

## • Reading Comprehension 3 Level 12

**Directions:** Read the passage. Then answer the questions below.

The biggest house of cards, the longest tongue, and of course, the tallest man: these are among the thousands of records logged in the famous *Guinness Book of Records*. Created in 1955 after a debate concerning Europe's fastest game bird, what began as a marketing tool sold to pub landlords to promote Guinness, an Irish drink, became the bestselling copyright title of all time (a category that excludes books such as the Bible and the Koran). In time, the book would sell 120 million copies in over 100 countries— quite a leap from its humble beginnings.

In its early years, the book set its sights on satisfying man's innate curiosity about the natural world around him. Its two principal fact finders, twins Norris and Ross McWhirter, scoured the globe to collect **empirical** facts. It was their task to find and document aspects of life that can be sensed or observed, things that can be quantified or measured. But not just any things. They were only interested in **superlatives**: the biggest and the best. It was during this period that some of the hallmark Guinness Records were documented, answering such questions as "What is the brightest star?" and "What is the biggest spider?"

Once aware of the public's thirst for such knowledge, the book's authors began to branch out to cover increasingly obscure, little-known facts. They started documenting human achievements as well. A forerunner for reality television, the Guinness Book gave people a chance to become famous for accomplishing eccentric, often pointless tasks. Records were set in 1955 for consuming 24 raw eggs in 14 minutes and in 1981 for the fastest solving of a Rubik's Cube (which took a mere 38 seconds). In 1979 a man yodeled non-stop for ten and a quarter hours.

In its latest incarnation, the book has found a new home on the internet. No longer restricted to the confines of physical paper, the *Guinness World Records* website contains seemingly innumerable facts concerning such topics as the most powerful combustion engine, or the world's longest train. What is striking, however, is that such facts are found sharing a page with the record of the heaviest train to be pulled with a beard. While there is no denying that each of these facts has its own, individual allure, the latter represents a significant deviation from the education-oriented facts of earlier editions. Perhaps there is useful knowledge to be gleaned regarding the tensile strength of a beard, but this seems to cater to an audience more interested in seeking entertainment than education.

Originating as a simple bar book, the *Guinness Book of Records* has evolved over decades to provide insight into the full spectrum of modern life. And although one may be more likely now to learn about the widest human mouth than the highest number of casualties in a single battle of the Civil War, the *Guinness World Records* website offers a telling glimpse into the future of fact-finding and record-recording.

## Questions

- 1) Which of the following statements would best serve as the headline for this passage?
  - A. The encyclopedia of the extremes reflects the changing interests of modern society.
  - B. A book of simple origins makes it to the top as sales total a staggering 120 million copies.
  - C. Facts are often displayed in a boring, uninteresting manner, but not in the *Guinness Book of Records*.
  - D. The *Guinness World Records* website proves itself a valuable resource for insight into the full spectrum of modern life.
  - E. Where other books fall short, the index of superlative sciences never ceases to amaze.
  
- 2) According to the author, the most significant difference between older editions of the *Guinness Book of Records* and the new *Guinness World Records* website involves
  - A. an end to the use of facts as a means to promote Guinness
  - B. an overall increase in the total number of facts presented
  - C. a move from fact-finding to the recording of achievements
  - D. a shift in focus from educational to entertaining material
  - E. a departure from book sales being limited to local pubs and bars
  
- 3) As used in paragraph 2, which is the best definition for **empirical**?
  - A. natural
  - B. derived from experience
  - C. recordable
  - D. excellent or unmatched
  - E. convenient or handy
  
- 4) Based on its use in paragraph 2, which of the following best describes something that is **superlative**?
  - A. Students give presentations about their favorite subjects for a grade. Amy Newhouse receives an 87% for her presentation, while Dustin Lincoln receives a 92%.
  - B. Although sharks are significantly bigger and have razor-sharp teeth, dolphins are smarter and can therefore successfully evade attack.
  - C. The lake holds a contest to see who can catch the biggest fish. Tommy wins, having caught a 6 lb. 5 oz. smallmouth bass.
  - D. A man built an enormous house of cards. It took him 44 days and 218,792 individual playing cards to complete.
  - E. Ichiro likes tennis and practices every day. In his last tournament, he placed 3rd of over 350 competitors, winning the bronze trophy.
  
