

“Seeing Clearly”

Reading Comprehension – Short Stories

Directions: Read the story. Then answer the questions below.



The announcement that Donna had reached middle age came **stealthily** and without warning.

Donna, at 42 years old, was in perfect health. She was fit, trim, and ate only the healthiest of foods, **eschewing** soda and candy. She was still asked for her identification when buying wine at the grocery store. She ran several miles every day; in local road races, she was known for beating people half her age.

“*Forty is the new twenty!*” her friends would say of Donna’s seeming agelessness.

Donna heard the quip so often that a part of her believed that this aging thing was surely only for other people.

That all changed during what should have been a fairly **innocuous** event: a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles to renew her driver’s license.

“Name?” the clerk asked, without looking up. Donna replied.

“Address?”

Donna gave it to her.

“Look through there, please,” The clerk gestured toward an eye-testing machine perched at the edge of the desk. “Read the first four lines,” she sighed.

Donna pushed her head against the contraption.

“Go ahead.”

Donna was perplexed. Everything was fuzzy. “I think the glass is dirty,” Donna said, searching the desk for a tissue to wipe off the lens.

“It’s not dirty,” the clerk said, her voice dripping with **condescension**.

“There must be some problem,” Donna said, pressing her head against the machine once more.

“Ma’am, do you wear glasses?”

“No, no, I don’t,” Donna responded, a little embarrassed now, as other people in the room began turning to see what was going on.

The clerk glanced down at Donna’s old license and back up at her. “Welcome to middle age, sweetheart. Come back when you’ve had an eye exam and gotten glasses.”

Questions:

- 1) What proverb best fits this story?
- A. Time marches on.
 - B. Time heals all wounds.
 - C. A stitch in time saves nine.
 - D. There is no time like the present.
- 2) As used at the beginning of the passage, which is the best antonym for **stealthily**?
- A. secretly
 - B. patiently
 - C. blatantly
 - D. sneakily
- 3) As stated near the beginning of the story, if Donna is **eschewing** candy and soda, she is
- A. overindulging in them
 - B. avoiding them
 - C. eating them in moderation
 - D. eating them responsibly
- 4) Using the passage as a guide, which best describes the meaning of "*Forty is the new twenty*"?
- A. If you are in good shape and health, being 40 can feel like 20.
 - B. When people turn 40, they are likely to say they are in their 20s.
 - C. If you are 20 and are not in great shape, you can feel like you are 40.
 - D. If you stay away from junk food, you can look 40 even when you are 20.
- 5) As used in the middle of the passage, which is the best antonym for **innocuous**?
- A. dangerous
 - B. difficult
 - C. juvenile
 - D. mature
- 6) What is the difference between the first four paragraphs and the rest of the passage?
- A. The first four paragraphs portray Donna's pride while the rest of the passage displays her frustration.
 - B. The first four paragraphs highlight the good life Donna has had while the rest of the passage shows her regret.
 - C. The first four paragraphs emphasize Donna's youth while the rest of the passage shows that she has aged.
 - D. The first four paragraphs outline Donna's fitness while the rest of the passage shows she is out of shape.
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Questions (continued):

7) Which best describes the clerk's attitude?

- A. hostile
- B. incoherent
- C. patronizing
- D. domineering

8) As the word is used at the end of the story, which of the following statements suggest **condescension**?

- I. Peter is a bright student, he simply does not apply himself.
- II. Ingrid is not invited to the party; she has no sense of style.
- III. Cindy's not too dumb, for a sixth grader.

- A. I only
- B. I and II
- C. II and III
- D. I, II, and III

9) The tone of the passage is best described as

- A. wry
- B. dark
- C. lighthearted
- D. passionate

10) What is *ironic* about the clerk calling Donna "ma'am"?

- A. It is not proper English.
- B. The clerk does not know Donna's name.
- C. It is a term often reserved for older people.
- D. It is unclear to whom the clerk is speaking.

Do you feel younger than you actually are? Do you feel older? Explain.

Answers and Explanations

1) **A**

At the beginning of the story, Donna does everything that she can to stop herself from aging, and it appears she is doing a good job at it. As the story goes on, however, we witness Donna experience her first real sign of aging. Even though Donna thought that time wouldn't catch up with her, eventually it does. This is exemplified in the proverb "Time marches on." That proverb illustrates the idea that no matter what we try to do to stop time, time will continue to move on. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

The proverb "Time heals all wounds" means that both emotional and physical pain fades after a while. Donna is not recovering from pain. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The phrase "A stitch in time saves nine" means that a little work now can prevent you from having to do a lot of work later. The story is not about Donna needing to do something now to save herself trouble later. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The phrase "There is no time like the present" means that you should not put something off for the future if you can do it right now. Donna is not putting something off for the future. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

2) **C**

stealthily (*adverb*): quietly, secretly, so as to avoid notice.

Doing something *blatantly* means doing something obviously or conspicuously. Since doing something obviously is the opposite of doing something secretly, *blatantly* is an antonym for *stealthily*. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

Secretly means doing something concealed from view. Since both *stealthily* and *secretly* mean doing something in a manner that avoids notice, they are synonyms. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Patiently* means doing something difficult or time-consuming without getting annoyed or upset. Since doing something secretly is not the opposite of doing something without annoyance, *stealthily* and *patiently* are not antonyms. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. Doing something *sneakily* means doing it furtively or surreptitiously, which means secretly. *Sneakily* and *stealthily* are synonyms. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

3) **B**

eschewing (*verb*): avoiding; shunning.

