

# The Number Painted on the Tree

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

## HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 15 minutes

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

Tomás had walked past the big cork oak a hundred times without really looking at it. Then his grandmother stopped him, pointed at the trunk, and asked him to read the number painted on it in white.

“Six,” he said.

“Six. So we leave it be. We come back when it is a nine, and not a day before.”

The number was the last digit of the year the tree had been stripped. A cork oak is only stripped once every nine years, and the painted number is how everybody remembers. Strip it sooner and you spoil the tree.

The men working further along the slope carried short axes with curved blades. Tomás watched one of them tap the bark, listening, the way you might knock on a wall to find the hollow part. Then he cut carefully downwards, slid the blade behind the bark and levered. A long curved plank of cork came away in one piece, and underneath, the tree was a deep red-brown, like wet terracotta.

Tomás winced.

“It does not hurt it,” his grandmother said. “That is only the outer coat. It grows a new one.”

They stacked the planks into a wall at the edge of the field, where the cork would dry for months before anyone did anything with it. Tomás picked up an offcut, squeezed it, and watched it push itself slowly back into shape.

On the way home his grandmother told him the oldest tree on the farm had been stripped seventeen times. He tried to work out how many years that was, got lost halfway, and started again.

“More than a hundred and fifty,” she said, without slowing down. “My grandmother knew that tree. So did hers.”

Tomás looked back down the slope at all the white numbers, and realised he was looking at a calendar.

**Cover the passage before you start.**

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

## PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about the cork oaks and what Tomás saw on the slope.

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## PART B 5 questions

1 What does the white number painted on a cork oak tell you?

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2 How often may a cork oak be stripped?

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3 What colour was the tree underneath the bark that was taken off?

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4 Why did Tomás decide at the end that he was looking at a calendar?

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5 The passage says Tomás “winced” when the bark came away. What does “winced” mean there?

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## 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 last digit of the year the tree was last stripped, so people know when it may be stripped again.
- ☐ 2 · Once every nine years.
- ☐ 3 · A deep red-brown, like wet terracotta.
- ☐ 4 · Because each painted number records a year, so the numbers across the whole slope show when every tree was stripped and when each one is next due.
- ☐ 5 · He pulled a face and flinched, as though it hurt — he thought the cutting was hurting the tree.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

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### THE STRATEGY Link it to what you know

New facts stick best when you hook them onto something already in your head. Nine years between strippings is about as long as you have been alive; the cork springing back into shape is like the sole of a trainer. Make the hook yourself, out of your own life, and the fact will come back with the hook attached.

### WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

What is something you learned quickly because it reminded you of something you already knew?

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**FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER** · This sheet trains recall, not reading speed. Let your child read the passage twice if they wish, then cover it completely before Part A begins — do not prompt, and do not let them look back. The vocabulary question asks what a word meant in the passage, so an answer in their own words is better than a dictionary definition.