- 5) Using the passage as a guide, it can be inferred that the author most likely believes reality television to be
  - A. corrupt
  - B. absurd
  - C. idiotic
  - D. invaluable
  - E. shallow

- 6) In the final paragraph, the author writes, "And although one may be more likely now to learn about the widest human mouth than the highest number of casualties in a single battle of the Civil War, the *Guinness World Records* website offers a telling glimpse into the future of fact-finding and record-recording." Which of the following literary devices is used in this quotation?
- A. *Aphorism*, characterized by the use of a concise statement that is made in a matter of fact tone to state a principle or an opinion that is generally understood to be a universal truth. Aphorisms are often adages, wise sayings and maxims aimed at imparting sense and wisdom.
  - B. *Alliteration*, characterized by the use of adjacent words that begin with the same sound or letter, creating a repetition of similar sounds in the sentence. This is used to add character to the writing and often adds an element of playfulness.
  - C. *Amplification*, characterized by the embellishment or extension of a statement in order to give it greater worth or meaning. This is often used for rhetorical purposes.
  - D. *Anagram*, characterized by the jumbling of the syllables of a phrase or the individual letters of a word to create a new word. Anagram is a form of wordplay that allows the writer to infuse mystery and a fun into the writing so that the reader can decipher the actual word on his or her own and discover enhanced depth of meaning.
  - E. *Anthropomorphism* in which a human quality, emotion or ambition is attributed to a non-human object or being. This is often used in order to relate the object to the reader on a familiar level and also to increase the level of relativity between the humans and objects while lending character to the subject.
- 7) Which of the following best summarizes the organization of this passage?
- A. introduction, history, conclusion
  - B. history, examples, explanations, conclusion
  - C. exposition, history, conclusion
  - D. introduction, thesis, supporting paragraphs, conclusion
  - E. introduction, history, exposition, conclusion

## Answers and Explanations

1) **A**

In paragraph 3, we learn that the early authors of the *Guinness Book of Records* were attuned to the interests of their audience: "Once aware of the public's thirst for such knowledge, the book's authors began to branch out to cover increasingly obscure, little-known facts." As the book has "found a new home on the internet," the facts contained therein have changed to reflect the interests of a new generation of readers. New records seem even more eccentric than previous ones, prompting the author to theorize: "Perhaps there is useful knowledge to be gleaned regarding the tensile strength of a beard, but this seems to cater to an audience more interested in seeking entertainment than education." The author shows throughout the passage that the *Guinness Book of Records* has always reflected the interests of its audience, and as society changes, so too do the records. A heading should capture the main idea of a passage. The main idea of this passage is that the book has changed over time, and moreover that its changes are in response to the changing interests of modern society. Therefore **(A)** is the correct choice. The fact that the *Guinness Book of Records* sold 120 million copies is a detail in the introduction designed to catch the reader's interest. It does not capture the main idea of the passage, so it would not serve as a comprehensive heading. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. While it may be true that facts are often displayed in a boring, uninteresting manner, and the *Guinness Book of Records* is a departure from this display, the main idea of this passage is not how the book differs from other factual publications. Rather, the focus here is on the ways the *Guinness Book of Records* has evolved. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The author does claim that the *Guinness World Records* website "is a valuable resource for insight into the full spectrum of modern life," but this detail concerns only the website. Most of the passage is about the history of the book and how it has changed, so this sentence does not capture the main idea of the passage. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. Though it may be true that The *Guinness World Records* "never ceases to amaze," the main idea of the passage is not that the book is compelling, but that it has evolved over time. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

