

ACTIVE READERS
ASSESSMENT RESOURCE

YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Reading Record Masters

BMX Racing

Word Count: 318

Eight bikes are racing down a dirt track at top speed. Bike number 29 is in the lead. As they round a turn, number 32 shoots ahead. The riders come to a bunch of bumps on the track. Bam! Bam! Bam! The finish line is just ahead. Who will win this BMX race?

What does BMX stand for?

BMX means “bicycle motocross.” *B* is for *bicycle*. *M* is for *moto*. *X* is for *cross-country*. Motocross started as off-road racing on motorcycles. Kids began to imitate motorcyclists on their bikes. Some of them built dirt tracks with turns and bumps. BMX racing was born!

Who can do BMX racing?

As soon as you can pedal a bike, you can race BMX. There are even races for kids five and under! Kids and teens compete with racers their own age who are at the same skill level. In some places, there are BMX races for older people too.

What kind of bikes do BMX racers use?

If your bike is in good shape and has wheels no bigger than 50.8 cm across, you can ride it in a BMX race. You will need to make a few changes to protect yourself. You must put padding on the frame and handlebars. You have to take off the kickstand, chain guard, and other gadgets. Some racers ride special BMX bikes. These bikes have wide tires, plastic spokes, and a number plate.

What equipment do racers need?

A full-face helmet is a must. You also need to wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

Elbow pads and non-slip gloves are a good idea. Soft-soled shoes are best for gripping the pedals. Many BMX clubs rent or lend bikes, helmets, and gloves.

BMX racing is a great sport for young people who enjoy competing outdoors. No matter what your level, you will enjoy the thrill of racing.

How to Make Fog

Word Count: 202

How does it feel to walk through a cloud? If you have walked outside on a foggy day, you already know. Clouds are made of millions of tiny water drops. When these drops form close to the ground, we get fog. So, a walk through fog is much the same as a walk through a cloud!

Try this simple experiment to see how fog forms.

What You Need

- a clear plastic 2-L pop bottle
- hot water
- rubbing alcohol
- an ice cube

What You Do

1 Fill the pop bottle about one-third full.

Use the hottest water you can get from the tap. Take care not to burn your fingers!

2 Add a few drops of rubbing alcohol.

3 Put the ice cube over the top of the bottle.

4 Wait a minute. You should see fog start to form inside.

What's Going On?

First, the hot water starts to evaporate. It breaks into tiny particles. The particles mix with the air to form vapour. Rubbing alcohol helps this process to happen more quickly. Then, the warm vapour meets the cold air at the top of the bottle. Cold air makes the vapour join together again in droplets. The result is fog.

What's the Forecast?

Word Count: 246

In the old days, the weather wasn't just something people talked about. It was a matter of life and death. More people worked outdoors back then. A dry summer could mean a farmer starved to death. A storm at sea could kill a ship's whole crew.

No one had TVs or radios back then to give them the forecast. They had to look at the sky for signs of rain. They also relied on old sayings to tell them what was going to happen.

Some of these sayings were common in Atlantic Canada. People saw that a red glow at dawn often meant a storm was coming. They would say, "Red sky at morning, sailors take warning." The rhyme helped them to remember the saying.

Today, weather experts rely on data from all over the world. They know that Japan's weather one day can affect Canada's a few days later.

Weather data comes in from stations on land, ships, and planes. A global network then sends the data all over the world. Experts in each country take what they need to make their forecasts. They use the data to draw weather maps. They also feed the data into computers. This helps them to predict what will happen over the next few days.

Are the forecasts always right? In the short term, they're close to perfect. In the long term, they still need to improve. But then, predicting the future has always been tricky.

What a Stunt!

Word Count: 311

Millions of people visit Niagara Falls every year. Most come to watch the water rush past and crash into the gorge below. A handful of others have come to try some amazing stunts.

The record for stunts over the Falls is held by “The Great Blondin.” In the mid-1800s, he walked over the Falls on a tightrope several times. The tightrope was strung across the gorge far below. Blondin was not content simply to walk across. He did a back somersault. He crossed on a bicycle. He stopped in the middle and cooked an omelette. He walked with his hands and feet cuffed together. The last time he crossed, he carried a man on his back.

