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## VII. English Language Arts, Reading Comprehension, Grade 8

# Grade 8 English Language Arts

## Reading Comprehension Test

The spring 2009 grade 8 MCAS English Language Arts Reading Comprehension test was based on learning standards in the two content strands of the Massachusetts *English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* (2001) listed below. Page numbers for the learning standards appear in parentheses.

- Language (*Framework*, pages 19–26)
- Reading and Literature (*Framework*, pages 35–64)

The *English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* is available on the Department website at [www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html).

In test item analysis reports and on the Subject Area Subscore pages of the MCAS *School Reports* and *District Reports*, ELA Reading Comprehension test results are reported under two MCAS reporting categories: **Language** and **Reading and Literature**, which are identical to the two *Framework* content strands listed above.

### Test Sessions and Content Overview

The MCAS grade 8 ELA Reading Comprehension test included three separate test sessions. Each session included reading passages, followed by multiple-choice and open-response questions. Selected common reading passages and approximately half of the common test items are shown on the following pages as they appeared in test booklets.

### Reference Materials and Tools

The use of bilingual word-to-word dictionaries was allowed for current and former limited English proficient students only, during all three ELA Reading Comprehension test sessions. No other reference materials were allowed during any ELA Reading Comprehension test session.

### Cross-Reference Information

The table at the conclusion of this chapter indicates each released item’s reporting category and the *Framework* general standard it assesses. The correct answers for released multiple-choice questions are also displayed in the table.

# English Language Arts

## READING COMPREHENSION: SESSION 1

### DIRECTIONS

This session contains one reading selection with seven multiple-choice questions and one open-response question. Mark your answers to these questions in the spaces provided in your Student Answer Booklet.

*In this article, Corey Kilgannon describes a strange and valuable material. Read the article and answer the questions that follow.*

### Please Let It Be Whale Vomit, Not Just Sea Junk

*by Corey Kilgannon*

1 MONTAUK, N.Y. — In this season of strange presents from relatives, Dorothy Ferreira got a doozy the other day from her 82-year-old sister in Waterloo, Iowa. It was ugly. It weighed four pounds. There was no receipt in the box.

2 Inside she found what looked like a gnarled, funky candle but could actually be a huge hunk of petrified whale vomit worth as much as \$18,000.



3 “I called my sister and asked her, ‘What the heck did you send me?’” recalled Ms. Ferreira, 67, who has lived here on the eastern tip of Long Island since 1982. “She said: ‘I don’t know, but I found it on the beach in Montauk 50 years ago and just kept it around. You’re the one who lives by the ocean; ask someone out there what it is.’”

4 So Ms. Ferreira called the Town of East Hampton’s department of natural resources, which dispatched an old salt from Montauk named Walter Galcik.

5 Mr. Galcik, 80, concluded that the mysterious gift might be ambergris, the storied substance created in the intestines of a sperm whale and spewed into the ocean. Also called “whale’s pearl” or “floating gold,” ambergris is a rare and often valuable ingredient in fine perfumes.

6 “He told me, ‘Don’t let this out of your sight,’” Ms. Ferreira said.

- 7 She was soon summoned to show the thing at a town board meeting, after which a story in *The Independent*, a local newspaper, declared Ms. Ferreira the proud new owner of “heirloom whale barf.” Friends and neighbors flocked to her tchotchke-filled\* cottage overlooking Fort Pond Bay, the very shores where her sister, Ruth Carpenter, said she found the object in the mid-1950s.
- 8 Childless and never married, Ms. Ferreira bounced from job to job, most recently as a short-order cook at a local deli, and now lives on her Social Security income.
- 9 “If it really does have value, I’m not silly, of course I’d want to sell it,” Ms. Ferreira said as she looked out past her lace curtains and picket fence at the whitecaps on the bay. “This could be my retirement.”
- 10 After researching ambergris on the Internet, Ms. Ferreira’s neighbor, Joe Luiksic, advised, “Put it on eBay.” But endangered species legislation has made buying or selling the stuff illegal since the 1970s; a couple who found a large lump of ambergris valued at almost \$300,000 on an Australian beach in January has had legal problems selling it.
- 11 “If I get locked up, will you bail me out?” Ms. Ferreira asked her friends.
- 12 Ambergris begins as a waxlike substance secreted in the intestines of some sperm whales, perhaps to protect the whale from the hard, indigestible “beaks” of giant squid it feeds upon. The whales expel the blobs, dark and foul-smelling, to float the ocean. After much seasoning by waves, wind, salt and sun, they may wash up as solid, fragrant chunks.
- 13 Because ambergris varies widely in color, shape and texture, identification falls to those who have handled it before, a group that in a post-whaling age is very small. Ms. Ferreira says she has yet to find an ambergris expert.
- 14 “A hundred years ago, you would have no problem finding someone who could identify this,” said James G. Mead, curator of marine mammals at the Smithsonian Institution, who said he hears of new ambergris surfacing somewhere in the world maybe once every five or six years. “More often, you have people who think they’ve found it and they can retire, only to find out it’s a big hunk of floor wax.”
- 15 Adrienne Beuse, an ambergris dealer in New Zealand, said in a telephone interview that good-quality ambergris can be sold for up to \$10 per gram, adding that for the finest grades, “the sky’s the limit.”

