UNIT 13: COMPREHENSION AND INTELLIGENT READING

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- learn the importance of comprehension
- gain an idea of intelligent reading and grasping skills
- tackle unseen passages with relative ease
- answer unseen passages keeping in mind the points of discussion
- attempt any form of unseen passages or extracts
- practice different types of comprehension passages
- develop an interest and enjoy the mental exercise of comprehension

13.2 INTRODUCTION

The mental exercise of comprehension may either tickle and excite your brain cells, or simply leave you head-scratching and totally jumbled. The trick of cracking any unseen passage lies in practice and once mastered can lead you to discover new ideas, information and knowledge. In this unit, the learner will be oriented to the skills of comprehension for both examination and regular reading purposes. While, it is an enjoyable exercise for many to read and comprehend any form of reading material such as

news reports, editorials, magazine or journal articles, fiction narratives, prose texts or various other write-ups; for some- 'reading' itself is an ordeal. Therefore, in this unit we shall discuss comprehension skills and explore a few examples followed by comprehension exercises to sharpen our comprehension of any form of textual source.

13.3 COMPREHENSION AND INTELLIGENT READING

The learner may wonder what makes comprehension so important, particularly in an examination. It is seen that apart from school, college or university examinations even competitive examinations prescribe a portion of reading and comprehension for the English paper. Now it is not without a reason. The purpose of comprehension in an examination is to test the candidate's ability to read and grasp meaning, to scan and select information and most importantly to answer and express the content in his/her own words within a limited time. Thus, the answers to the given set of questions of an unseen passage provide the examiner, an idea of the candidate's comprehension skills. It is in a way to measure at once the candidate's cognitive abilities.

In the first place, comprehension requires the sharpening of reading skills because **intelligent reading** provides clues to quick grasping. And secondly, it requires the practice of writing skills because the given questions of a passage look for answers which are crisp and concise and reflect the candidate's own understanding in the **correct expression**. The unit lays out ways to both develop and improve 'intelligent' reading skills as well as to tackle and express one's understanding through the exercise of writing.

13.4 READING AND GRASPING SKILLS

One's first reading of an unseen passage is bound to be incomplete as it tends to provide a vague idea of its entire content. Only in re-reading and grasping the essentials, the highlights, the keywords and the main points

can one proceed to organising answers to the given questions. It is incorrect to think that reading a passage a few times over is a mere waste of time. In fact by reading carefully one invests valuable time in comprehending the content of any unseen passage.

The methods of **skimming and scanning** are two ways to do justice to your reading. In an examination one does not have all the time to read at one's own pace. And thus, in order to improve one's reading speed and extract the most of an unseen passage, it is advisable to first 'skim' through the contents of the paragraph and then 'scan' through it. **Skimming** is a way of quick reading through a passage, to receive an overview or a gist of the content and the type of questions asked. This provides a vague idea of say an almost 55% of the text that one skims through. After having skimmed through the next thing to do is to scan the content. **Scanning** is a way of detailed reading which requires one to focus on the details of the content i.e. keywords, central controlling ideas, expository sentences, highlights, figures or factual details etc. This will enable one to form a broad view of the content and also in the formulation of a mental picture or map of meaning. While the examination clock is ticking, all it requires is **concentration and intelligence** to crack open an unseen passage.

The unseen passage can be a mentally stimulating exercise and help you measure your comprehension power. The key is in both the practice of reading and writing.

For examination purpose:

- Read a given passage or extract quickly in order to **receive a vague idea of the content**.
- Re-read the passage with **a careful attention to details** along with the **questions**.
- As you re-read your mind will simultaneously be at work to **figure out the core idea**.
- **Scan through the passage** for important ideas, information and details.
- Make **mental notes of the probable answers** to the given set of questions or frame your answers mentally first

- If the questions follow the sequence of paragraphs serially, **mentally organise your answers**
- Write your answers **in your own words without altering the content of the passage** or the author's opinion (if any)
- **Do not provide your opinion** unless the questions require it.
- Check if you have **misread or misinterpreted** any portion of the passage

For general practice:

- Select and **extract a passage** from a newspaper, novel, magazine, journal, encyclopedia or any other text source.
- You may pick any form of reading material be it in print or on the web.
- **Quickly read or browse** through the material.
- **Re-read and scan** the selected passage for smaller details.
- **Jot down the core idea or central theme** of the content.
- Mark or highlight certain **keywords** that act as clues to the central theme.
- **Consult a dictionary** if you find certain keywords difficult.
- **Form self-questions** pertaining to the content.
- **Jot down a set of questions**.
- Attempt to **answer** these questions in your own words.
- In case you are **asked to provide a heading**, write a suitable one in keeping with the core idea, theme, event or character as the case may be.
- Start from easier texts that interest you and gradually try the sort of texts that you generally avoid.
- You may **time yourself** while you do attempt the entire exercise of comprehension.
- Try to ask someone who will be able to explain the meaning and context of the passage.
- **Check** how much you have been able to comprehend correctly.



13.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit the learner will gain a fair idea of the importance of comprehension through intelligent reading and grasping skills. The various examples of the selected extracts with possible answers highlight some of the important points to note while tackling unseen passages. It also provides the learner a scope to develop both reading and writing skills through the practice exercises.

The practice exercises contain a set of questions which are to be attempted by the learner. It encourages him/her to learn by doing or practicing and to inculcate a good habit of intelligent reading in the long run. Thus, the unit aims to both develop and improve the learner's interest and ability to make comprehension an enjoyable mental exercise. The power of comprehension will also open up new windows of knowledge and learning for the learner.

13.6 EXAMPLES

The following examples contain select extracts followed by a set of questions, which have been answered for your quick reference. Also, a few important points have been highlighted to help you tackle and answer comprehension passages confidently.

Extract 1:

At last the great day came when the two caravans were due to arrive. The children stood at the end of the drive for hours, watching for them.

Mother had managed to borrow them from an old friend of hers. The children had promised faithfully to look after them well, and not to damage anything. Now they stood at the end of the drive, watching eagerly for the caravans to arrive.

'They are being drawn by cars today', said Julian.

'But they are fitted up to be horse drawn, too, I wonder what they are like- and what colour they are.'

'Will they be like travelers 'caravans, on high wheels, do you think? asked Anne. Julian shook his head.

'No, they're modern, Mother says. Streamlined and all that.Not too big either, because a horse can't draw too heavy a van.'

They're coming, they're coming! I can see them! Suddenly yelled George, making them all jump. 'Look, isn't that them. Far down the road?'

They all looked hard into the distance. No one had such good eyes as George, and all they could see was a blotch, a moving speck far away on the road. But George's eyes saw two caravans, one behind the other."

[Blyton, Enid. *The Famous Five: Five Go Off in a Caravan.* London: Hodder Children's Books, 1991]

Questions:

1. **Why did the children stand at the end of drive for hours?**
2. **What did the children promise their mother?**
3. **What did the caravans look like according to their mother?**
4. **What did George notice in the distance?**

Answers:

1. The children stood at the end of the drive for hours, watching for the caravans to arrive.
2. The children had promised their mother to faithfully look after the caravans, and not to damage anything.
3. According to their mother, the caravans were modern, streamlined and not too big because a horse would not be able to draw a heavy caravan.
4. George was quick to spot two caravans, one behind the other in the distance.

Points to Note:

a. You may note from the above example that in general, questions for any given extract are set in a 'systematic' instead of a random pattern. This also gives the learner an ease of reference while answering questions to any given text. Therefore, in taking note of

this point, you would find it easier to focus on answering your questions both quickly and correctly.

Extract 2:

"I was born in the city of Bombay…once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And thetime? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more…On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And,outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate-at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at that time.**"**

[Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children.* London: Vintage, 2006]

Questions:

1. **Briefly describe the exact details of the narrator's birth.**
2. **Which significant historical moment had coincided with the narrator's birth?**
3. **How does the narrator describe the moment?**
4. **What do you understand by the words "saluting clock"?**
5. **Why does the narrator blame that moment of time?**
6. **What are the various names by which the narrator is known? What is his realisation at that particular moment?**

Answers:

1. The narrator was born in the city of Bombay in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on the stroke of midnight on 15th of August 1947.
2. It was the precise moment of India's independence which had coincided with the narrator's time of birth.
3. Historically, it was a celebratory moment and there were fireworks and gathering of crowds. And at the personal level the narrator's father suffered an accident of breaking his big toe and the Independence Day timed with his birthday had mysteriously arrested him to history and he was thus chained to share similar destinies with that of the nation.
4. The words "saluting clock" refers to the clock-hands striking together at midnight which the narrator likens with or imagines as joined palms in a respectful greeting.
5. The narrator blames the moment because he considers the saluting clocks as a supernatural occurrence which had chained him for the coming three decades without escape. The soothsayers were caught busy with their prophecies on him, the newspapers celebrated his arrival and the politicians had consented to his genuineness.
6. The various names by which the narrator are Saleem Sinai, Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and Piece-of-the-Moon. The narrator's realisation is that of helplessness with the way circumstances are shaped and he finds himself dangerously heavily embroiled in Fate.

Points to Note:

a. While answering extracts which have the first person narrative (note theuse of 'I' in the extract) write in third person speech i.e. narrate as a mere reporter of what you have received in the first person narrative.

b. If it so happens that you are unable to supply a synonym for a tough word, use the given word itself. Don't make guesses as it may lead you to misunderstand or misinterpret the entire sentence or idea.

Extract 3:

"The worst pair of opposites is boredom and terror. Sometimes your life is a pendulum swing from one to the other. The sea is without a wrinkle. There is not a whisper of wind. The hours last forever. You are so bored you sink into a state of apathy close to coma. Then the sea becomes rough and your emotions are whipped into a frenzy. Yet even these two opposites do not remain distinct. In your boredom there are elements of terror: you break down into tears; you are filled with dread; you scream; you deliberately hurt yourself. And in the grip of terror- the worst storm- you yet feel boredom, a deep weariness with it all.

Only death consistently excites your emotions, whether contemplating it when life is safe and stale, or fleeing it when life is threatened and precious. Life on a lifeboat isn't much of a life. It's like an end game in chess, a game with a few pieces. The elements couldn't be more simple, nor the stakes higher. Physically it is extraordinarily arduous, and morally it is killing. You must make adjustments if you want to survive. Much becomes expendable. You get your happiness where you can. You reach a point where you're at the bottom of hell, yet you have your arms crossed and a smile on your face, and you feel you're the luckiest person on earth. Why? Because at your feet you have a tiny dead fish**"**

[Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi.* Edinburgh; Canongate, 2013.]

Questions:

1. **What are the emotions that the narrator describes as the "worst pair of opposites"?**
2. **How are the hours spent at the sea described by the narrator?**
3. **Explain why the two opposite emotions do not remain distinct?**
4. **What is the comparison drawn to life on a lifeboat and why?**
5. **What are the physical and moral challenges faced in the sea?**
6. **Elaborate why one is compelled to make adjustments while all alone in the sea?**

Answers:

1. The worst pair of opposites that the narrator describes is boredom and terror.
2. The narrator describes the hours spent at the sea seem quiet and endless, where there is not a splash in the sea or a stir in the wind. It is at such a point that life feels like a swinging pendulum of a clock that measure time endlessly. One is so caught by boredom that one slips into a state of apathy or comatose. But, when the sea turns rough ones emotions are stirred into a state of uncertainty and uncontrolled excitement.
3. The two opposites do not remain distinct because one experiences mixed feelings of boredom and terror at the same time. The feelings of terror creep into the feelings of boredom when one is filled with dread, in tears, with the tendency to scream and hurt oneself knowingly. And again when one is in the worst storm of terror, a sudden feeling of boredom and deep weariness tends to creep in.
4. The comparison drawn to a life on a lifeboat is compared to an end game in chess in which only a few pieces remain. Just as the end game is the most challenging part of a chess game when there's the risk of suffering a 'checkmate' position and it is difficult to decide who would be the winner, the seas are a challenging due to the involvement of high risks and the unpredictability of the elements at sea.
5. According to the narrator, while out in the seas all alone it turns physically tiresome or exhaustive in an extraordinary way and morally it turns defeating.
6. While at sea one is compelled to make adjustments in order to survive. When every resource tends to be spent one can only be happy in the moment which may not last long. One experiences moments that feel worse as hell and yet is compelled to bear it with calm and a smiling composure and make the best of the surviving moments.

