriate information for specific purposes
- To organise and convey facts, ideas and opinions effectively

What are short-answer questions?

Short-answer questions are straightforward and test your understanding of a passage that you have read. They require brief, factual answers to show that you have understood a particular piece of information in the text. You should try to express your answers in your own words.







Applying your skills

You might be asked to show an understanding of the passages printed for you to read. Although different papers use different types of questions to do this, success depends very much on the care and concentration with which you read.

It is good idea to keep the following points in mind when you set about preparing to answer questions:

- You have plenty of time to read the passages carefully; don't rush into writing your answers until you have gained a clear understanding of what you have been asked to read.
- Remember that a clear understanding of the questions is as important as reading the passages. This will help to ensure that you are in the best position to select the details that are relevant to the question you are answering.

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- Read each passage through carefully from beginning to end in order to gain a general, overall understanding of it: it is important that you gain a sound overview of what it is about.
 - Once you have achieved both an overview of the passage and a clear understanding of what the questions require, then look closely at the relevant sections of the passage on which the questions are based. It may help to underline or highlight key points in the text so that you can easily find them when writing your answers.
 - The next step is to produce your written answers to the questions. Remember: it is important that what you write makes clear that you have understood exactly what the question requires. A reader can judge your understanding only by what you have written: don't leave out points which may seem obvious if they are relevant; if you don't include a point, you cannot be given credit for knowing it.

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- Make sure that the details you include in your answers are relevant to the question.
 - Write your answers clearly, without irrelevant comments.
 - Use your own words as far as possible to demonstrate your understanding. If you are asked to explain the meaning of a word such as *exciting* remember that an answer which says 'something that makes you feel excited' will not be sufficient, as you need to use a word such as *thrilling* to show your understanding.

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Types of questions



**Texts which
might be used
to test your
comprehension
skills will be:**

- factual (an article giving information)
- narrative (a passage telling a story or a part of story- this could be a true account such as an account of a visit to somewhere taken from a travel book)
- descriptive (a piece of writing describing a person, place or object which may include the writer's feelings about what(s) he is describing)
- argumentative writing (an article in which the writer puts forward a point of view or belief in an attempt to provoke her/his readers to agree- or disagree).

- The types of questions you could be asked are likely to vary, depending on the type of passage.

- More straightforward questions often require only short, one-or two-sentence answers.

- You might also be required to find factual details from the passage. More demanding questions may ask you to **interpret** some of the points included in the passage to arrive at your answer.

- Comprehension of text often doesn't have a right or wrong answer; what is important is that you give evidence that you have understood the details of the passage and can apply this to produce a consistent interpretation of the question.


Key term

Interpret: This means to look beyond the literal meaning of a word or phrase and attempt to explain what the writer is implying by the use of these words.

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How to approach short-answer comprehension questions






- There are some techniques that are specific to short-answer comprehension questions.

- Short answer questions require brief, factual answers to show that you have understood a particular piece of information in the text. You should try to express your answers in your own words.

- The way in which a question is worded will give you some indication of the approach you should take in your answer. For example:

- ➤ Questions which contain instructions such as *Give to reasons* require straightforward retrieval of details from the passage. Remember that you should provide two distinct reasons and not just two aspects of the same reason!
- ➤ Questions which ask you to *Explain* something, such as the writer's opinions, require you not only to say what the opinions are, but also to make some comment about them in your own words.

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- Questions which begin *Why do you think* the writer uses certain words or expressions (for example), require you to interpret and explain the writer's intentions in choosing these words. There are no specific right or wrong answers to these questions- remember to justify your opinion.
 - Questions which contain an instruction to *use your own words* require you not to copy words or phrases directly from the original passage in your answer, but to substitute other words to make clear that you have understood the words the writer has used. It is particularly important if the question asks you to give the meaning of words used in the original passage that you don't use the same word (or a derivative of it) in your definition!