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\**tchotchke* — an inexpensive trinket

- 16 At \$10 per gram, Ms. Ferreira’s chunk, according to a neighbor’s kitchen scale, would have a value of \$18,000. “The only way to positively identify ambergris is to have experience handling and smelling it, and very few people in the world have that,” Ms. Beuse said. “Certainly, if she has it, it’s like winning a mini-lottery.”
- 17 Larry Penny, 71, director of East Hampton’s natural resources department, said he had no way of making a definite determination, because “we don’t keep a certified whale-vomit expert on staff.”
- 18 Mr. Penny, whose great-great-uncle was skipper of a whaling ship out of Sag Harbor, said he grew up searching the beach for ambergris.
- 19 “The older folks would always tell us, ‘Keep your eyes open for that whale vomit because it’ll pay your way through college,’” he recalled. “We used to bring home anything that we thought looked like it, but it never turned out to be ambergris. The average person today could trip over it on the beach and never know what it was.”
- 20 Ambergris has been a valued commodity for centuries, used in perfume because of its strangely alluring aroma as well as its ability to retain other fine-fragrance ingredients and “fix” a scent so it does not evaporate quickly. Its name is derived from the French “ambre gris,” or gray amber. During the Renaissance, ambergris was molded, dried, decorated and worn as jewelry. It has been an aphrodisiac, a restorative balm, and a spice for food and wine. Arabs used it as heart and brain medicine. The Chinese called it lung sien hiang, or “dragon’s spittle fragrance.” It has been the object of high-seas treachery and caused countries to enact maritime possession laws and laws banning whale hunting. Madame du Barry supposedly washed herself with it to make herself irresistible to Louis XV.
- 21 In “Paradise Regained,” Milton describes Satan tempting Christ with meat pastries steamed in ambergris. In “Moby-Dick,” Melville called it the “essence found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale.” Old newspapers show clippings every few years describing some whaling crew coming upon a hunk, or some vacationing family finding it on the beach and either cashing in — or discovering it was just ocean detritus.
- 22 “We always heard about it, but I don’t remember finding any,” recalled Encie Babcock, 95, of Sag Harbor, whose great-uncle Henry Babcock was captain of a whaling ship in the 1800s.
- 23 Mrs. Carpenter, Ms. Ferreira’s sister, said she was about 30 years old, beachcombing with her dog in front of the family house, when she spied the

object and “just liked the way it looked, so I kept it.” After moving with her husband to Iowa, Mrs. Carpenter kept the waxy hunk in a box in her bedroom closet.

- 24 “Anytime we had houseguests, I’d take it out and ask them if they knew what it was,” she said. “Of course they didn’t. This is Iowa.” She sent it to her sister, Mrs. Carpenter said, because “I’m not feeling too good, and I don’t have much time left.”

“Please Let It Be Whale Vomit, Not Just Sea Junk” by Corey Kilgannon, photograph by Gordon M. Grant, from *The New York Times*, December 18, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission of *The New York Times*.

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- 1 Based on the article, what is the **main** reason Ms. Ferreira is having trouble confirming the identity of the object she received?
    - A. Because the object was found so long ago, it has decayed.
    - B. Because the object is so small, it has few recognizable marks.
    - C. Because the oceans are less polluted now, few whales make ambergris.
    - D. Because the whaling industry has declined, few people alive today have seen ambergris.
  