Points to Note:

a. **Try to write the answers in your own words from what you have grasped without altering what the narrator's conveys or expresses.**

b. **Read and re read the questions and answer briefly and precisely to the point.**

13.7 EXERCISES

The few exercises given below are meant for the learner to practice. It takes frequent practice for one to develop a good sense of comprehension. It is necessary to time yourself while practicing comprehension for examination purpose. Further, it is also advisable to first try reading at leisure and to develop quick comprehension skills through regular practice,

Exercise 1:

Read the passage given below and answer the given questions:

"The pumpkin was huge. Much bigger than last year's Halloween pumpkin. It was wedged in with the rest of the groceries in the shopping cart- as was Cole.

He still loved to be pushed through the parking lot. He was a little old for it, and way too heavy, but Lynn didn't mind at all. It was one of the few carefree, childlike things Cole allowed himself.

The breeze was especially crisp today, and the flame-coloured tree canopies seemed to radiate their own light against the cloudy sky. Days like this made Lynn want to rise up and soar over the earth. She hoped Cole felt it too-but when she leaned over to look at him, she could see his mind was far away.

Lynn began veering left and right. She circled around to an open part of the lot, picking up speed.

Cole's hair began to blow back in the wind. He looked up to the sun, throwing his arms outward like the wings of an airplane.

Lynn whooped with joy, pushing harder, running.

She pulled up to the rear bumper of her old Volvo station wagon with a perfect landing, Cole lowered his arms.

He was smiling now.

Sometimes, Lynn knew, the simple joys were the best.

Simple joys. Simple hopes."

[Shyamalan, M. Night. *The Sixth Sense: A Novelization.*New York: Scholastic, 2000.]

Answer the following questions:

Q1. Mention one of the few carefree, childlike things that Cole liked to do.

Q2. What did Lynn like about that particular day?

Q3. What did Lynn suddenly notice Cole doing?

Q4. What did Lynn think to herself looking at Cole?

Exercise 2:

Read the passage given below and answer the given questions:

"I had the whole afternoon before me, and examined about three miles of the road very carefully. When a tiger uses a road regularly it invariably leaves signs of its passage by making scratch marks on the side of road. These scratch marks, made for the same purpose as similar marks made by domestic cats and all other members of the cat family, are of very great interest to the sportsman, for they provide him with the following very useful information, (1) whether the animal that has mad the mark is a male or a female, (2) the direction in which it was travelling, (3) the length of time that has elapsed since it passed, (4) the direction and approximate distance of its headquarters, (5) the nature of its kills, and finally (6) whether the animal has been recently had a meal of human flesh. The value of this easily-acquired information to one who is hunting a man-eater on strange ground will be easily understood. Tigers also leave their pugmarks on the roads they use and these pugmarks can provide one with quite a lot of useful information, as for instance the direction and speed at which the animal was travelling, its sex and age, whether all four limbs are sound, and if not sound, which particular limb is defective.

The road I was on had through long disuse got overgrown with short stiff grass and was therefore not, except in one or two damp places was within

a few yards of where the road came out on the ridge, and just below this spot there was a green and very stagnant pool of water; a regular drinking place for *sambhar*"

I found several scratch marks just round the corner where the road turned to the left after leaving the cultivated ground, the most recent of which was three days old. Two hundred yards from these scratch marks on the road, for a third of its width, ran under an overhanging rock. This rock was ten feet high and at the top of it there was a flat piece of ground two or three yards wide, which was only visible from the road when approaching the rock from the village side. On the ridge I found more scratch marks, but I did not find any pugmarks until I got to the first hairpin bend. Here, in cutting across the bend, the tiger had left its trace where it had jumped down onto the same soft earth. The tracks, which were a day old, were a little distorted, but even so it was possible to see that they had been made by a big, old, male tiger."

[Corbett, Jim. "The Mohan Man-eater" *Man-eaters of Kumaon.* New Delhi; Oxford University Press, 2012.]

