

The Cave They Had to Seal

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Critical analysis

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 25 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about seven minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

In September 1940 four teenagers climbed the wooded hill above Montignac, in the Dordogne, to look at a hole where a tree had come down years before. The eldest, Marcel Ravidat, had found the hole a few days earlier and had come back with rope, a crude oil lamp and three friends. They widened the gap, slithered down a cone of loose earth and stood up in a chamber they could not see the far end of. Ravidat was eighteen and an apprentice garage mechanic; the youngest of the four was fourteen. They told nobody for three days.

The lamp showed animals. Horses with short legs and heavy bellies, stags with branching antlers, and aurochs — the wild cattle of Ice Age Europe — one of them nearly five metres from nose to tail. The walls of Lascaux carry roughly six hundred painted figures and almost one and a half thousand engravings, made about seventeen thousand years ago in ochre, haematite and charcoal. Every one of them was made in the dark, by lamplight, by people who had to bring their own fire in with them.

The cave was opened to visitors in 1948. A staircase went in, then electric light, then a path, and by the late 1950s as many as a thousand people a day were filing past the bulls. Each of them breathed. Breath carries warm water vapour and carbon dioxide, the lamps added heat, and the cave had been sealed for seventeen millennia at a steady temperature with almost no air exchange at all. Nothing about the arrangement was unreasonable at the time, because nobody yet knew what a crowd does to sealed air.

The paintings began to change. First came what the guides called the green sickness: a film of algae, fed by the lights and the carbon dioxide, creeping across the rock. Then came the white sickness, a veil of calcite crystals precipitating out of the altered air and quietly fogging the figures underneath. In the spring of 1963 the culture minister, André Malraux, ordered the cave shut. In the village, which had built two decades of its living on the queue at the entrance, the decision was not popular.

The answer, eventually, was a copy. Lascaux II opened in 1983, about two hundred metres from the original: the Hall of the Bulls and the Axial Gallery rebuilt as concrete shells

moulded to the surveyed shape of the real walls, then painted over several years by the artist Monique Peytral using the same mineral pigments. It worked well enough that a second, far larger facsimile of almost the whole cave, Lascaux IV, opened down in the valley in 2016. Even the lamp-black smudges and the ladder marks of the original gallery were copied, on the grounds that a visitor who notices nothing false will accept the whole surface as it is.

That is where an argument starts that has never been settled. One view is blunt: a copy is a copy. Standing in a concrete shell is not standing where the painters stood, and a hill full of replicas teaches visitors that the real thing is expendable. The other view is just as blunt. The real thing survived eighty centuries of nothing and nearly died of twenty years of admiration; the facsimile is not a substitute for the cave but the reason the cave still exists.

The original is now a monitored instrument. Sensors read its temperature and humidity hour by hour, a small number of specialists go in for a few days a year, and even they have set outbreaks of mould loose more than once. Above them the coach park fills, and the visitors walk into a cave that was finished thirty-six years ago.

- 5 What is the writer's attitude to the closing of the cave, and how can you tell?

- 6 Weigh up the two views of the facsimiles that the passage sets side by side. Which is better supported by the evidence given?

- 7 The passage ends with visitors walking into “a cave that was finished thirty-six years ago”. Evaluate how well that closing line does its job.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • It was opened to visitors in 1948 and closed in 1963.
- ☐ 2 • Because the cave had been sealed at a steady temperature with almost no air exchange, and the paintings had only lasted because nothing disturbed that balance. A thousand people a day breathed out warm water vapour and carbon dioxide, and the lights added heat, so the air itself changed — which fed algae and then deposited calcite over the figures.
- ☐ 3 • To make clear that the chambers have never had any natural light, so every figure was made from memory and by a flame held in one hand. It shows the paintings were not casual decoration near a cave mouth but deliberate work done deep underground at real effort.
- ☐ 4 • An instrument is a device that is read, calibrated and kept within limits rather than used or enjoyed. The phrase suggests Lascaux is now handled as scientific equipment — sensors logging its temperature and humidity, access rationed to specialists — rather than as a place anyone visits.
- ☐ 5 • The writer treats it as necessary but genuinely costly, and refuses to make it a simple victory. The cost is stated plainly — a village that had built two decades of its living on the queue at the entrance — and the phrase about a cave that “nearly died of twenty years of admiration” makes the damage sound sad rather than wicked, since the visitors meant no harm.
- ☐ 6 • The case against the copies is that authenticity cannot be rebuilt: a concrete shell is not the rock the painters touched, and offering replicas may teach people that originals are replaceable. The case for them rests on what actually happened — the cave was stable for seventeen thousand years and was visibly deteriorating within fifteen years of opening, and even a handful of specialists have triggered mould. On the evidence in the passage the second view is better supported, because the choice was never between a copy and an open cave; it was between a copy and losing the paintings. The first view still carries weight as a warning about how replicas are presented.
- ☐ 7 • It works because it holds both readings at once without arguing for either. Calling a building a cave and giving it a completion date is deliberately jarring, which keeps the objection alive, while the surrounding detail — the full coach park, the sensors, the sealed original — reminds you why the copy had to be built. It also avoids a moral: the writer simply puts the real cave under the new one and leaves the reader to weigh them, which is more persuasive than a verdict would be.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY Elaborative interrogation

After each paragraph, stop and ask yourself why that fact is true rather than simply what it says. Why would breath damage a painting? Why did sealing the cave fail to settle the argument? Hunting for the reason forces you to connect the new fact to things you already know, and facts that arrive joined to something else are far easier to pull back out later than facts that arrive alone.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already ask why instead of just accepting an instruction — a rule at home, a tactic in a sport, a step in a recipe? What happened to how well you remembered it?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.