  - 2 According to paragraph 20, why have laws regulating the sale of ambergris been enacted?
    - A. to protect the seas from pollution
    - B. to protect the whales from harm
    - C. to increase perfume production
    - D. to increase jewelry production
  
  - 3 What do the details in paragraph 20 suggest about ambergris?
    - A. It has a long and unusual history of uses.
    - B. It has often been mistaken for other substances.
    - C. It has been shown to be unsafe when used to excess.
    - D. It has a complex and changing chemical composition.
  
  - 4 Based on the article, what is the **most likely** reason Mrs. Carpenter kept the object she found for so long?
    - A. She forgot she had it.
    - B. She thought it seemed interesting.
    - C. She was saving it to give to her sister.
    - D. She knew it might be worth a lot of money.

- 5 The author of the article relies **most** upon which of the following sources?
- A. whaling records
  - B. well-known books
  - C. newspaper clippings
  - D. first-person accounts

- 6 What does the word *commodity* mean as it is used in the first sentence of paragraph 20?
- A. benefit
  - B. product
  - C. advantage
  - D. convenience

- 7 What does *detritus* mean as it is used in paragraph 21?
- A. rare shells
  - B. sea creature
  - C. ancient artifact
  - D. worthless debris

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**Question 8 is an open-response question.**

- **Read the question carefully.**
- **Explain your answer.**
- **Add supporting details.**
- **Double-check your work.**

**Write your answer to question 8 in the space provided in your Student Answer Booklet.**

- 8 Based on the article, explain how the author engages the reader in the subject. Support your answer with relevant and specific information from the article.

# English Language Arts

## READING COMPREHENSION: SESSION 2

### DIRECTIONS

This session contains one reading selection with eight multiple-choice questions and one open-response question. Mark your answers to these questions in the spaces provided in your Student Answer Booklet.

*In this excerpt from The Contender, Alfred has gathered up the courage to visit Donatelli's Gym, a neighborhood boxing club. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.*

*from* **The Contender**  
*by Robert Lipsyte*

- 1 **D**ONATELLI CIRCLED SLOWLY around him, his hand on his square chin, as if he were inspecting a slab of meat in a butcher store. He grabbed one of Alfred's hands, studying first the knuckles, then the palms.
- 2 "Big hands, you'll grow some more," he said. His voice was cold and rasping. He pointed at a battered white medical scale against a wall. "Get on."
- 3 Donatelli adjusted the vertical measure and fingered the sliding weights. "Five feet seven and three-quarter inches. One hundred twenty-four and a half pounds." There was no expression in his voice. He pointed at two wooden folding chairs facing each other. "Sit down."
- 4 Numbly, Alfred lowered himself to the edge of one chair, clutching his shirt in his hands. Donatelli sat down in the other, resting his heavy forearms on his neatly pressed gray slacks. His pale blue eyes flicked over Alfred's face and body. Alfred's eyes dropped down to the man's shoes, planted solidly on the wooden floor, black shoes curling with age but highly polished.
- 5 "Who sent you?"
- 6 "Nobody."
- 7 "Did you come by yourself?"
- 8 "Yes."
- 9 The pale blue eyes worked their way down to Alfred's hands, twisting and wringing the tennis shirt.
- 10 "Are you frightened?"
- 11 "Me? No, not—"
- 12 "A man must have some fear," said Donatelli, "and learn to control it, to make it work for him. Do you understand?"
- 13 Alfred nodded.
- 14 "Have you ever boxed?"
- 15 "No."
- 16 "I can see you've been fighting in the street."

17 Donatelli stood up and marched across the room, his square, boxlike body erect. He pulled a string dangling from the ceiling, and a dozen naked bulbs flooded the large room with pools of yellow light. In the center of the room was a boxing ring, its white canvas floor stained and lumpy. Donatelli leaned against four black-taped ropes, and turned his bulldog face to Alfred.

18 “There’s no place to hide in a boxing ring. You’re all alone in there with another man who wants to hit you more times, and harder, than you hit him. There are rules, and there’s a referee to make sure you follow them. It’s not the street. You follow me?”

19 “Yes.”

20 Donatelli nodded, his bushy white eyebrows arching over the cold eyes. “Sometimes kids come up here and they want to get in that ring right away and knock somebody’s head off. No chance. You have to earn your way in there, you have to work hard for it. Most of the kids leave.”