William Hunt tried to do better. In 1860, he also crossed the Falls on a tightrope. He decided to put a washing machine on his back. Washing machines in those days worked by hand. Halfway across, Hunt stopped. He lowered a pail into the gorge to collect water. He pulled the pail up and poured the water into the machine. Then he did a load of laundry!

Annie Taylor tried a different sort of stunt. In 1901, the 63-year-old went over the Falls in an oak barrel. First, her assistants strapped her in. Then they closed the barrel tightly. They took it out by boat and dropped it into the river above the Falls. Before long, the barrel shot over the Falls. It was pulled from the water 17 minutes later. Amazingly, Taylor was alive. Dazed, she climbed out of the barrel. Her head was bleeding. “No one ought ever do that again,” she said.

Annie Taylor was right. Blondin, Hunt, and Taylor were lucky. Other stunt artists have died at the Falls. Today there are rules to stop stunts like these. Niagara Falls is amazing enough without them!

Meet Mattie Mitchell

Word Count: 311

Mattie Mitchell was born in Norris Point, Newfoundland, in 1850. He was the son of a Mi'kmaq chief. As a young man, he worked as a hunter, trapper, and lumberjack. Later, hunters began to hire Mattie as a guide. Mattie made some of the first maps of the area.

A Mining Job

In 1905, Mattie started working for a mining company. Part of his job was to look for mineral ores. Ore is used to make metal. Mattie found valuable lead, copper, gold, and silver ore at Buchans River. The mining company opened many mines in the area, and the town of Buchans grew. The ore that Mattie had found was worth more than \$3.6 billion.

The Reindeer Drive

In the winter of 1908, Mattie signed up for a reindeer drive. A logging company hired Mattie to guide a group that would take 50 reindeer from St. Anthony to Millertown. The trip was more than 600 kilometres. Although the idea never worked, the company had thought they would use the reindeer in Millertown to pull heavy loads.

The trip was slow and difficult. The group had to travel over the Long Range Mountains. They faced extreme cold, hail, and blinding blizzards. Because they had to travel slowly, they ran out of food. At one point, Mattie had to leave to get more supplies. It took him 52 hours by dog team to make the 32-kilometre trip! After 58 days, the long journey was over. Every single reindeer survived.

An Important Person

Mattie spent the rest of his life as a fishing and hunting guide. He also continued to look for ore. He died at the age of 77 in his son's home in Corner Brook. In 2002, the federal government named Mattie an important person in Canadian history. This brave man finally received the honour he deserved.

Life on an Offshore Oil Rig

Word Count: 327

How would you like to fly by helicopter to get to a job in the middle of the ocean and stay there for a few weeks? That's what people who work on an offshore oil rig do. For a month at a time, they live on the rig while they work there. This saves travel time and keeps the rig operating 24 hours a day.

At Work

There are lots of jobs to do on an oil rig. Some workers drill for oil and gas under the sea floor. Others check and repair the rig's machinery. Some rigs have several platforms pumping oil and gas day and night. That means there is a lot of equipment to maintain. Additional staff members do the crew's laundry and cleaning. Some rigs even have their own chefs who cook all the workers' meals.

Life on a rig usually involves a long workweek—12 hours a day, 7 days a week. Workers can rise as early as 5 or 6 a.m. They usually wear overalls, safety boots, a hard hat, and safety glasses. Teams of workers do round-the-clock shifts. While some teams work, other teams sleep. For safety reasons, the whole crew cannot sleep at once. There must be some crew members awake at all times in case there is a storm or emergency.

After Work

After their shifts, workers enjoy free time. Many rigs have a recreation centre with satellite television and a pool table. Some

rigs have their own bird sanctuaries. If a bird hits the rig, the crew cares for it until it can be taken to shore by helicopter.

These workers are controlling machinery on the drill floor.

Not for Everyone!

