

Nine Words to the Valley

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 25 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about eight 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.

The rule in her grandfather's hut was that the morning report had to fit on one line of the logbook, and one line held nine words. Lena had argued about it for the whole of her first winter. The radio had no word limit. The logbook had wide margins. Her grandfather, who had measured snow in the Dischma valley for thirty-one years, said that a man who needs twenty words has not finished thinking, and then went out to clear the instrument shelter, which ended that conversation as it ended most of them.

So she learned to compress. Every morning at seven she went out to the measuring field behind the hut — a flat rectangle of snow with four marked poles, fenced off so that nobody walked on it — and took the readings in the same order, because the order was part of remembering them. New snow on the board. Total depth at the north pole. Temperature at the surface and at twenty centimetres down. The thickness of any crust. Wind direction from the pennant on the roof. Then back inside, boots off, and nine words into the microphone for the office down in the valley.

What the nine words never contained was everything she knew. She knew that the crust on the eighteenth had squeaked like polystyrene under her boot heel. She knew that the north pole always read four or five centimetres deeper than the others because of the way the wind curled round the shelter. She knew that the layer of old snow from early January had turned to loose sugary grains you could pour, and that nothing good sits on top of grains like that. None of it fitted on one line. All of it stayed in her head, which was, she came to understand much later, the entire point of the rule.

On the twenty-third the storm came up the valley from the south-west and dropped fifty-eight centimetres in nineteen hours. Her grandfather was down in Davos with a bad knee. Lena took the morning readings in a wind that pushed her sideways between the poles, came in, and sent: "Fifty-eight new, total one-ninety, wind west, no crust." Nine words. Then she put the kettle on.

The telephone went forty minutes later. The man on the other end introduced himself, said he had her line in front of him, and that the road crew wanted to open the lower

stretch at eleven. Then he said: “Tell me the rest.”

She had never been asked for the rest. She stood with the receiver against her shoulder and found, slightly to her own surprise, that it was all there and that it came out in the order she took the readings in — new snow, depth, the two temperatures, the crust, the wind — and then everything that had never fitted. The sugary layer from early January, twelve centimetres thick, forty centimetres down. The way the surface had been scoured bare on the south-facing shoulder and loaded deep in the gully below it. The crust on the eighteenth, and when it had gone. Fourteen minutes, by the clock on the shelf.

The man asked her to repeat two of the depths, thanked her, and rang off. The road stayed shut until the following afternoon. Nothing dramatic happened, which is what a closed road is for, and the only record of any of it is a line in the logbook in Lena's handwriting: fifty-eight new, total one-ninety, wind west, no crust.

Her grandfather came back up on snowshoes two days later, read the page, and did not add anything to it. He put the pencil back in the tin, looked out at the measuring field, and said that the poles wanted straightening.

- 5 How does the writer handle the outcome of the telephone call, and what is the effect?

- 6 Weigh the case for and against the grandfather's rule, using the evidence of the story.

- 7 Evaluate the ending: the grandfather reads the page, adds nothing, and remarks that the poles want straightening. How well does that close the story?

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 • The morning report had to fit on one line of the logbook, which held nine words. On the twenty-third she sent: “Fifty-eight new, total one-ninety, wind west, no crust.”
- ☐ 2 • Because having to leave almost everything out meant she had to hold it instead. The rule gave her no place to put the crust that squeaked, the sugary layer or the odd reading at the north pole, so those details stayed in her memory — which is why she could produce them all when someone finally asked for them.
- ☐ 3 • Because she had taken the readings in the same fixed order every morning, and that order worked as a route through the material. Starting with new snow and moving through depth, the two temperatures, the crust and the wind pulled each item up in turn, and the unrecorded observations came out attached to the measurements they belonged with.
- ☐ 4 • It tells you the layer had lost any structure — grains that pour cannot grip each other or hold weight, so they behave like a bed of ball bearings. Buried forty centimetres down under fifty-eight centimetres of new snow, such a layer gives the fresh load nothing to bond to, which is why she says nothing good sits on top of grains like that.
- ☐ 5 • With deliberate flatness. The man simply asks her to repeat two depths, thanks her and rings off; the road stays shut; “nothing dramatic happened, which is what a closed road is for”. Refusing any moment of praise or crisis makes the competence feel ordinary and professional rather than heroic, and the grandfather’s silence at the end works the same way.
- ☐ 6 • Against it: a nine-word line discards almost everything that mattered on the twenty-third — the weak layer, the scoured shoulder, the loaded gully — and the office only learned any of it because one man happened to telephone. A system that depends on being asked is a poor system, and Lena’s first-winter objections were reasonable. For it: the rule forced her to decide every morning what the single most important thing was, and it kept the rest live in her memory in a usable order, so that fourteen minutes of accurate detail was available on demand. On the story’s evidence the rule worked, but it worked because of the habits it built in her, not because nine words were ever enough.
- ☐ 7 • It closes it well, and does so by refusing to comment. Adding nothing to the page is the strongest possible endorsement from a man who has measured snow for thirty-one years — the line was right, so it stands — and the reader is left to work that out rather than being told. Moving straight on to the poles keeps the work in the foreground and denies the story a moment of praise it has been quietly earning, which matches the flat handling of the road closure. A more explicit ending would have made the point once; this one makes the reader make it, which is why it lands harder.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY Compress then expand

When you have finished reading, force the whole thing down to a single line — nine words, no more — and write it out. Then put that line in front of you and expand it back into everything you

can reach. Compressing makes you decide what the centre of the material is; expanding from your own summary shows you exactly which parts you had not really taken in, because they will be the ones that refuse to come back.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already squeeze something long into a line — a message to a friend, a title, a note to yourself? What do you find you can rebuild from that line later, and what disappears?

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.