21 He straightened up and the ropes quivered back into place. One square, thick hand waved at a corner of the room. A gray, canvas bag, as large as a loaded army duffel bag, hung from the ceiling on a long chain.

22 “The heavy bag. Go on over and hit it. Not too hard.”

23 Alfred walked across the room, the naked skin of his chest prickling. He punched the bag with his left fist. His knuckles burned and a sharp current of pain ran through his wrist, up his arm, exploding in his shoulder. The bag barely swayed.

24 “Over there,” said Donatelli, pointing to another corner. A brown leather bag, not much larger than a paper lunch sack, hung from a swivel mounted on a round board screwed to the wall. “The peanut bag. Hit it a few times.”

25 Alfred punched with his right, and the bag slapped against the round board. He missed with his left.

26 “The heavy bag is for power, to build up your arms and shoulders. The peanut bag is for speed and timing. Before you can go into the ring you have to be able to slam that heavy bag around all day and make that peanut bag sound like a machine gun.”

27 “I could try,” said Alfred.

28 “Thousands of kids can do it. Doesn’t mean anything. The bag doesn’t have any arms to hit you back with. You understand?”

29 “Yes.”

30 “Let me tell you what it’s like.” He walked toward Alfred until they were standing face to face. His square head settled down into the crisp collar of his open-throated, short-sleeved white shirt. He had almost no neck.

31 “You get up at five-thirty in the morning, before the gas fumes foul the air, and you run in the park. That’s to build up your legs and wind. You run smooth and easy, a little faster and a little longer each day. You run every day, rain or snow, unless you’re too sick. Then you go home and eat breakfast. Juice, two boiled eggs, toast, and tea. You go to school?”

32 “I work.”

33 “You don’t eat too much lunch, it just makes you slow and tired. No fried foods, no beans, no cabbage, no pies and cakes, no soda. After work you come to the gym. Jump rope, stretching exercises, sit-ups, push-ups, deep-knee bends. You

do them until you can't do any more, then you start all over again. You go home, have a good dinner. Meat, green vegetable, fresh salad, milk, fruit. You're asleep by nine o'clock."

34 Donatelli strolled beside the dusty plate-glass window. Neon signs blinked on and off in the street below, throwing pink, green, and blue mists against his smooth-shaven cheeks. His thin lips barely moved as he talked. "You'll do it for a week, maybe two. You'll feel a little better physically, but all your friends, your family, will say you're a fool. You'll see other people smoking and drinking and staying out late, eating anything they want, and you'll start to think you're a fool, too. You'll say to yourself, 'All this sacrifice, and I'll probably never even get to be a good fighter.' And you'll be right, nine times out of ten."

35 His voice was lower as he moved away from the window and walked along a green wall, looking at the rusting clothes lockers and the faded posters advertising old prizefights.

36 "People will try to drag you down. Some will laugh at you for wanting to be a fighter. And others will tell you you're so good you don't need to train, to go to bed early. How far did you go in school?"

37 "Eleventh grade."

38 "What happened?"

39 "I quit."

40 "Why?"

41 "Didn't seem like any reason to stay."

42 "What makes you think you won't quit here, too?"

43 Alfred swallowed. He suddenly wished he hadn't come up the steps, that he was somewhere else, anywhere. He thought of the cave.\*

44 "Well?"

45 "I want to be somebody."

46 "Everybody is somebody."

47 "Somebody special. A champion."

48 Donatelli's thin lips tightened. "Everybody wants to be a champion. That's not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there's a good chance he'll never get to the top, the man who's willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him. That must sound corny to you."

49 "No."

50 "It's the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward."

51 "I want to try."

52 Donatelli shrugged. "Boxing is a dying sport. People aren't much interested anymore. They want easy things like television, bowling, car rides. Get yourself a good job. Finish high school. Go at night if you have to."

53 "I'll try hard."

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\* *the cave* — a safe place where Alfred goes to dream

54 “Talk it over with your parents.”

55 “I don’t have any. I live with my aunt.”

56 The pale blue eyes came around again. They seemed softer now. But the voice was still cold and flat. “It’s not easy trying to become a contender. It’s never any fun in the beginning. It’s hard work, you’ll want to quit at least once every day. If you quit before you really try, that’s worse than never starting at all. And nothing’s promised you, nothing’s ever promised you.”