2) **D**

In paragraph 4, we learn that the website includes new, more eccentric records in addition to the previous records, such as "the record of the heaviest train to be pulled with a beard." The author goes on to say that the addition of such types of records "represents a significant deviation from the education-oriented facts of earlier editions." Finally, the author claims that these new records "cater to an audience more interested in seeking entertainment than education." From these statements we can infer that the author finds the most significant difference between the older editions and the website to be the shift in focus from educational to entertaining material. Therefore **(D)** is correct. In paragraph 1, we learn that the *Guinness Book of Records* "began as a marketing tool sold to pub landlords to promote Guinness, an Irish drink." The story does not contain the information that the book is no longer used to promote Guinness, whether in the form of older editions or the newer website. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. In paragraph 4, we learn that "no longer restricted to the confines of physical paper, the *Guinness World Records* website contains seemingly innumerable facts concerning such topics as the most powerful combustion engine, or the world's longest train." Here the author implies that there is an overall increase in the total number of facts presented, as the website does not limit space in the way a physical book does. However, though this is a difference between the website and the older editions, the passage does not contain information to prove that it is the most significant difference, in the author's opinion. The use of phrases like "what is striking" and "significant" indicate that the author finds the most significant difference has to do with the types of facts, not the quantity. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. In paragraph 3, we learn that "the book's authors began to branch out to cover increasingly obscure, little-known facts. They started documenting human achievements as well." The move is not necessarily from fact-finding to documenting achievements, but rather a move to include both types of records. Furthermore, the move towards including achievements occurred well before the creation of the website. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The passage does not contain information that book sales were limited to pubs and bars, nor does it say that the website represents a departure from this practice. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

3) **B**

**empirical** (*adjective*): originating in or based on observation or experience.

In paragraph 2 we learn that the "two principal fact finders, twins Norris and Ross McWhirter, scoured the globe to collect empirical facts. It was their task to find and document aspects of life that can be sensed or observed, things that can be quantified or measured." From this information the reader can infer that empirical facts are those that can be sensed or observed. Our senses and observations derive directly from our experience of the world. Therefore **(B)** is correct. *Natural* means existing in or found in nature. Though some of the facts recorded in the *Guinness Book of Records* could be found in nature, things which we can sense or observe through experience are not necessarily natural. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Recordable* means able to be set down in writing. Although empirical facts are recordable, not everything that is set down in writing can be sensed or observed, quantified or measured. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. While some of the records were no doubt excellent, *excellent* or *unmatched* can also describe something that cannot be observed and quantified. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. The twins had to scour the globe to collect facts, which indicates that these facts were difficult to unearth, the opposite of *convenient* or *handy*. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

4) **C**

Comparative is used to show how one thing has some feature to a greater degree than another (used in a one-to-one comparison) while superlative is used to show how one thing has some feature to the greatest degree of all of its kind. This is the case with adjectives. There are standard adjectives, which are used to attribute features to an individual thing (ex. big). Then there are comparative adjectives, which are used to indicate that *one thing* has some feature to a greater or lesser degree than *another thing* (ex. bigger). Then there are superlative adjectives, which are used to indicate that *one thing* has some feature to a greater or lesser degree than *all others* in a given context (ex. biggest). In this case, we are looking for a superlative situation, which would be a situation in which *one thing* has some feature to a greater or lesser degree than all others. The lake holds a contest to see who can catch the biggest fish, and Tommy wins because his fish weighs the more than any others. This makes Tommy's fish the superlative fish in the contest. Therefore **(C)** is the correct answer. In a situation where we know two students' grades, we can compare them to each other, but we do not know whether Amy or Dustin has the superlative score in the class, because we do not know the scores of all the other students. The situation in answer choice **(A)** is a comparative situation, so this choice is incorrect. In a situation where we know the advantages of sharks (bigger) versus the advantages of dolphins (smarter), we cannot determine

which of the two is superlative. This is another comparative situation. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The situation in answer choice **(D)** is also incorrect. This is because it offers details about a man's accomplishment, but we do not have any other situations to which we can compare his accomplishment. We do not know if 44 days is a comparatively long or short time, and we do not know whether 218, 792 cards is a larger or smaller amount compared to other people's attempts at this accomplishment. Since we have no comparative information, we cannot determine whether this is a superlative accomplishment or not. Ichiro placed 3rd out of 350 competitors, which may be an impressive performance, but is neither the best nor the worst. Thus his situation does not describe something superlative. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