**Example-
answering
short-answer
comprehension
questions**

Read the passage, ‘The Lost Lagoon’, which is an account of a visit to the Esteros del Ibera in the north-east of Argentina, and then answer the questions below using your own words wherever possible. Read through the commentary that follows and which contains guidance as to what your answers should be.

The lost lagoon

Philip Smith

Yellow and black, it was hiding among the sun-bleached branches at the water's edge. Our boat nudged closer to the island. I lifted my camera and pulled the creature's beady eyes into focus. Then, in a quarter of a second, measured by the camera's rapid frame-burst, the anaconda snapped open its jaws, sprang forward, and hissed in my face. In the Esteros del Iberá, I learned, it's hard to avoid getting up close and personal with nature.

Our guide, Maximo, was smiling. There was no danger, he told me. Anacondas aren't poisonous – they squeeze their victims to death. I can't have looked convinced because he quickly edged the boat away from the bank, and soon we were threading our way through the streams and inlets that weave an unknowable pattern through the embalsados – hundreds of floating



islands which bump and skitter across the surface of this vast lagoon system, in a kind of slow-motion game of dodgems.

The Esteros del Iberá is the least known of Argentina's natural wonders. Its 63 lagoons are spread across an area the size of Wales and mark the former course of the Paraná River. In these vast wetlands an improbably rich ecosystem thrives, but until recently it received only a passing mention in many guidebooks. Only now, with a flurry of low-rise, eco-friendly development, is the Esteros finally opening up to tourism.

To reach the Esteros from Buenos Aires we took an overnight coach to the dusty town of Mercedes. After a further hour's journey in a 4x4 truck down the dirt track otherwise known as 'provincial route 40' and as a red sun crawled over the horizon, we approached the makeshift bridge which serves as a gateway to the Laguna Iberá. Iberá means 'bright water' in Guaraní, and as we rattled over the bridge, the surroundings fell away as if we were driving across a gleaming ocean.

The sweeping lawns of the Posada de la Laguna were dotted with a selection of multicoloured birds. One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been dunked headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint. The birds barely noticed us; it was hard not to trip over them as we rolled our luggage through the freshly cut grass. Later, at breakfast, I turned to see a pair of hummingbirds on the veranda. They would return every morning.

We were staying in the small town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, an ideal base for exploring the Esteros. The posada was built in 1997, and in recent years a number of other lodges that share its emphasis on conservation and tradition have opened nearby. But none has such a privileged position, right on the water.

Walking to the small jetty, it was difficult to see where the posada's four acres of gardens ended and the water began, so dense was the covering of aguape and irupé: water hyacinths and lilies. As Maximo readied the boat, he told us that these plants spread so quickly he has to clear a new path through the water each morning.

We pushed away from the jetty, thrilled by a glimpse of a basking yacaré. Soon, sightings of this South American alligator would prompt little more than a nod of recognition. It seemed that every few metres you could spot a leathery snout and pair of prehistoric yellow eyes poking through the water.



Due to their relatively small size, the yacaré are generally not considered to be fatally dangerous to humans.

The yacaré feast on the local fish. Fat and happy, they pose little threat to humans. And some say it's OK to swim, as long as you don't mind the odd nibble from the palometas, a type of piranha found in these parts. I decided that any swimming would be confined strictly to the hotel pool.

When the Esteros became a natural reserve in 1983, hunting was banned and indigenous Guaranis like Maximo retrained as guides. Each day we explored a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys. We would hear rumours of a beautiful rare deer that constantly seemed to elude us. And then there were the birds. Almost 400 species call these marshes home. Some are difficult to miss, such as the chaja, that resembles an ugly turkey and emits a gurgling scream. Others take a little searching out: kingfishers, heron, ibis and eagles.

The lagoon system is so vast we rarely saw another boat. The wildlife here works in shifts, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces. Back among the water lilies where we had spent our first afternoon, we continued our search for the elusive marsh deer. Here the islands had rearranged themselves so extravagantly that, for the first time, even Maximo looked a little confused. As dusk turned to night and the darkness became inky black, he flicked on a powerful torch.