Near the beginning of the story, we learn that Donna "was fit, trim, and ate only the healthiest of foods, eschewing soda and candy." Since Donna only ate the healthiest foods, and soda and candy are unhealthy foods, we can infer that Donna does not eat soda and candy. *Eschewing* soda and candy means avoiding soda and candy. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

Overindulging means eating too much. Since Donna only ate the healthiest foods, Donna was not overindulging in soda and candy. Therefore **(A)** is

incorrect. *In moderation* means within reasonable limits. We know that Donna only ate the healthiest foods. This means that Donna was not eating unhealthy foods like soda and candy at all. Donna was not consuming soda and candy, even in moderation. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Responsibly* means with good judgment. Again, Donna was not consuming any soda or candy, so she was not even eating them responsibly. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

4) **A**

Near the beginning of the story, we learn how fit Donna is. Even though Donna is 42 years old, “she ran several miles every day, and in local road races, she was known for beating people half her age.” Donna’s friends say, “*Forty is the new twenty!*” Donna is 42 years old, but she seems much younger because she is so fit. Thus the phrase *Forty is the new twenty* means that being 40 can feel like being 20 if you are in the right shape. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

The story does not provide information to support answer choices **(B)**, **(C)**, and **(D)**. Therefore they are incorrect.

5) **A**

innocuous (*adjective*): harmless; not likely to provoke strong emotion.

Near the middle of the story, Donna’s perspective radically changes during “what should have been a fairly innocuous event: a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles to renew her driver’s license.” The author contrasts the big change in Donna’s self-perception with an everyday task—renewing a driver’s license. The reader can infer from this that *innocuous* means harmless. Since innocuous means harmless, an antonym for harmless is *dangerous*. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

Something *difficult* is hard to do. Since innocuous means harmless, and harmless is not the opposite of hard to do, difficult is not an antonym for innocuous. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. Something that is *juvenile* is childish. Since childish is not the opposite of harmless, juvenile is not an antonym for innocuous. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Mature* means having achieved full growth. That is not the opposite of harmless, so mature is not an antonym for innocuous. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

6) **C**

In the first four paragraphs, we learn that although Donna was 42 years old, she “was in perfect health.” Donna was so fit that “she was still asked for her identification when buying wine at the grocery store.” In road races, Donna beat “people half her age.” All of this tells the reader how youthful Donna appeared. The rest of the story, in contrast, describes how Donna went to get her driver’s license renewed and found out that she could not see as well as she used to. Donna experienced a sign of aging for the first time: loss of eyesight. The first four paragraphs show Donna’s youth while the rest of the passage shows how Donna has aged. Therefore **(C)** is the correct answer.

While one might be proud of appearing youthful in her forties, the first four paragraphs highlight Donna's youthful qualities, not her pride over them. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. While the first four paragraphs do portray Donna's life positively, the rest of the story does not show any regret on Donna's part. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The story never describes Donna as out of shape. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

7) **C**

When the clerk is talking to Donna, she doesn't look at Donna or speak to her in complete sentences. The clerk "sighed" the directions at Donna. All of these things show a lack of respect. Furthermore, when Donna said the glass was dirty, the clerk replied with "condescension." Someone with a patronizing manner treats people with condescension or a lack of respect. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

A *hostile* attitude is marked by antagonism and ill will. While the clerk was not particularly respectful or nice to Donna, she did not antagonize Donna. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Incoherent* is not understandable. The clerk was understandable. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Domineering* is imperious or overbearing. The clerk was not pleasant, but she was not overbearing. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

8) **C**

condescension (*noun*): a patronizingly superior attitude.

Speaking to someone as if you have little regard for him or her displays *condescension*. In the sentence *Peter is a bright student, he simply does not apply himself*, the speaker does not talk about Peter in a condescending way because the speaker describes Peter as bright. The qualification that Peter does not apply himself does not make this statement condescending because it does not suggest that the speaker is superior in any way. It may be negative, but just because something is negative does not mean it is condescending. It is only condescending if the speaker makes it seem as though he or she is better than the subject of condescension. For example, look at the following sentence: "Daniel is arrogant." In this sentence, the speaker says something negative about Daniel. However, this is not condescending because the speaker does not suggest that he or she is superior to Daniel. This eliminates **option (I)**. In the sentence, *Ingrid is not invited to the party; she has no sense of style*, the speaker speaks condescendingly about Ingrid because he or she uses a tone of superiority. The speaker suggests that he or she has a sense of style that is superior to Ingrid's. This supports **option (II)**. In the sentence, *Cindy is not too dumb, for a sixth grader*, the speaker is condescending. While the speaker does say that Cindy is not too dumb, the speaker uses a tone of superiority, suggesting that sixth graders can only know so much. In general the speaker implies that all sixth graders are pretty dumb. This supports **option (III)**. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

9) **A**

The story opens by describing how amazingly fit and youthful Donna was for her age. Then, the story describes a somewhat embarrassing exchange with a DMV clerk where Donna learned that she ages just like everyone else. A *wry* tone is dryly humorous, often in an ironic way. Since the story is dryly funny, the tone can be described as wry. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

A *dark* tone is morbid or grimly satiric. The story is not morbid or satiric. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. A *lighthearted* tone is carefree. In the story, Donna seems to care very much about her youth and its loss, so the tone is not carefree. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. A *passionate* tone is marked by deep emotion. The story is not particularly emotional. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

10) **C**

The term *ma'am* is a polite term used to address a woman. It generally refers to a woman who is at least middle-aged. Something is *ironic* when it is marked by a deliberate contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. Here, the use of the word *ma'am* is ironic because Donna supposedly looks so youthful. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

Ma'am is proper English. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. When you don't know a woman's name, calling her *ma'am* is polite, so that is not the reason calling Donna *ma'am* is ironic. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. It is clear that the clerk is speaking to Donna. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.