Answer the following questions:

1. What does the narrator learn from his examination of the road?
2. a. What information does a sportsman receive from a tiger's scratch marks?
   b. What information do the pug marks provide?
3. Describe the road on which the narrator finds the next set of scratch and pug marks.
4. Give a brief description of the rock visible from the road.
5. What does the narrator determine from the tracks at the hair-pin bend of the rock?

Exercise 3:

Read the passage given below and answer the given question:

"Once upon a time there was a widow who had two daughters. She and her elder daughter resembled each other so closely, in appearance and character, that when you saw the daughter you would have said that it was

the mother. They were both so disagreeable and proud that they were impossible to live with. The younger of the daughters, who for gentleness and good manners was the image of her father, was also as beautiful a girl as you could wish to see. Since like attracts like, the mother was excessively fond of the elder daughter, and had a terrible aversion for the younger. She made her eat in the kitchen and work all the time.

Among other things, the poor child was obliged to be a good half-league from the house twice a day to fetch water, and bring back a great big ewer filled on the top. One day, when she was at the spring, a poor woman came up to her, and asked if she could have a drink.

'Of course you can, good mother', said this pretty girl, and she rinsed out the ewer, went to fill it at the best spot along the stream, and offered it to the old woman, holding it so that she could drink more easily. When she had had her drink the good woman said to her: 'You are so fair, so good-natured, and so considerate, that I cannot do otherwise than give you a gift' (for she was a fairy, who had put on the shape of a poor village woman, in order to see how far the young girl's kindness and politeness would go).

The fairy continued: 'The gift that I give you is this: at every word you speak, from your mouth a flower will come, or else a precious stone.

When the beautiful daughter arrived home, her mother scolded her for coming back so late from the spring. 'I beg your pardon, mother, for having taken so long', said the poor girl; and as she spoke, from her mouth came two roses, two pearls, and two great diamonds.

'What's this?' exclaimed her mother in astonishment; 'I do believe that those are the pearls coming from her mouth; how can that be daughter?' (which was the first time she had ever called the girl daughter). The poor child told her exactly what had happened, producing huge quantities of diamonds as she did so.

'Really, I must send the other daughter,' said the mother, 'come along Florrie, look at what has come from your sister's mouth when she speaks. Wouldn't you like to have the same gift? All you have to do is to go and get some water to drink, give her some nicely.**"**

[Perrault, Charles. "The Fairies" *The Complete Fairy Tales.* New York; Oxford University Press, 2010]

Answer the following questions:

1. How were the two daughters of the widow different from the other?
2. What obligations did the mother place on the younger daughter?
3. What happens when the younger daughter meets the poor old woman by the stream?
4. How is the young daughter gifted by the fairy for her good behaviour?
5. a. What does the mother plan to do after she learns of the girl's gift?
   b. What strikes you about the widow's nature from your reading of the fairy tale?

Exercise 4:

Read the passage given below and answer the given question:

"I guess that one of the most embarrassing things that can happen to a person is to forget a speech while in front of his audience. Next to forgetting the speech is the embarrassment of faltering along as if you're not sure of what you have to say. Actually, it seems to me that anyone who is asked to give a talk on any particular subject must know the subject pretty well; otherwise why would he be asked to talk about it? No; speakers who falter or hesitate during their speeches do so, I think, because they have forgotten the next word-or because they are fearful that they will forget the next word. There, in my opinion, lies the problem. If a speech is memorised word for word, and then a word, here and there, is forgotten; it surely will not be delivered as it should be. Why should you have to grope for one particular word? If you can't think of it; why, use any other word that serves the same purpose. Isn't that much better than hemming and hawing until you remember the exact phrasing just the way you memorised it?

The people who realised this felt that the next best thing would be to simply read the speech. This solves the problem of forgetting words, until you lose your place on the paper, and forget what you're talking about altogether. Besides, it seems to me that there is a subtle annoyance evident in the speech word for word."

[Text Source: Harry Lorayne's book *How to Develop a Super-Power Memory*.]

Answer the following questions:

Q1. What is one of the most embarrassing situations according to the narrator?

Q2. Why do speakers hesitate or falter?

Q3. What happen if a speech is not memorised word for word?

Q4. What according to people is the next best thing to do, in case a speaker is not confident?

Q5. Does this method completely solve the problem of forgetting words while delivering speech?

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