There was a movement in the reeds. We edged closer. The torch picked out a pair of eyes. And then, finally, there it was. A marsh deer standing glorious in the landscape, the furry tufts of its ears lit up by the tungsten glow of the torch. It turned its gaze towards us for a moment and then, with a twitch of the nose, disappeared into the darkness. It had been worth the wait.

Adapted from the *Guardian*, 29 November 2008

**Example-
answering
short-answer
comprehension
questions**

- 1 From paragraphs 1 and 2, give two facts that the writer gives about the anaconda. (2 marks)

This is a question requiring straightforward interpretation and you are told exactly where to find the answer so you won't need to include information from anywhere else. A correct answer would be something similar to: 'Anacondas have "beady eyes"; they are not poisonous; they squeeze their victims to death.' Note: saying that anacondas are snakes would not be correct as this fact is not mentioned in the first two paragraphs. As is often the case in a structured question paper, this first question is a 'settling in' question.

- 2 What made the lodge in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, in which the writer stayed, different from other lodges in the region? (1 mark)

Again, this is a straightforward question; the answer is that the lodge is the only one in the region that is on the water's edge.

- 3 By referring closely to paragraph 9, explain, using your own words, what the writer says about swimming in the Esteros.

(2 marks)

This question requires simple interpretation, although you need to reword the original statement to demonstrate your understanding. A good answer would contain the following details:

- the writer is not fully convinced that the creatures living in the water would not do him any harm
- he would much prefer to swim in the safety of the lodge's swimming pool.

- 4 Using your own words, explain what you learn about the life of Maximo from paragraph 10.

(2 marks)

Notice that this question is clearly focused on the *life* of Maximo and is, therefore, testing specifically your understanding of not just what he does, but also what the word 'indigenous' tells you about him. A good answer would contain the following points:

- he is a native/original inhabitant of the area
- after the Esteros became a natural reserve in the 1980s, he was trained as a guide for visitors.

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5 Which word in paragraph 11 tells you that the marsh deer was difficult to find?

(1 mark)

This is a straightforward question requiring you to identify the single word 'elusive'. It is important that you quote only the actual word and not the whole sentence which contains it (unless you make it clear by underlining which word you have chosen).

6 By referring to paragraphs 3 and 11 explain, using your own words:

- a) what the Esteros del Iberá is and how it was formed
- b) what feature of the Esteros caused Maximo to look confused while searching for the marsh deer.

(2 marks)

(1 mark)

Again, this is a straightforward question requiring you to explain some details from the passage in your own words. Remember, as there are 2 marks available for the first of the sub-questions, you should attempt to identify two distinct details about the Esteros and how it was formed. A good answer to both parts of the question would contain the following details:

- The Esteros consists of 63 lagoons./It covers a very large area of land.
- It was originally part of the Paraná River which has now changed its course but has left the lagoons behind.
- The islands in the Esteros are floating vegetation and are in continual movement which makes navigation difficult.

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Example-
answering
short-answer
comprehension
questions

- 7 a) Explain, using your own words, what the writer means by the words in italics in three of the following phrases:
- i) 'hundreds of floating islands which bump and *skitter* across the surface'
 - ii) 'One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been *dunked* headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint.'
 - iii) 'a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, *bizarre* spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys'
 - iv) 'The wildlife here *works in shifts*, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces.' (1 mark each)
- b) Explain how the words and language used by the writer in each of the phrases you have chosen help to suggest the particular fascination of the Esteros region and the creatures that live there. (2 marks each)

This question requires some response to the language the writer uses. It is worth 9 marks in total; 1 mark would normally be awarded for an explanation of the meaning of each of the three words/phrases selected, and a further 2 marks for an explanation of how the writer's choice of words/imagery helps to convey the fascination of the region and the creatures that inhabit it. With questions of this type, it is important in your answers to distinguish between the first part which requires a straightforward *explanation* of the meaning of a word, and the second part which requires a comment on how the words used by the writer help to create a particular response in the mind of the reader. For example:

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- ai) The word *skitter* means to skim or glide across a surface (in this case, water).
- bi) The choice of the verbs *bump* and *skitter*, with their associations with fairground rides, suggests the unpredictability and frequency with which the islands are changing shape and position.
- aii) The word *dunked* means to dip something into a liquid (such as a biscuit into a cup of tea).
- bii) The choice of the word *dunked* suggests something done without a great deal of care and effectively conveys the almost haphazard arrangement of the brightly coloured feathers in the bird's crest. The reference to *Day-Glo paint* also suggests a cartoon-like quality of the brightly coloured bird.
- aiii) The word *bizarre* means unusual, freakish and incongruous.
- bi iii) The choice of the words *uncanny* and *bizarre* suggests that the creatures living in the region are unlike anything found anywhere else on earth, and that they are highly unusual and unexpected. Also, these creatures are found in a *secluded* area which their appearance contrasts with and so emphasises their unusual appearance. The use of the word *array* suggests that they are deliberately putting themselves on show for the visitors.
- aiv) The phrase *works in shifts* means that each member of the wildlife in the region has its own scheduled period when it performs in front of the visitors.
- biv) The comparison of the wildlife to the workforce in a factory gives the creatures human characteristics. It suggests that their lives are organised into a carefully planned pattern of appearances so that the most persistent of visitors are rewarded with an entertaining variety show.

● Practise answering reading comprehension questions

Exercise 1

You will probably find the following extract easier to understand than some of the more informative writing you have already looked at. Be careful, therefore, that you do not fall into the trap of reading it passively. It is important that you continue to **concentrate on extracting the meaning** as fully as possible. With this type of writing you are not looking just to identify relevant facts but also, for example, to indicate an understanding of the motives and personalities of the characters described. Think about this as you answer the questions which follow the passage.

First read the extract. The writer describes the effect of severe weather conditions on her father's farm in Australia.

After the great rain of 1939, the rainfall declined noticeably in each successive year. In 1940, the slight fall was of no consequence because our major worry was that the accumulation of growth on the land would produce serious bushfires. These did occur on land quite close to us, but my father's foresight in getting cattle to eat down the high grass preserved Coorain from that danger.

In 1941, the only rain of the year was a damp cold rain with high wind which came during the lambing season in May and June and carried off many ewes and their newborn lambs. After that there were no significant rainfalls for five years. The unfolding of a drought of these dimensions has a slow and inexorable quality. The weather perpetually holds out hope. Storm clouds gather. Thunder rolls by. But nothing happens. Each year as the season for rain approaches, people begin to look hopefully up at the sky. It mocks them with a few showers, barely enough to lay the dust. That is all.



It takes a long time for a carefully managed grazing property to decline, but three years without rain will do it. Once the disaster begins, it unfolds swiftly. So it was with us.

My father and I would set out to work on horseback as usual, but instead of our customary cheerful and wide-ranging conversations he would be silent. As we looked at sheep, or tried to assess the pasture left in a particular paddock, he would swear softly, looking over the fence to a neighbour's property, already eaten out and beginning to blow sand.

Each time he said, 'If it doesn't rain, it will bury this feed in a few weeks.' It was true and I could think of nothing consoling to say.

His usual high spirits declined with the state of the land, until the terrible day when many of our own sheep were lost because of a sudden cold rain and wind when they had too little food in their stomachs. By 1942 it was apparent that the drought could be serious.

