

The Bridge That Always Falls

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Comprehension

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.

In the far south of Argentina, in a national park called Los Glaciares, a river of ice comes down out of the mountains and runs straight into a lake. The glacier is named Perito Moreno. It is about thirty kilometres long, and where it meets the water its front stands roughly seventy metres above the surface — the height of a twenty-storey block — with a great deal more ice hidden below.

Most glaciers in the world are shrinking back up their valleys. This one has spent the last century roughly holding its ground, which is part of why so many people come to look at it. Snow piles onto the ice field behind it faster than most, and the ice creeps forward about two metres a day.

Forward is the interesting part. Directly across the water from the glacier's front is a point of rock called the Magallanes Peninsula. Every few years the advancing ice reaches it and touches, and the moment it does the lake is cut in two.

That matters because the two halves are not equal. The main body of Lake Argentino drains away northwards down a river. The southern arm, the Brazo Rico, has no way out except past the glacier. Once the ice plugs the gap, the southern arm begins to fill with meltwater and rain and cannot empty.

So it rises. Not by a few centimetres — by metres. In the biggest events the trapped arm has climbed more than twenty metres above the lake on the other side of the ice, until the two halves of the same lake sit at wildly different heights, separated by a wall of glacier.

Water that heavy does not wait politely. It forces its way into cracks at the bottom of the dam and melts a tunnel through. The tunnel widens. Over days it becomes a cave, and then an archway with the glacier sitting on top of it: a bridge of blue ice with a torrent roaring underneath.

Then the bridge falls. The arch thins until it cannot hold its own weight, and the whole span comes down into the channel in blocks the size of lorries, with a crack that carries

for kilometres. The southern arm drops back to its old level. The glacier goes on creeping forward, and in a few years it will touch the rock again.

Nobody can put a date on it. Rangers watch the arch and give warnings, but ice keeps its own timetable: the ruptures have come four years apart and ten years apart. When one looks close, people fly into the nearest town, El Calafate, and fill the viewing balconies in the hope of being there on the right afternoon. Many of them hear it from the car park instead.

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 Perito Moreno glacier and how its ice bridge forms and falls. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- 1 How long is the glacier, and how high does its front stand above the water?

- 2 What happens to the water level in the Brazo Rico once the ice touches the peninsula, and by how much?

- 3 Why does the water tunnel through at the bottom of the ice dam rather than spill over the top?

- 4 Why is it fair to call this a cycle rather than an accident?

- 5 The passage says the glacier has been “holding its ground”. What does that mean for a glacier, and why is it unusual?

- 6 The writer ends by saying many visitors hear the collapse from the car park. Why finish there instead of with the collapse itself?

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 · About thirty kilometres long, with a front standing roughly seventy metres above the lake — and much more ice below the surface.
- ☐ 2 · It rises, because the arm has no outlet once the glacier plugs the gap. In the biggest events it has risen more than twenty metres above the rest of the lake.
- ☐ 3 · The trapped water is pressing hardest at the bottom, so it is forced into cracks low down and melts its way through there. The ice front is about seventy metres high, far too tall to overtop.
- ☐ 4 · Each stage leads to the next and then starts again: the ice creeps forward, touches the rock, traps the southern arm, the water tunnels through, the arch collapses, the level drops — and the glacier keeps advancing, so it will happen again.
- ☐ 5 · It means the front is staying in roughly the same place instead of retreating up the valley, because snow feeding it balances the ice it loses. It is unusual because most of the world's glaciers are shrinking back.
- ☐ 6 · It makes the point that the event cannot be scheduled. Ending on people who just missed it is a lighter and more memorable way of saying the glacier keeps its own timetable, however many warnings the rangers give.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Build a memory chain

When something happens in stages, store it as a chain rather than a list: ice advances, so the lake is cut in two, so the southern arm rises, so water tunnels through, so the arch falls. Each link pulls the next one up out of your memory, which is why you can recover a whole process from a single starting point.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of something you can explain start to finish — a recipe, a game's rules, how you get to a friend's house. Do you recall it as separate facts, or does each step hand you the next one?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your child read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back, and no prompting, because the struggle to haul a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level, reward the reasoning in the inference and purpose answers rather than the exact wording.