57 He reached up and pulled the string. The room was murky again, except for the single light bulb. Donatelli spoke from the shadows.

58 “I’m always here, Alfred. I live here now. Whatever you decide, good luck to you.” His footsteps echoed in the darkness as he walked away.

59 Alfred left. He moved carefully down the steps. They were still narrow and slippery, but no longer darkly threatening. He was halfway home before he realized that the twisted tennis shirt was still in his hand.

*The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte. Copyright © 1967 by Robert Lipsyte. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

- 9 Based on the excerpt, what will **most likely** be Alfred’s biggest challenge to becoming a good boxer?
- A. lack of time
  - B. lack of commitment
  - C. doubts about his physical ability
  - D. doubts about the quality of the gym

- 10 What is Donatelli doing in paragraph 1?
- A. easing Alfred’s anxiety
  - B. assessing Alfred’s potential
  - C. mocking Alfred’s appearance
  - D. questioning Alfred’s background

- 11 According to the excerpt, what is Donatelli’s opinion of fear?
- A. Fear destroys the soul of a fighter.
  - B. Fear is necessary and can be useful.
  - C. Fear can be used to understand an opponent.
  - D. Fear is felt by those who are weak and bitter.

- 12 Read the details from the excerpt in the box below.

- . . . a boxing ring, its white canvas floor stained and lumpy.
- . . . the dusty plate-glass window.
- . . . the rusting clothes lockers and the faded posters advertising old prizefights.

What do the details **most** contribute to the excerpt?

- A. They reveal Donatelli’s untrustworthiness.
- B. They suggest the emptiness of Alfred’s hopes.
- C. They emphasize the rundown nature of the setting.
- D. They highlight the conflict between the characters.

- 13 Read the sentences from paragraph 59 in the box below.

Alfred left. He moved carefully down the steps. They were still narrow and slippery, but no longer darkly threatening.

Based on the excerpt, what do the steps symbolize for Alfred?

- A. escape from work and family
- B. the beginning of a friendship
- C. the challenges ahead
- D. fame and riches

- 14 Read the sentence from paragraph 59 in the box below.

He was halfway home before he realized that the twisted tennis shirt was still in his hand.

Based on the excerpt, what does the sentence suggest about Alfred?

- A. He is nervous about having to return home to his aunt.
- B. He is preoccupied with his upcoming decision.
- C. He is angry about his encounter at the gym.
- D. He is still sweating from his workout.

- 15 At what point in the excerpt does Alfred feel **most** uncomfortable with Donatelli?
- A. when Donatelli asks him if he has ever boxed (paragraph 14)
  - B. when Donatelli tells him he has to earn being in the ring (paragraph 20)
  - C. when Donatelli asks him how he knows he will not quit (paragraph 42)
  - D. when Donatelli tells him that everybody is somebody (paragraph 46)

- 16 What does the word *murky* mean as it is used in paragraph 57?
- A. still
  - B. cold
  - C. dark
  - D. quiet

**Question 17 is an open-response question.**

- **Read the question carefully.**
- **Explain your answer.**
- **Add supporting details.**
- **Double-check your work.**

**Write your answer to question 17 in the space provided in your Student Answer Booklet.**

- 17 Based on the excerpt, explain what Donatelli means when he says, “Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough.” Support your answer with relevant and specific details from the excerpt.

**Grade 8 English Language Arts  
Reading Comprehension  
Spring 2009 Released Items:  
Reporting Categories, Standards, and Correct Answers\***

Item No.	Page No.	Reporting Category	Standard	Correct Answer (MC)*
1	87	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	D
2	87	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	B
3	87	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	A
4	87	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	B
5	88	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	D
6	88	<i>Language</i>	4	B
7	88	<i>Language</i>	4	D
8	88	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	13	
9	92	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	B
10	92	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	B
11	93	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	B
12	93	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	15	C
13	93	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	C
14	93	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	B
15	94	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	C
16	94	<i>Language</i>	4	C
17	94	<i>Reading and Literature</i>	12	

\* Answers are provided here for multiple-choice items only. Sample responses and scoring guidelines for open-response items, which are indicated by shaded cells, will be posted to the Department's website later this year.