Shortly afterwards, the first terrible dust storm arrived boiling out of the central Australian desert. One sweltering late afternoon in March, I walked out to collect wood for the stove. Glancing towards the west, I saw a terrifying sight. A vast boiling cloud was mounting in the sky, black and sulphurous yellow at the heart, varying shades of ochre red at the edges. Where I stood, the air was utterly still, but the writhing cloud was approaching silently and with great speed. Suddenly I noticed that there were no birds to be seen or heard. All had taken shelter. I called my mother. We watched helplessly. Always one for action, she turned swiftly, went indoors and began to close windows. Outside I collected the buckets, rakes, shovels and other implements that could blow away or smash a window if hurled against one by the boiling wind. Within the hour, my father arrived home. He and my mother sat on the back step not in their usual restful contemplation, but silenced instead by dread.

A dust storm usually lasts days, blotting out the sun, launching banshee winds day and night. It is dangerous to stray far from shelter, because the sand and grit lodge in one's eyes, and a visibility often reduced to a few feet can make one completely disorientated. Animals which become exhausted and lie down are often sanded over and smothered. There is nothing anyone can do but stay inside, waiting for the calm after the storm. Inside, it is stifling. Every window must be closed against the dust, which seeps relentlessly through the slightest crack. Meals are gritty and sleep elusive. Rising in the morning, one sees a perfect outline of one's body, an after image of white where the dust has not collected on the sheets.

As the winds seared our land, they took away the dry herbage, piled it against the fences, and then slowly began to silt over the debris. It was three days before we could venture out, days of almost unendurable tension. The crashing of the boughs of trees against our roof and the sharp roar as a nearly empty rainwater tank blew off its stand and rolled away, triggered my father's recurring nightmares of France during World War 1, so that when he did fall into a fitful slumber it would be to awake screaming. It was usually I who woke him from his nightmares. I, the child in the family, would waken and attempt to soothe a frantic adult.



When we emerged, there were several feet of sand piled up against the windbreak to my mother's garden; the contours of new sandhills were beginning to form in places where the dust eddied and collected. There was no question that there were also many more bare patches where the remains of dry grass and herbage had lifted and blown away.

It was always a miracle to me that animals could endure so much. As we checked the property, there were dead sheep in every paddock to be sure, but fewer than I'd feared. My spirits began to rise and I kept telling my father the damage was not too bad. 'That was only the first storm,' he said bleakly. He had seen it all before and knew what was to come.

From The Road from Coorain: An Australian Memoir, by Jill Ker Conway, Vintage, 1992

Note: The marks allocated to each question, for this and any subsequent exercises, are given as a guide only and should not be taken as a definitive representation of an actual examination mark scheme.

- 1 What do we learn about the rainfalls in this part of Australia in the years 1939, 1940 and 1941? (3 marks)
- 2 Which one word does the writer use in paragraph 6 to describe the results of the lack of rain? (1 mark)
- 3 Explain, using your own words, why the writer's father was worried about the lack of rain (paragraphs 5–6). (2 marks)
- 4 What two things led to the deaths of many sheep on 'the terrible day'? (2 marks)
- 5 Re-read paragraph 7 from 'Shortly afterwards . . .' to 'We watched helplessly.' and explain, using your own words, what were the main signs of the approaching dust storm. (4 marks)
- 6 Write a summary of the dangers and problems caused by a dust storm (paragraphs 7–9, from 'Always one for action . . .' to 'to awake screaming.'). (7 marks)
- 7 Re-read the end of paragraph 9 (from 'The crashing . . .' to 'a frantic adult.') and explain what you think the writer means by this section of the passage. (3 marks)
- 8 In the second to last line of the passage, why do you think the writer uses the word 'bleakly' to describe how her father spoke? (2 marks)
- 9 Re-read paragraphs 4–7. Give three words or phrases which describe the father's thoughts, and explain what each of them tells you about his state of mind during this period. (6 marks)

A woman with long brown hair is sitting on a wooden chair, working on a silver laptop. She is wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a green top and blue jeans. The desk is made of light wood and has a smartphone, a tablet, and two potted cacti on it. To the left of the desk is a large green plant, and to the right is a black metal shelf with a hanging plant and a brown mug. A yellow sticky note with the text "Good Luck!" is attached to the left side of the image.

**Good
Luck!**