5) **E**

In paragraph 3, the author states, "A forerunner for reality television, the Guinness Book gave people a chance to become famous for accomplishing eccentric, often pointless tasks." From this statement, we can infer that the author believes reality television also gives people a chance to become famous for accomplishing eccentric, often pointless tasks. Something *shallow* lacks intellectual or mental depth and is superficial. Since these tasks lack intellectual depth, and since being famous for doing something pointless is a form of superficiality, we can infer that the author believes reality television to be shallow. Therefore **(E)** is the correct answer. *Corrupt* means guilty of dishonest practices. While it may be trivial for people to gain fame for accomplishing pointless tasks, it is not dishonest for them to do so. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Absurd* means utterly senseless or illogical. The author may find reality television absurd, but the passage does not offer any information that he or she believes the chance to become famous for accomplishing pointless tasks is illogical. There is evidence that he considers the tasks themselves absurd or pointless, but there is not concrete evidence that he finds reality television absurd. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Idiotic* means foolish or stupid. It is a negatively charged word. If the author is saying that the Guinness Book was a forerunner for reality television, and if he believes that reality television is idiotic, then it logically follows that he believes the Guinness Book is also idiotic. But it is clear from his tone throughout the passage that he does not hold such a negative view of the book. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. *Invaluable* means beyond calculable worth, or priceless. This answer choice represents a trap, as people often misunderstand *invaluable* to mean the opposite of valuable, or worthless. However, when one considers the actual definition in this context, it is clear that the author does not believe reality television to be priceless. Rather, he implies that it is superficial for people to gain fame for accomplishing pointless tasks. Something superficial is not something that is priceless, or beyond calculable worth. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

6) **B**

The final phrase of this sentence includes multiple words beginning with f and r: "the future of fact-finding and record-recording." This repetition of initial letters or sounds in words in quick succession is called *alliteration*. There are two instances of it here. Therefore **(B)** is the correct answer. An *aphorism* is a short saying generally understood to be a universal truth, such as a maxim or adage. There is no universal truth contained in the given sentence. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. *Amplification* occurs when a writer embellishes a sentence by repeating words or expressions, and adding more information to increase the meaning and emphasis. While the sentence does offer specific details, there is no such explicit repetition. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. An *anagram* is a literary device wherein the author jumbles the letters of a word to create a new word. There is no such example in the given sentence. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect. *Anthropomorphism* is the act of lending a human quality, emotion or ambition to a non-human object or being. There is no object or being in this sentence which is bestowed with a human quality, emotion or ambition. Therefore **(E)** is incorrect.

7) **E**

Paragraph 1 introduces the subject of this passage, the *Guinness Book of Records*, by describing it and then giving an overview of its history. Paragraphs 2 and 3 delve into this history, particularly the history of the types of facts collected and the methods of collection. Paragraph 4 moves into exposition, informing the reader of the differences between the older editions and the current website edition. Finally, in paragraph 5, the author offers his conclusion: that the publication "has evolved over decades" and that it "offers a telling glimpse into the future of fact-finding and record-recording." Since this structure follows the organizational pattern of introduction, history, exposition, conclusion, **(E)** is the correct answer. While the passage does begin with an introduction and history, and it ends with the author's conclusion, paragraph 4 is an important piece which describes the current state of the publication. Answer choice A does not include exposition in the organizational pattern. Therefore A is incorrect. The passage does include history and it does offer examples of the types of facts found in the book. However, there are no substantial explanations, of either the history or the examples, offered. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The bulk of the exposition in this passage is not at the beginning, but in paragraph 4. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. Though the essay does follow the organizational pattern of introduction, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion, the author's thesis does not appear until paragraph 5, instead of near the beginning. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.