One of the best things about working on an offshore oil rig is the pay. It is excellent! However, the long hours and the time away from family and friends may not appeal to everyone. Do you think working on an offshore oil rig would suit you?

Don't Be a Copycat!

Word Count: 360

These days it seems that almost everybody is copying music CDs. It's very easy to do on a computer, or even on some CD players. You probably know someone who has done it. Perhaps you think there is no harm in copying a CD. All you have done is made yourself a disk for free. You haven't hurt anyone—right? Wrong!

Imagine someone is playing a guitar on a street corner. The singer has written the music. It's a sound that you can't resist. People stop to listen. Some drop coins into the guitar case. Then someone reaches down, steals the coins, and melts away into the crowd.

Copying a CD is not very different from stealing those coins.

Whenever you copy a CD, it is as if you have reached down and grabbed a handful of coins from the guitar case. That's because musicians and others in the music industry make money by selling albums.

When you buy a CD, only part of the money you pay goes to the store. Some goes to the recording company, and a small part goes to the musicians who made the CD. Musicians make a lot of money only if the album sells really well.

What happens when people copy CDs rather than paying for them? The recording companies make less money. This means they will have less to spend on producing new CDs, especially albums featuring artists who are not yet well known. Many young musicians might not have a chance to make an album, and you won't have the chance to hear their music.

The musicians, too, make less money. They might not be able to make a living by playing music. Some might stop making CDs altogether. Again, you might be the one who loses out.

Don't be fooled by the superstars you see on TV. Most musicians are not rich. Most never will be. They make music because that's what they love to do. Yet even artists have to pay the rent. Besides, many of them have spent years studying and practising. They deserve to be paid for their work, just like everyone else.

The Story of Snowshoes

Word Count: 265

The snowshoe is one of the oldest ways of getting around in the winter. No one is sure when snowshoes were invented. However, it is thought that they were invented about 4000 years ago in Asia.

Snowshoes work by spreading a person's weight over a large area. They let the person wearing them walk on the surface of even the deepest snow.

Aboriginal Peoples in North America used snowshoes. They made many different designs. Hunting snowshoes were long and narrow. They made it easy to break trails in fresh snow. Trail snowshoes were wide and round. They packed down the snow so sleds could follow.

The Mi'kmaq created snowshoes for different kinds of snow. One kind of snowshoe was for fluffy snow. Another kind was for snow with a hard crust on top.

The Mi'kmaq often made snowshoe frames from ash wood. This type of wood is easy to bend. Caribou, moose, or deer hide was then woven onto the frame. The snowshoes were tied onto the foot with leather straps. The heel and toe were left free to move.

Snowshoe making was a combined effort for Aboriginal Peoples. Men made the snowshoe frames. Women cut the hide into the strips and wove them onto the frames.

Europeans who came to Canada adopted snowshoes for winter travel. Fur trappers used snowshoes to check their traplines in deep snow.

Today, you can still buy wooden snowshoes. There are also snowshoes made from aluminum, plastic, and rubber. Whatever kind you wear, though, snowshoes are still a great way to get around in winter!

How Roller Coasters Work

Word Count: 425

What Goes Up ...

You are strapped in, and the roller coaster slowly starts to move up the track. At first, the cars are pulled up by chains under the track. After that, energy and gravity do all the work. As your car climbs, it stores energy. The higher the car goes, the more energy it stores. This is potential energy. Now you are at the top. Your heart stops as the car teeters high above the trees. The **potential energy** is about to change.

Suddenly, you're plunging down the track, as gravity pulls you to the ground. As the car drops, potential energy is converted into movement, or **kinetic energy**, and the train speeds up.

The train moves the fastest at the bottom of the hill, where the kinetic energy is at a maximum.

As the train starts back up the hill, it slows down. Kinetic energy converts to potential energy, and the process begins all over again.

