

# The Hand at the Top

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Critical analysis

## 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.

In a town square in Catalonia, several hundred people are pressing inwards, shoulder to shoulder, arms over each other's backs, until the crowd becomes a single solid disc of bodies. This is not an audience. It is the foundation of a building, and it is called the *pinya*.

What they are building is a *castell*, a human tower. Teams of climbers, known as *colles*, come from towns across the region and are told apart by the colour of their shirts. Underneath, every member wears the same two things: white trousers and a black cloth sash, sometimes four metres long, wound tightly round the waist. The sash supports the lower back and gives the climbers above something to grip and stand on. Everyone climbs barefoot.

Towers are named by arithmetic. A “three of eight” means three people in each level and eight levels in all. The lower storeys are built by the heaviest and strongest; each level above is lighter than the one below, until the last few are climbed by children in helmets, who go up the outside of the tower like a ladder they are also holding together.

The child who reaches the summit is the *enxaneta*. The tower is not finished when she gets there. She must cross the top, raise one hand with four fingers extended — a reference to the four red stripes on the Catalan flag — and only then is the castle counted as *carregat*, or loaded. Then comes the harder half. The structure must be taken apart in reverse order, climber by climber, without collapsing. A tower that falls on the way down is still recorded, but only a tower brought down cleanly is *descarregat*, and that is the one that counts.

Almost nobody inside the tower can see what is happening. A casteller in the base has their face against a neighbour's back and their arms locked. So the information comes as music. Two or three players on a shrill double-reed pipe called the *gralla* play a fixed melody, the *toc de castells*, whose phrases mark each stage of the climb. By listening, a man crushed at the bottom knows that the sixth level is up, that the *enxaneta* is moving, that the hand has been raised.

The practice grew out of a Valencian dance in the late eighteenth century, in the countryside around the town of Valls, where rival groups began competing to finish their dance with the tallest tower. It has risen and nearly vanished more than once since. Every second year the biggest teams meet in the bullring at Tarragona for a competition, and in 2010 UNESCO added *castells* to its list of intangible cultural heritage.

The strange arithmetic of the thing is that the tallest towers are not the work of the climbers at the top. A nine-storey castle may put five hundred people into the base and a child of seven on the summit. The weight presses downwards and the risk presses upwards, and both are shared out along the whole structure.

It lasts, from the first level to the last climber off, about two minutes.



- 5 Why does the writer save the length of the whole event — about two minutes — for the final line?

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- 6 “The weight presses downwards and the risk presses upwards.” Weigh up how fairly a castell shares out effort and danger between the base and the summit, using the passage.

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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 • The base crowd is the pinya. “Three of eight” means three people in each level and eight levels in total.
- ☐ 2 • Because almost nobody in the tower can see. A casteller in the base has their face pressed against a neighbour's back and their arms locked, so a fixed melody whose phrases mark each stage lets them follow the climb by ear.
- ☐ 3 • Because coming down is the harder half. Dismantling the tower in reverse order, climber by climber, means the structure must stay stable while it is being weakened, so a clean descent proves the tower was genuinely sound rather than briefly balanced.
- ☐ 4 • A foundation carries the weight of everything above it and does not move. Calling the crowd a foundation means those several hundred people are structural, not spectators — their packed bodies take the load and hold the tower's base rigid.
- ☐ 5 • To put the effort and the result side by side. After paragraphs on hundreds of people, sashes, music and centuries of tradition, a single short sentence about two minutes makes the scale of the preparation land, and the abruptness mirrors how quickly the tower rises and goes.
- ☐ 6 • The base carries almost all the load — five hundred people may stand in it, and they are the heaviest and strongest — yet they are packed at ground level and can barely see or move. The climbers at the top carry nothing and may weigh very little, but a child of seven is the one exposed at nine storeys up. So effort is concentrated at the bottom and danger at the top, and neither group could attempt the tower without the other; a good answer argues whether sharing it that way is fair or simply unavoidable.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

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### THE STRATEGY The one-sentence summary

When you have finished reading, cover the page and write a single sentence that would let someone else picture the whole thing. One sentence forces you to decide what the passage is actually about, and that decision is what fixes the structure in your memory. If your sentence needs an “and” in the middle, you have probably not chosen yet.

### WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When a friend asks what a film or a match was like, how do you compress an hour into a line? What do you keep, and what do you always throw away?

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**FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER** · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager 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 mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, purpose and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.