

Fields That Float

PASSAGE · NON-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.

Six hundred years ago the valley where Mexico City now stands held a chain of shallow lakes. It was a hard place to farm, because almost all the flat ground was under water. The Mexica people, who built their capital on an island in the middle of it, solved the problem in an unusual direction. If there was no dry land, they would make some.

Their method was patient and simple. In the shallows they drove rows of stakes and wove reeds between them to make a long, narrow pen, like a raised bed with walls of basketwork. Into the pen they shovelled mud dredged from the lake floor, layered with water weed cut from the surface. The mud was black, heavy and extraordinarily rich. Once the pen was filled above the waterline, it became a field.

A field like this is called a *chinampa*. A typical one is long and thin — perhaps thirty metres by five — with a canal of open water down either side. The name is sometimes translated as “floating garden”, which is lovely and not quite true. Chinampas do not float. They are built up from the lake bed and stand on it.

To stop the soft edges slumping back into the water, farmers planted a willow called the *ahuejote* at the corners and along the sides. Its roots grow down and sideways through the mud and knit the bank together, so each field is held by a living fence. The willows are easy to spot today: tall, thin and leaning, in straight lines across the water.

Chinampa farming is unusually productive, for two reasons. The first is water: the roots of the crops can always reach down to canal level, so the fields need almost no watering even in the dry months. The second is the seedbed trick. Farmers spread a bed of wet mud, let it stiffen, then cut it into small cubes called *chapines* and press one seed into each. When the seedlings are ready, each cube is planted whole, roots undisturbed. Several harvests a year are normal.

The lakes have mostly gone, drained over centuries as the city grew. But in the south of Mexico City about a hundred and seventy kilometres of canal survive at Xochimilco, whose name means “field of flowers”, and chinampas are still worked there. Flat-bottomed boats carry lettuces, maize and cut flowers along the water.

Something else survives in those canals: the axolotl, a pale salamander that keeps its feathery gills all its life and can regrow a lost limb. It lives wild almost nowhere else on Earth.

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 a chinampa is built and why it grows so much food. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 5 questions

- 1 What two materials were layered inside the reed pen to make a chinampa?

- 2 What are chapines, and what are they used for?

- 3 Why does the passage say “floating garden” is “not quite true”?

- 4 The ahuejote willows are described as a living fence. Explain what job they do.

- 5 The passage calls chinampa farming “productive”. What does productive mean here, and give one reason the fields are so productive.

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 • Mud dredged from the lake floor and water weed cut from the surface.
- ☐ 2 • Small cubes cut from a bed of stiffened wet mud. One seed goes in each cube, and the whole cube is planted out later so the roots are not disturbed.
- ☐ 3 • Because chinampas do not float at all. They are built up from the lake bed with mud and stand on the bottom, even though they are surrounded by water.
- ☐ 4 • Their roots spread down and sideways through the soft mud and hold the banks together, stopping the edges of the field from slumping back into the canal.
- ☐ 5 • It means it yields a great deal of food for the space. Either reason: the roots always reach water so little watering is needed, or the chapines method lets several harvests be grown each year.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 5

DATE

THE STRATEGY Build a chain

Some passages are really a sequence: stakes, then reeds, then mud, then weed, then willows. When you spot one, do not memorise the steps as separate items — hook each one to the next and ask what would go wrong if you skipped it. A chain is retrieved by pulling on one end, so remembering the first link can drag the rest up with it.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of something you can do in a fixed order without thinking — making a sandwich, packing your bag, starting a game. How did that order get into your head?

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.