Wooden Tracks Versus Steel Tracks

All roller coasters plunge and climb, but the kind of ride you have depends on the tracks you are on. Many older tracks are made of wood. A ride on wooden tracks won't be as fast as a ride on steel tracks because the tracks are like those of a traditional train. Strips of metal are bolted to the wooden track, which makes for a bumpy ride. The metal wheels sit on the track and a lip of metal keeps the car from rolling off the rails. You may not soar as high on wooden

tracks, but it's exciting to sway from side to side as you speed up and down.

Steel tracks are a more recent invention. They are made of long steel tubes that are welded together. The wheels are made of nylon or a similar substance, which makes for a smoother ride. The cars also have additional wheels that run along the sides and bottom of the tracks. These wheels help anchor the cars so they don't sway. This means the cars can twist and turn and climb more easily. They also blast through the air at speeds that thrill even the most experienced riders.

So the next time you decide to ride a roller coaster, remember: there is no engine. It's all about energy, gravity, and tracks.

Fun Facts about Potatoes

Word Count: 387

Who first grew potatoes for food?

The Inca in Peru, about 200 b.c.e. The Spanish conquistadors brought the potato back to Europe in 1536.

What did they think about the potato in Europe?

That it was poison! The potato belongs to a family of plants that are toxic if eaten. King Frederick William of Germany knew that potatoes were good food. He ordered farmers to plant them or have their noses cut off!

So *can* potatoes be poisonous?

Potatoes are **tubers**, swollen roots of the potato vine. The vine is toxic, but the tubers are not. If a potato gets too much light, its skin will turn green. This colour comes from a buildup of a chemical called **solanin**. It makes the potato taste bitter, and can be harmful if eaten in large quantities. Be sure to cut out any green patches on the skin before you cook a potato.

Who invented instant potatoes?

A Canadian nutritionist, Dr. Edward Asselbegs. He came up with the formula for instant potatoes in 1962.

Are potatoes good for you?

Of course! A potato has lots of vitamin C and potassium. It also has about three grams of fibre.

When were potato chips invented?

In 1853. A millionaire by the name of Cornelius Vanderbilt was eating at a fancy restaurant in Saratoga Springs, New York. He complained his potatoes were cut too thick. This made the chef, George Crum, very angry. He sliced some of the potatoes paper-thin and boiled them in oil. Then he salted them and served them up. Everyone was shocked when Vanderbilt loved the crunchy snack. A new food fad had been born!

Were potatoes ever used in place of money?

Yes, they were. During the Klondike gold rush in the 1890s, hungry miners traded bags of gold for bags of potatoes. They would eat some of the potatoes and trade the rest for supplies.

What was the first vegetable grown in space?

The potato, of course. Researchers in the United States created the technology in 1995. Their goal was to help feed astronauts on long voyages.

What's the most popular song ever written about the potato?

“Bud the Spud,” by Stompin’ Tom Connors. Stompin’ Tom was born in Saint John, New Brunswick, and grew up in Skinner’s Pond, Prince Edward Island.

Snack On!

Word Count: 355

Students pour out of school. Most of them are hungry for a snack. One group stops to share a bag of trail mix. Others head over to a corner store to pick up sunflower seeds, milk, and yogurt. Still others drop in at a food court for salads and fruit shakes. Is this reality or a dream?

Nutritionists (people who study food and diet) agree that snacking is a part of most people's lives. You may be surprised to know that they also agree that snacking is a good idea. Young people, especially teenagers, need more than three meals a day. Two or three between-meal snacks provide fuel for their growing, active bodies.

The problem is that many young people choose cookies, chips, candy bars, or soft drinks for a quick snack fix. These foods have no nutritional value and are full of fat, sugar, and salt. Healthy snacks, on the other hand, contain protein, calcium, fibre, and vitamins. They provide energy and essential nutrients, and also help to build strong bones. Healthy snacks should be part of a well-balanced diet.

Making good snack choices at home is easy. The important thing is to have healthy food on hand when a snack attack hits. Work with your family to prepare a shopping list of healthy snack items. Then set aside a snack area in your kitchen's refrigerator and cupboard. Refrigerator snacks might include baby carrots, red pepper slices, low-fat yogurt, cheese, and lots of fruit. In the

cupboard, you might keep items such as whole grain crackers, nuts, dried fruit, peanut butter, and popcorn.

