

The Mosque Made of Mud

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Vocabulary

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.

In the town of Djenné, in Mali, there is a building made almost entirely of mud. It is called the Great Mosque, and it is the largest mud-brick building anywhere in the world. Three tall towers rise from its front wall, and on top of each tower sits an ostrich egg.

The walls are built from bricks that are shaped by hand and left to bake hard in the sun. Over the bricks goes a thick coat of plaster, mixed from mud, water and rice husks. In places the walls are half a metre thick, which keeps the rooms inside cool even when the air outside is burning.

Bundles of palm wood stick out of the walls in neat rows, like the spines of a hedgehog. They are called *toron*. They are not decoration. When the building needs repair, the masons climb onto them and use them as a ready-made ladder.

And it does need repair, every single year. Mali has a long dry season and then a short, heavy rainy one. The rain scours the plaster off the walls and leaves cracks behind, and cracks in a mud building are dangerous.

So each spring, before the rains come, the whole town turns out to mend the mosque. The festival is called the *crépissage*. For days beforehand, men stir deep pits of mud with their feet to soften it. Children carry the mud up to the walls in buckets and baskets.

On the morning of the festival, drums start before sunrise. Boys race one another to the pits. The masons stand on the *toron* and press handfuls of fresh plaster onto the walls, while helpers pass more up from below. By the end of the day the mosque has a new skin, and almost everybody in the town has touched it.

The building you can visit today was finished in 1907. But a mosque has stood on that spot since the thirteenth century, and the town around it was trading salt, gold and books long before that. Every year the mud goes back on. Every year the mosque is new again.

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 how the Great Mosque is built and how the town repairs it. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 5 questions

1 What is the Great Mosque of Djenné built from, and what sits on top of each of its three towers?

2 What are the *toron*, and what are they used for?

3 Name two jobs that people do during the *crépissage*.

4 Why does the town mend the mosque before the rainy season instead of waiting until after it?

5 The passage says the rain “scours” the plaster off the walls. What does *scours* mean here?

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 • Hand-shaped mud bricks baked in the sun, covered with mud plaster. An ostrich egg sits on top of each tower.
- ☐ 2 • Bundles of palm wood sticking out of the walls in rows. The masons climb on them as a ready-made ladder when the mosque needs repair.
- ☐ 3 • Any two of: stirring the mud pits with their feet, carrying mud up in buckets and baskets, drumming, pressing fresh plaster onto the walls, passing plaster up to the masons.
- ☐ 4 • The plaster is what protects the mud walls. If the cracks were left open when the heavy rain arrived, water would soak into the bricks and the building could be badly damaged.
- ☐ 5 • It means it scrubs or wears the plaster away by washing and rubbing at it, the way you scour a dirty pan.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

THE STRATEGY Chunk and retell

Do not try to swallow the whole passage in one go. Stop at the end of every two or three paragraphs, look away, and retell that chunk out loud in your own words. Each small retelling is a practice run at remembering, and five easy runs will beat one long read every time.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of a song you know all the words to. Did you learn it in one straight go, or a bit at a time?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains recall, not reading speed. Resist prompting during Part A — the effort of retrieving a half-remembered fact is exactly what builds the memory, and a child who is rescued too early never does that work. Compare the Part A count across several sets rather than chasing a score on any single one.