



Learning Project **7** Reading Poetry

Inquiry Activity 7-2: Answering Questions on the Passage

Each of the questions for this passage is presented below. The IA encourages the learner to determine what kind of question is being asked before trying to answer it. We strongly encourage learners to begin with LPs #1, 2, and 3. If this is the learners' first LP, please have them do LP #1 to learn about the kinds of questions asked on the GED Reading test.

(Note: Italicized portions should be directed to students.)

1. Identify the Problem (Items #1-6 PA)

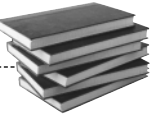
Scan the passage and the test questions.

Questions refer to the poem introduced in Inquiry Activity 7-1.

- In lines 1-6, the speaker describes the world outside the bird's cage. From the caged bird's point of view, what does the outside world represent?**
 - spring
 - freedom*
 - vacation
 - love
 - youth
- What feeling is the speaker attributing to the caged bird's song in lines 19-20: "But a prayer that he sends from the heart's deep core, / But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings"?**
 - anger
 - playfulness
 - longing*
 - relaxation
 - betrayal
- Notice that most of the words of the first line of each stanza are repeated at the end of that stanza. What effect does this repetition have on the speaker's message?**

The repetition

 - reinforces the speaker's message*
 - mocks the message of the first line
 - makes other rhyming unnecessary
 - restates the title
 - makes interpreting the ideas more difficult



4. From what you know of the speaker in the poem, what feelings might he or she have toward someone in slavery?
- (1) understanding*
 - (2) indifference
 - (3) fondness
 - (4) embarrassment
 - (5) hatred
5. Which among the following is the most likely occasion for someone to sing a song of the bird?
- (1) a vacation in the mountains
 - (2) a young children's sing-along
 - (3) a birthday celebration
 - (4) a peaceful protest*
 - (5) a nighttime lullaby
6. Maya Angelou, an African-American writer, titled her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. What does her use of the line from the poem "Sympathy" in her title suggest about the message of her book?
- Angelou's book is about
- (1) success after extensive failure
 - (2) maltreatment of caged animals
 - (3) the enjoyment of springtime
 - (4) capturing and charging criminals
 - (5) understanding the suffering of others*

In the teacher edition, the correct answer is marked with an asterisk.

2. Becoming Familiar with the Problem

Remember, in this step, we are focusing on becoming familiar with the questions through pre-reading strategies, not answering them from the passage.

Preview the Questions: What do you see? What kinds of questions are these? How would you go about **clarifying** anything you might not understand in the questions?

Activate/Build from Prior Knowledge: Have you seen questions like these before? What do you know about questions like these?

Consider/Build Interest: Why would you be interested in answering these questions?

Set a Purpose: The title of Inquiry Activity 7-1 is "How does the speaker relate to the life of a caged bird?" What does that question ask of you as a reader?

Those of your students who are not fluent readers may have considerable difficulty with poetry because of either the imagery or the subjectivity, both of which will be a challenge for them to interpret.

3. Planning, Assigning, and Performing Tasks

Doing the Work: Read the questions and reread the poem alone, with a partner, or in a group. Think aloud about the poem, the questions, and the answer choices.



Clarify:

Scan the questions and answer choices. Find and mark any words you might not know. See if the questions or answer choices give you enough information to **clarify** the meaning of those words. If not, find the meaning by asking somebody or looking it up.

Questions may come about: alas, slopes, springing, chalice, fain, bough, keener.

Were there any places in the passage that you did not understand what was going on?

Analyze:

Read the answer choices to each question and decide if the information in the answers is:

- not in the passage,
- the opposite of the information in the passage, or
- not accurate.

Determine if the speaker in the poem and the author are the same. Why?

The poet identifies himself, “I.”

To answer question 1, you should look at the words in the poem, lines 1-6. What do the words and phrases tell you about how the speaker feels about the outside world?

Bright sun, wind stirring the grass, birds singing and buds opening, are all calm, pleasant, and desirable images.

