

The Town That Had to Move

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 20 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about six 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.

Kiruna is the northernmost town in Sweden, far enough above the Arctic Circle that the sun does not rise at all for several weeks each winter. Around twenty thousand people live there. The town exists for one reason, and that reason is now slowly destroying it.

Under Kiruna lies one of the largest bodies of iron ore ever found. The ore is magnetite, a dense black mineral that will stick to a magnet, and it sits inside a mountain the local Sami people call Kiirunavaara. The town was founded in 1900 to house the people who dug it out. Everything else — the railway, the shops, the school — followed the mine.

The trouble is the shape of the ore. It does not lie flat like a seam of coal. It forms an enormous slab tilted into the ground at a steep angle, running down beneath the town itself. Mining now takes place from a main haulage level about 1,365 metres underground, and every time a chamber is emptied the rock above sags to fill the gap. The sagging works upwards over years. Cracks open at the surface, and the zone of cracking creeps eastwards, towards the houses.

In 2004 the mining company told the town what everyone had suspected: the old centre could not be saved. Kiruna would have to move about three kilometres east, out of the path of the damage. Not close down. Move.

Most of the work has been slow and unglamorous. New flats, new streets, a new school. A new town hall opened in 2018, and the clock tower from the old one was taken down and rebuilt outside it so that the new square would still keep the old time. Some buildings were demolished. Others were cut from their foundations, lifted onto trailers with dozens of wheels and driven away whole.

The hardest of these was the church. Kiruna's wooden church was finished in 1912, painted dark red, with a wide sloping roof shaped partly after the tents of Sami reindeer herders. It is one of the largest wooden buildings in the country and it could not be taken apart without ruining it. In the summer of 2025 it was raised onto a self-propelled platform and moved to a site beside the new centre. The journey took two days. It travelled at walking pace, with people walking beside it.

The move is not finished and will not be for years. Families are still being paid for homes they will lose, and arguments continue over what a replaced building is actually worth. Reindeer herders have lost grazing routes to the new roads and rail lines. Behind it all sits an awkward fact: without the mine there is no money to move the town, and without the mine there is no town to move.

Stand on the eastern edge of the new centre on a clear winter night and you can see both versions at once. Street lights to the west, where the old town is being emptied. New windows behind you. Above the mountain, if the sky is working, the green curtain of the northern lights.

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 why Kiruna has to move and how the move has been carried out. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

1 In which year was Kiruna founded, and in which year was the town told it would have to move?

2 Describe two things that were done with the old buildings rather than knocking them down.

3 Why does the tilted shape of the ore matter so much more than how much ore there is?

4 The passage calls one fact “awkward”. What makes the town's situation awkward rather than simply unlucky?

5 The writer describes much of the work as “unglamorous”. What does that mean here, and which parts of the move does it describe?

- 6 Why does the writer mention the reindeer herders and the arguments over what buildings are worth, instead of ending on the successful church move?

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 • It was founded in 1900 and told in 2004 that the old centre could not be saved.
- ☐ 2 • Any two of: the clock tower from the old town hall was taken down and rebuilt outside the new one; buildings were cut from their foundations and driven away whole on trailers; the wooden church was raised onto a self-propelled platform and moved over two days.
- ☐ 3 • Because the slab runs down underneath the town itself. Mining it means emptying rock below the houses, so the ground above sags and cracks spread towards them. A flat seam further away could be mined without threatening the town at all.
- ☐ 4 • The mine is both the problem and the only solution. It is destroying the ground the town stands on, but it also pays for the new town, so Kiruna cannot escape the damage by closing the thing causing it.
- ☐ 5 • Unglamorous means ordinary and unexciting, nothing anyone would make a film about: new flats, new streets, a new school. The dramatic church move was the exception, not the rule.
- ☐ 6 • To stop the story reading as a straightforward triumph. The church move is the impressive part, but the costs fall on real people in ways engineering cannot fix, and including them keeps the account honest rather than celebratory.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Self-explanation

After each section, stop and explain to yourself why the thing you just read is true — not what happened, but why it had to happen that way. Here, that means saying out loud why a tilted slab of ore threatens houses when a flat one would not. Explaining forces you to join the facts together, and joined facts are far harder to lose than a list.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of a rule at home or at school that you once thought was pointless until someone explained the reason behind it. Was it easier to remember afterwards?

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 effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level, reward the quality of the reasoning in the inference and purpose answers rather than the exact wording.