

Green Before Blue

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.

Sani had been at the dye pits for eleven weeks and he still could not read a vat.

The pits sat in rows in the open ground, each one a round mouth in the earth lined with clay, sunk deeper than a tall man and narrow enough to step across. Fifteen of them were working that month. The rest stood dry and swept, waiting their turn, because a pit that is always used goes sour.

The dye came from indigo leaves, pounded with wood ash and rolled into dark balls that were dropped in and left to work. Nobody could hurry it. Malam Audu, who had the pits from his father, said the vat was a living thing that had to be fed and then left alone, and that an apprentice who stirred out of boredom was worse than rain.

The hard part was the colour. Sani had expected the dye to be blue. It was not. A vat that was ready looked like pond water — a dull yellow-green under a crust of coppery froth — and the cloth came out of it green as a young leaf. The blue arrived afterwards, in the air, spreading across the wet cloth while you held it up, as though the sky were claiming it back.

So you could not judge a vat by looking into it. You judged it by the froth, by the smell, and by the way a test strip changed as you walked it into the sun.

On the Thursday a woman came for six metres of cloth for a wedding, and Malam Audu was at the market. Sani looked at the froth, decided it was ready, and dipped.

It came out green and turned blue, and the blue was wrong. Thin in places, almost grey, with a pale band down one edge where the cloth had folded against the side of the pit. Nothing he did with his hands would even it out.

He dipped it again. He waited the length of a pot of water boiling, and dipped it again, and again, hanging it between each dip until the air had finished with it. Six dips, and the sixth came up the deep even blue of a night sky, with that faint metal shine the beaters work into it with their mallets.

Malam Audu came back, lifted the hem, let it fall and said nothing about it at all. He said, “You have spoiled my thumbnail.”

Sani looked down. His own nails were blue to the quick, every one of them, and would stay blue for a month at least.

“Mine too,” said Malam Audu, “since I was nine.” He went to look at the froth on pit number four.

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 dye pits and what happened to Sani's cloth. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

1 What was the dye made from, and how many pits were in use that month?

2 What colour is the cloth when it comes out of the pit, and what happens to it next?

3 Why was Sani unable to tell whether a vat was ready simply by looking into it?

4 Malam Audu lifts the hem of the finished cloth and says nothing about it. Why not?

5 Malam Audu says an apprentice who stirs out of boredom is “worse than rain”. What does he mean, and what does it tell you about the vats?

- 6 The story ends with blue fingernails rather than with the finished cloth. What effect does the writer get from that?

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 · Indigo leaves pounded with wood ash and rolled into dark balls. Fifteen pits were working; the others were left dry and swept.
- ☐ 2 · It comes out green, like a young leaf. The blue appears afterwards, spreading across the wet cloth as it meets the air.
- ☐ 3 · A ready vat is not blue at all — it looks like dull yellow-green pond water. The colour in the pit tells you nothing, so dyers go by the froth, the smell and a test strip taken into the sun.
- ☐ 4 · Because there was nothing left to correct — Sani had already found the fault and fixed it himself. Saying nothing is how Malam Audu accepts the work without turning it into praise or a telling-off.
- ☐ 5 · Rain would water down and ruin a vat, so he is saying careless stirring does even more damage. The vats need to be left to work slowly and cannot be hurried.
- ☐ 6 · It turns the stain into a mark of the trade: Malam Audu has had it since he was nine, so Sani's blue nails quietly say he now belongs at the pits. It makes the point without anyone having to say he did well.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Summarise in one sentence

When you finish a passage, force the whole thing into a single sentence before you do anything else — no more than about fifteen words. Having to leave almost everything out makes you decide what the passage was really about, and that one sentence then works as a handle you can pull the details back up by.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When a friend asks what a film or a match was like, you do not replay all of it. How do you decide what goes in the first sentence?

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.