For the first answer choice to question 1, the images could be said to be of spring but not only of spring. Answer (2) freedom is appropriate because all the details are free and in a natural state. Rivers are often a symbol of freedom in literature. Sunshine and soft winds are also symbols of freedom. Freedom is the correct answer because it is represented in all the images. Answer (3) vacation, while some of the images may remind people of vacation, it is a further projection from freedom. Answer (4) love is not referenced. Answer (5) youth could be a consideration but only for the first bird and first bud.

The answer to question 2 is (3) longing because it would define both prayer and plea. Playfulness and relaxation can be eliminated right away, because neither have the depth of emotion the lines exhibit. Betrayal is not indicated, and although anger for being in the situation may be a choice for some, the use of the words prayer and plea eliminate that choice.

How does the phrasing of question 3 help you to **determine the important from the unimportant** in the passage? What section or parts of the passage support your answer?

Think about a time in which you repeated yourself several times. Why did you do this? Oftentimes a writer will repeat lines to make a point. The author in this poem repeats: “I know... the cage bird feels,...beats his wing,...sings.” Why do you think the author does this? Is it the same reason you sometimes repeat yourself several times?

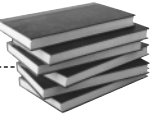
Repetition is a common method to emphasize a point. In this instance, the poet knows both what the caged bird does and why he performs certain activities. The pattern thus established strengthens and supports the underlying message of pain and prayer for delivery.

Question 4 asks about the author’s feelings toward his subject. What words in the poem help you recognize the author’s views?

The words alas, cruel, pain, prayer, plea, and the phrase “ah, me” indicate that the author is sympathetic, which is also shown by the title of the poem.

Go through the answer choices for question 5. Which is most appropriate for the caged bird’s song?

In this poem, what feelings is the bird expressing through his singing? Explain. Think of an occasion when you might need to express the feelings of the bird in the poem. Are there other occasions when other people might express the feelings of the bird in the poem?



In addition to the obvious analogies to slavery and servitude, wrongful suffering could also arise in group discussion. This is a powerful emotional piece, and the song of the bird could be very appropriate at a peaceful protest, choice (4). The images of blood and old scars in the second verse are reason enough not to select any of the other four options.

What does question 6 ask you to do?

Question 6 is an **application** question, requiring the learners to carry their understanding of the meaning of the poem to another work of literature. That understanding of the poem will allow the learners to **predict** some things about the book and its point of view.

For question 6, look at the poem and determine what the experiences of the caged bird are. Write those experiences in your own words.

The image of the bird beating his wings against the bars and singing a prayer for freedom is very clear.

Determine whether you would want to have experiences like the caged bird has in your own life.

Now, consider the writer, Maya Angelou. Do you know anything about her? From what you know, decide which of the choices she would think relate best to the caged bird.

Some students may be familiar with Maya Angelou. In addition to the books she has written, she often appears on television and writes articles for magazines. Her line of greeting cards is widely available. She also wrote a poem and recited it during President Clinton's inauguration. In an interview in the April 2003 issue of *Smithsonian*, Angelou cites Paul Laurence Dunbar as one of her favorite poets.

The correct answer for question 6 is (5) understanding the suffering of others. It is the only response that the third verse addresses. In fact, her book has a strong and positive ending, but all her writing reflects her understanding of and sympathy for those who have remained powerless or trapped by circumstance.

4. Sharing with Others

Telling other people what you know helps you to understand the material better. So take this opportunity not only to share the knowledge, but also to learn it more completely.

Small Groups: Compare your answers with the others in the group. Discuss the meanings of the words in the answer choices, the answers you found, the methods you used to find the answers, the support for your answers in the passage, and the reasons why each learner thinks his/her answers are correct.

Agree on the correct answers and reading strategies you would use for answering questions.

Whole Class: Report to the class the group's meaning of the words in the answer choices, the group's answers to the questions, the methods used to find the answers, the support for the answers chosen, and your group's strategy for answering questions.

