

# Tuning Grandmother's Gongs

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

## HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 18 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about five 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 gongs had been under the house for eleven years, wrapped in sacking, and Arif had never once been allowed to touch them.

“Today you may carry,” his grandmother said. “Carrying is not playing.”

So he carried. Fourteen bronze kettles the size of soup bowls, each in its own cradle of cord. Two long racks of bronze bars. A drum with a goat-skin head gone slack as an old balloon. And last, hanging from a carved frame, the great gong, as wide as a bicycle wheel, with a bump in the centre like a closed eye.

A *gamelan*, his grandmother told him, is not a collection of instruments. It is one instrument with many parts, and it is tuned to itself and to nothing else. “There are no spare notes,” she said. “If you lose a kettle you cannot buy another. You tune a new one to these.”

She had him strike the smallest kettle, then the next, up the row. Arif waited for the scale he knew from the school keyboard. It never came. The steps were uneven — two close together, then a stride, then close again.

“Wrong?” she asked.

“Different,” he said carefully.

She nodded. “Different. And this set is a little lower than the set in the next village. They would never play together. Each *gamelan* is like a voice.”

The bronze bars were worse. Where the set should have rung clean, one bar buzzed. His grandmother held it to the window and showed him a hairline crack running from the edge towards the first peg hole.

“Mended with glue in my mother's time,” she said. “Glue does not ring.”

They spent that afternoon on the drum instead. Arif learned to damp the skin with the heel of his hand, to tighten the cords in the order she gave him — never two next to each

other, always across, the way you tighten the nuts on a wheel — and to listen for the moment when the note stopped sagging and sat still.

By five o'clock the drum held its pitch. The great gong, struck with the padded beater, did not crash at all. It made a slow swell that arrived a heartbeat late, filled the room, and took a long time leaving, like a tide going out.

His grandmother sat back and looked at the fourteen kettles on the mat.

“Next week,” she said, “you may play one of them.”

“Which one?”

“The one that comes in last, and least often, and must never be early.” She smiled. “The hardest one.”

**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 gamelan and about Arif's afternoon with his grandmother. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

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**PART B 5 questions**

- 1 What instruments did Arif carry out from under the house?  

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- 2 In what order was Arif told to tighten the drum cords, and why that way?  

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- 3 Why could the grandmother not simply buy a replacement for the cracked bronze bar?  

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- 4 Arif said the scale was “different” rather than “wrong”. What does his choice of word suggest about him?  

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- 5 The drum's note “stopped sagging”. What does sagging mean when it describes a sound?  

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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 • Fourteen bronze kettles in cord cradles, two racks of bronze bars, a drum with a slack goat-skin head, and the great gong on its carved frame.
- ☐ 2 • Never two next to each other — always across, the way you tighten the nuts on a wheel, so the skin is pulled evenly.
- ☐ 3 • A gamelan is tuned only to itself, and this set is pitched slightly differently from every other. A bought bar would be the wrong pitch, so a new one would have to be tuned to these.
- ☐ 4 • He is being thoughtful and respectful rather than quick to judge. He realises the gamelan is not a broken version of his keyboard but a system with rules of its own.
- ☐ 5 • It means drooping or sliding downwards — the pitch was falling away instead of holding steady, the way a slack rope sags.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

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### THE STRATEGY Turn it into questions

As you read, stop at the end of each part and turn what you have just read into a question — not a quiz question for someone else, but one you honestly have to think about. Why that order and not another? Why could she not just buy a new bar? Asking why forces you to join the facts together instead of storing them in a loose pile, and joined-up facts are much harder to lose.

### WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When somebody explains a game you have never played before, what sort of question do you usually ask first — and does asking it help you remember the rules?

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**FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER** · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your child read once, then cover the passage completely before Part A — no peeking back, and no prompting, because the struggle to retrieve a half-remembered fact is what builds the memory. At this level expect the inference answers to be worded loosely; reward the reasoning rather than the phrasing.