You may find that healthy snacking outside the house is trickier. Fast-food restaurants are especially challenging, although some of them now offer healthy choices. Of course, you always have the option of bringing along your own healthy snacks. The odd French fry or cookie isn't the end of the world either, as long as such snacks don't become a habit.

You can do wonders for your own well-being by sticking to healthy snacks. Just say "no" to junk food. Your body will thank you!

The Origin of Blue Jeans

Word Count: 443

Look around at the students in your class. Chances are that quite a few of them are wearing blue jeans. Why are they so popular? Jeans are strong and durable. At the same time, they can also be soft and comfortable.

The Origin of Blue Jeans

Blue jeans go back more than 130 years. The city of San Francisco was thriving due to a gold rush. Mine workers, gold diggers, and pioneers had all moved to the city. After hearing about how well things were going in San Francisco, a man named Levi Strauss moved there from New York in 1853. He opened a successful dry-goods business. Strauss's business did well because the things he sold, including cloth, pillows, blankets, and toiletries, were in high demand. Soon he was selling his goods to stores all over California. In 1872, a tailor named Jacob Davis wrote Strauss a letter. Davis had begun putting metal fasteners, called rivets, in pants in places where they tended to rip. The rivets made the pants stronger. Davis wanted to apply for a **patent**—a special licence that meant no one else could steal his idea. The patent cost \$68. Davis did not have that much money. He asked Strauss to be his partner, and Strauss agreed. On May 20, 1873, they received the patent.

Levi Strauss & Co. opened factories in San Francisco to make “waist overall” workpants that used the rivets. The pants were made from strong blue denim cotton or brown cotton duck fabric.

These workpants were the first blue jeans, which is what we now call them.

Blue Jeans Make a Statement

Over the years, other companies began making jeans. Miners were not the only workers who wore them. In the 1930s, movies showed rugged cowboys wearing jeans. In 1954, Marlon Brando wore jeans in the movie *The Wild One*. Jeans became a statement of independence and rebellion. But the biggest change came in 1963. *Newsweek* magazine did a feature on young people. The cover of the magazine showed a picture of a teenage girl wearing blue jeans. Soon every young person wanted to own a pair.

By the 1970s, some people wanted their jeans to stand out, to be different. They used beads, coloured thread, and paint. In the 1980s, designers started making their own styles of jeans. Jeans became a fashion statement.

In 2000, a museum opened in Buttenheim, Germany. This is the city where Levi Strauss was born. The museum tells the story of blue jeans. Many kinds of old jeans are on display. Does this mean jeans are history? Look around. What do you think?

The Sinking of the *SS Florizel*

Word Count: 278

Three days ago, at 8:00 p.m., the *SS Florizel* steamed out of St. John's Harbour on its regular run to Halifax and New York City. In addition to its cargo, this proud ocean liner carried 78 passengers and 60 crew members. Today, the *SS Florizel* is a tragic wreck. It lies on the rocks near Cape Race, where it crashed early on Sunday morning.

Courage at Sea

Through luck and courage, 44 people survived. We can now tell the story of two of them, crew member John Johnston and passenger Minnie Denief.

When the ship crashed onto the rocks, everyone looked for a safe place on the ship. The rear of the ship sank into the water. Anyone who stayed there would have drowned. Most people tried to reach the tiny radio hut at the front of the ship. They had to make their way across the ship's decks, which were being pounded by the waves.

As Mr. Johnston and Miss Denief struggled along the deck, a wave swept them both off their feet. Instantly, Mr. Johnston grabbed a ladder rung with one hand. With the other, he grasped Miss Denief's hair. Had he not done so, they would both have been swept out to sea. When the wave passed, they made their way to the radio hut.

Safe at Last

Johnston, Denief, and the other survivors waited in the radio hut as the storm raged. They did not know if they would be rescued or swept away by the cold, rough waves. At last, 27 hours after the wreck, rescuers arrived and saved the people they found huddled in the hut.

Tsunami!

Word Count: 340

What Is a Tsunami?