Some of your students may have participated in some protests or demonstrations. The reasons they got involved in doing so would uncover an emotional context for poetry they could write.

The emotional force of poetry allows it to be used for a wide range of purposes, and the audience can understand and appreciate the piece at their own levels. Walt Whitman's poem "Oh Captain! My Captain!" is clearly about the loss of a leader; literally the captain of a ship. It adds to the understanding to recognize that he wrote it after the death of Lincoln, but it is not necessary for appreciating the poem. It could as well be about the loss of a parent, a mentor, or any other leader.



5. Reflecting, Extending, and Evaluating

Reflecting: *Think about how well you have understood what you have done.*

Here are some questions to start you thinking about the experience you just had. Thinking about what you have experienced is part of the learning process. When the focus is only on the answer, you don't get much time to think about what you learned.

What methods did you use to read and answer the questions?

How did you use, or how do you think you can use, the multiple-choice answers to help you in answering the question?

How important was knowing the meaning of the words in the answer choices for answering the questions?

What would you say is a good approach (strategy) to use for reading the passage when the test question asks you to interpret the author's feeling in certain lines of a poem?

In poetry, individual word choices are important not only for their precise meaning, but also for their emotional weight.

What were your reasons for not choosing each of the answers you thought were wrong?

Extending: *Extend what you learned to new situations.*

In extending, you are being asked to transfer the information presented in the Practice Test questions to other information or situations.

These extension activities can be used to support a continuing study of poetry.

Create a poem together as a class by saying or writing the first word that comes to mind. Have other people add three sentences of five words or less. Then write multiple-choice questions for the poem. Pass around your questions for others to answer and then discuss.

Listen to your favorite song, or the favorite song of a friend. What would you say the author's thoughts and feelings are? Read an editorial in the newspaper and determine the author's thoughts and feelings.

Have you read books or articles or poems, or seen movies where one author uses a line from another author?

How are expressions like "going postal" an example of using one type of situation to describe another?

Think about a favorite movie or TV show; what expressions from these shows do you use in your life?

Think of the line, "Is that your final answer?" from the television game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Another line that gained widespread use was, "Show me the money," from the movie *Jerry Maguire*.

Using the poem or poems either you or your fellow classmates brought in or your facilitator provided, read it for the purpose of developing multiple-choice test questions that focus on interpreting the author's feeling as expressed in parts of the poem.

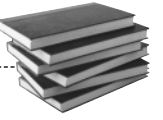
Poetry is the most intensely personal of all literary forms. People can assign meanings to it from their own experiences.

Then write multiple-choice questions that focus the interpretation of the author's feelings. Pass around your questions for others to answer and then discuss.

Write a poem about a family pet or about animals with which you are familiar. Write a multiple-choice question about your poem. Pass the poem and question to your classmates to answer.

State a line you have heard before that should be repeated for emphasis. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. repeats the line, "I have a dream..."

Many of Dr. King's speeches use repetition as a hook for his message. And while they are prose, his use of rhythm and



cadence are also strongly poetic techniques for capturing and maintaining attention.

In songs, the use of the repeating chorus also serves to reinforce the theme of the song. Other musical uses of repetition are seen in movies where the hero has a particular theme, as does the antagonist. The early *Star Wars* movies are good examples, as is *Jaws*.

Think about times in history when people felt like the caged bird. Have you ever felt this way? Write a poem about your feelings.

Identify a current television or movie character that you think feels like the caged bird. Describe that character to a friend or classmate.

Evaluating: Assess what you learned and how you learned it.

In this last step, you get a chance to review the methods used to learn. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; it is your chance to look more closely at your learning style and the opportunity to state how you benefited or didn't benefit from the content and/or the methods presented in this IA.

What did you learn from this activity?

How did the approaches in this activity work for you?

State and then evaluate the approach (strategy) you used to answer reading test questions that ask you to determine the author's point of view.

State and then evaluate the approach (strategy) you used to eliminate some multiple-choice answers when taking a reading test.

Discuss with the class and come up with an approach for eliminating answer choices that makes sense for you.