

The Nails in the Posts

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Critical analysis

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 28 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 posts were Uwase's idea and nobody in the family had ever quite approved of them. There were nine, chestnut, driven into the lip of the terraces on the steep side of the hill above Musanze, and into the top of each she had hammered a long iron nail until only a hand's width stood clear. Every February, at the end of the heavy rains, she marked each nail with red paint at the exact height of the soil. Three years of marks. Her father called them her scars and asked whether she had considered doing something useful with the paint.

From the ninth post you could see the volcanoes, Muhabura and Sabyinyo, standing over the ridge with their heads in cloud, and below them the hill ran down in steps the width of a kitchen. The steps were new. Four years earlier the slope had been one long field, and after every storm the ditch at the bottom filled with soil the colour of cocoa, which her father and uncles carried back up in baskets twice a year. The cooperative had cut the terraces with hoes across two dry seasons: eleven men, a borrowed level and a great deal of arguing.

Uwase's nails said the carrying had stopped. On the oldest posts the red mark of the first February and the red mark of the third sat within a finger's width of one another. Her figures agreed with the sacks: beans off the terraced plots had risen from eleven sacks to about sixteen. She kept all of it in a school exercise book, with readings from a rain gauge cut out of a water bottle, and at the cooperative meeting she stood up and said what she thought it meant. Terraces hold soil. Soil holds water. Water grows beans. Spend the money on the second hill.

Her aunt Beata, who kept the cooperative's accounts and had a way of waiting, let her finish and then asked a question that stayed with her for a year. In the same season the terraces were cut, Beata said, the cooperative had done two other things. It had changed from the old bush beans to a climbing variety staked on sticks, and it had agreed to plant ten days later than their fathers used to, after the agronomist came up from Kigali with his rainfall figures. Three changes, one harvest. Which of them, she asked, was Uwase's sixteen sacks?

There was one field on the hill that had not been terraced. Old Nzeyimana grew his beans on the flat ground by the stream and had sent the hoes away, but he had taken the new seed and the new planting date like everybody else. His yield was up as well — less than theirs, but up. Uwase had been calling his field her control, the one plot where only some of the changes had happened, and for a week she thought it proved her case, since he had gained less than the terraced plots. Then she worked out that his ground was flat and had never lost any soil, so there was nothing there for a terrace to have saved.

That was the trouble with the nails, and she came to it slowly, walking the terraces with the book under her arm. She had driven them where the gullies used to start, on the worst of the slope, because that was where there was something to measure. A post tells you the truth about the half metre of hill it stands in and nothing else. Nine posts on the steepest ground were never going to tell her what the whole hill had done, and the sacks, which did cover the whole hill, could not tell her why.

Beata's view was that the seed and the planting date were doing most of the work, and the terraces were insurance against a bad year — a slower kind of profit, harder to put in an account book. Uwase's view was that without soil the best seed in the country is a sack of stones, and that insurance looks like wasted money until the year it pays. Neither had the one thing that would have settled it: a second hill, identical, terraced and sown the old way. At the end of the dry season Uwase borrowed the hammer and drove four more nails, lower down, into ground that had never slipped.

- 5 Weigh Uwase's explanation of the sixteen sacks against Beata's. Which is better supported by what the passage tells you?

- 6 Uwase realises she put her posts where the gullies used to start. Evaluate how far that choice undermines her measurements.

- 7 The cooperative now wants to spend two dry seasons of labour terracing a second hill. Using the reasoning the passage has set up, say what they should do first and why.

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 • She drove nine chestnut posts into the lip of the terraces with a long iron nail hammered into the top of each, leaving about a hand's width showing, and every February at the end of the heavy rains she marked each nail with red paint at the exact height of the soil. She had three years of marks.
- ☐ 2 • Because it was not actually a control for the thing she was testing. Flat ground by the stream had never lost soil, so terracing could not have improved it, and the smaller rise in his yield tells you nothing about how much the terraces were worth. His field only shows what the new seed and the later planting date can do on their own — which, awkwardly for her, is a rise without any terracing at all.
- ☐ 3 • A control is the case left out of the change, kept for comparison, so that any difference can be attributed to the thing you altered. A good control here would have been ground as steep and erosion-prone as the terraced plots, growing the same new seed on the same later date but with no terraces — identical in every respect except the one under test. His flat streamside field differed in the very feature that mattered, which is why it could not do the job.
- ☐ 4 • Evenly and with affection, giving neither of them a defeat. Beata is not hostile but patient — she has “a way of waiting” and lets Uwase finish before asking her question — and the final paragraph sets out both positions in the same measured breath, each with a good line in its favour. The ending, in which Uwase simply goes and drives four more nails, treats her as corrected rather than beaten, and the father's teasing about the paint keeps the whole argument at family scale rather than making it a contest someone must win.
- ☐ 5 • Beata's has the better of the evidence as it stands, but not by much. Three changes arrived in one season, which means no figure in the exercise book can be assigned to any one of them, and the only plot that separated the changes — Nzeyimana's, with new seed and no terraces — also showed a rise. That is real support for the seed and the planting date. Uwase's case is not merely sentiment: the stopped carrying of soil is a measured fact, the old field demonstrably lost its topsoil every storm, and a yield gain built on vanishing soil cannot last. The honest position is Beata's weighting question rather than either answer: the terraces plausibly protect the gain that the seed produces, and nothing in the three years distinguishes protection from production.
- ☐ 6 • It does not make them wrong, but it makes them unrepresentative, and the two are easily confused. Each post reliably records what happened in the small patch of hill it stands in, so as evidence that erosion stopped on the worst ground the nails are sound — arguably they are the strongest evidence in the passage. What they cannot support is the step she took at the meeting, from nine posts to the behaviour of a whole hill, because she deliberately sampled the places most likely to show a dramatic change. Sampling where the effect is largest will always overstate the average. Her remedy at the end — four more nails in ground that had never slipped — is exactly the right correction, since it tests the places her first set left out.
- ☐ 7 • They should arrange the second hill so that it answers the question the first one could not. That means changing one thing at a time: terrace part of the steep ground and leave a comparable steep strip untouched, with the same seed and the same planting date on both, and put posts and nails on both before anything is cut, so there is a baseline rather than a memory. They should also decide in advance what result would count as success, because the passage shows that yields alone cannot settle it — a rise on both strips would point to the seed, a rise on the terraced strip only would point to the terraces, and stable soil with no yield difference would support Beata's view that terracing is

insurance rather than profit. The general lesson is that the measurement has to be designed before the intervention, not reconstructed after it.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY **Map the argument**

When a passage holds two positions, stop reading it as one voice and split it into two columns on a scrap of paper: every claim goes on the side it supports, and anything both sides accept goes in the middle. You will usually find the middle column is the biggest. Sorting as you read means you are organising the material rather than absorbing it, and an organised page is far easier to rebuild from memory later than a flat run of facts.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already sort claims into sides as you go — a match you are watching, a disagreement between friends, a decision at home? What do people arguing from only one side tend not to notice?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your student 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.