A tsunami [tsu-NAHMEE] is a series of powerful waves. It is different from a tidal wave, which is caused by the rise and fall of the tides. A tsunami is usually caused by an underwater earthquake, landslide, or volcano. Any of these will send out circular waves, like the ripples in a pond when you toss in a pebble. Tsunami waves, though, are *powerful* ripples! They can travel faster than a jet—about 600 to 900 kilometres an hour.

Deadly Waves

Tsunamis do not cause any damage until they hit land. In 1946, a ship was anchored not far off Hawaii. Looking toward the harbour, the crew saw a huge wave rise out of the water. As they watched in horror, the wave hit shore. It crushed buildings, smashed boats, and killed more than 170 people. Yet the crew had not even felt the wave pass under their ship! They didn't feel it because most of the wave was underwater. When it hit the shallow ground near the shore, the front of the wave slowed down. In seconds, the faster water behind piled up into a massive wall of water.

When the volcanic island of Krakatoa erupted in 1883, it created waves that were 35 metres high. The waves crashed against the islands of Java and Sumatra. Over 36 000 people died.

Detecting—and Surviving

Tsunamis cannot be prevented, but islands and coastal areas around the Pacific now have a warning system. Instruments called **seismographs** pick up disturbances in the ocean. Tide gauges attached to buoys measure the speed of waves. If scientists detect a fast-moving wave, they can warn people in its path.

It may be hard to believe that anyone could survive such a thing, but there are some strange stories. Once a Hawaiian couple was about to eat breakfast when a tsunami hit.

It picked up their house and dropped it lightly in a field down the road. Not only were the people unhurt, but their breakfast was still on the table!

William Hall: A Canadian Hero

Word Count: 291

William Hall became a Canadian hero when he was awarded the Victoria Cross. The Victoria Cross is a medal given for bravery in war. It is named after Queen Victoria, who ruled Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 to 1901. Hall was the first Nova Scotian to earn the Victoria Cross. He was also the first African Canadian to receive the medal.

Hall was born in Nova Scotia in 1827, the son of freed slaves. He was a good sailor and liked to be active. In 1852, he joined the British Navy in search of adventure.

At this time, India was part of the British Empire. Many people there did not like being ruled by Britain. They wanted to be independent—to rule themselves.

In 1857, Indian soldiers rose up against the British. Britain sent its navy to stop the rebellion. William Hall was on one of the ships that set sail. Once the ships reached India, Hall's captain sent his men to the city of Lucknow. They had to drag eight large cannons by land to the city, fighting all the way.

At Lucknow, the battle was fierce. Indian soldiers held a key position in a fortress outside the city. The British sent two gun crews up to the fortress to fire their cannons. Only Hall and one other man survived the mission. They made a hole in the wall of the fortress. This allowed British soldiers to enter the city to help those inside. Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.

Hall stayed in the navy until 1876. Then he retired and looked for a life of peace. He went to live on a farm in Avonport, where he died in 1904.

Unbelievable

Word Count: 409

Casey stops me in the hall at school and asks if I want to go to the party at Brad's house on Saturday. Everybody's going and Casey's really cute, so I say, "Sure, what time?" He gives me a nice smile, and suddenly I feel like I'm walking on air. Unbelievable!

Casey drives us over in his mom's car, and the first thing I notice at Brad's is that his parents aren't around. Brad says they've gone to Florida for two weeks. Everybody's dancing and having a good time, and somehow I lose Casey. I start asking where he's gone, but people just laugh, and I can't find him anywhere.

Unbelievable!

Two hours go by, and I'm starting to wonder how I'll get home. Just then somebody taps me on the shoulder. It's Casey, but his eyes are all bloodshot, and he smells like ... well, he smells like he's been drinking. Unbelievable!

"Come on, I'll take you home now," says Casey.

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I want to get there alive."

He says he's only had one drink, and I say I don't believe him.

"Okay," he says. "You can walk home."

"I'll get my friend Sheila to take me," I reply.

"Go ahead," he says. "She's drunker than I am."

Unbelievable!

With that, I start to walk away. "I'm calling my dad," I say. "He'll come get me."

“Yeah, right,” Casey says. “You call your dad, he’ll ask why you need a ride. If he finds out you were at a party where there was drinking, you’ll be grounded till you’re thirty!”

“Really? Shows what you know!” I say. Inside, though, I’m thinking that being grounded till I’m *forty* is more like it.

I call home. My dad sounds kind of grumpy when he answers, but says he’ll be there in ten minutes to pick me up.

The minute my dad pulls up at Brad’s house, I run out and hop in the car. I take a deep breath and start a story about why I called. But my dad stops me.

“Chrissy, I don’t know why you called, but I can guess. I was young once too. I just want to say I’m proud to have a daughter as smart as you. And I want you to know that you can always call me, no matter how late it is.”

I’m speechless. And know what word I’m thinking describes my dad at this moment?

Unbelievable!

A Rock and a Hard Place

Word Count: 209

Rupa's hands felt sweaty. She was afraid. The cliff rose above her, and sharp rocks loomed below. Summer camp in Cape Breton had been great until everyone had signed up for rock climbing, she thought. Why did I have to sign up too?

All at once her foot slipped and she swung out into space. The team leader shouted out what to do, but Rupa was too scared to listen. The safety line held fast, though, and swung her back toward the cliff. I'll never make it to the top, she thought. They'll have to pull me up. Everyone will know I'm a coward!

As she hung against the rock, she noticed an ant climbing past her. It carefully placed one leg after the other as it went.

So that's all it takes, thought Rupa. With a deep breath, she cautiously felt around with the toe of one boot. She found the tiniest ledge and then jammed her fingers into a crack. Bracing her other foot against a bump on the rock, she pulled herself up ...

At the top, her friend Kelly gave her a high five. "You did it!" she cheered.

"I had help," said Rupa, grinning, "from a *very* small friend."

Timing Is Everything

Word Count: 238

I have to admit they looked pretty scary. The guys on the other relay team, I mean. Right before the track meet, they all shaved their heads. That made them look different from everybody else, and tough. They were fast, too, and everyone on our team knew this was the team we had to beat if we wanted to become the provincial champs.

Coach always says, “Timing is everything. You have to pass the baton to your partner without losing a single second.” Just looking at those other guys threw our timing way off. We all tensed up, and you never run your best race when you’re tense.

Coach didn’t seem to notice, though. He just kept saying, “Believe in yourselves.”

“We’re trying hard to believe,” said Leon, our anchor—the last runner in the relay. “But those guys are freaking us out!”

Coach looked up from his clipboard and blinked.

“You mean those bald-headed guys? You think *they’re* a threat? They just look like a bunch of lollipops to me.”

Leon was so surprised that he started laughing, and pretty soon we all joined in. Coach was right. Their shaved heads *did* make them look like lollipops. Suddenly, I felt loose and ready to run.

“What do you do with lollipops?” asked Coach.

Together we shouted, “You lick ‘em!”

When the starter’s gun went off, that’s just what we did. We
licked ‘em!

The Friendship Basket

Word Count: 247

October 3

I'm a jerk. I have concert tickets and I promised Nisha we'd go. But then Tanya offered to invite me to her party if I'd take her to the concert. The coolest girls from school are going to Tanya's party and I wanted to go too. So, I said yes. Now Nisha is furious!

October 5

The concert was incredible, but I missed Nisha. If she had been there, we'd have painted our faces. We would have danced and sung along. Tanya just sat there and talked about what other people were wearing.

October 7

Tanya's party last night was OK, I guess. We gave each other make-overs and ate and laughed a lot. But when I looked in the mirror, I wondered about the person looking back at me. I phoned Nisha today, but she hung up. She's been ignoring me at school too.

October 8

I made up a special basket for Nisha today. I put in our favourite book, the sports ribbon I won because she coached me, a photograph of us taken at camp, and other stuff like that. I also wrote a note apologizing and saying how important her friendship is to me. I left it on her doorstep. Now my fingers are crossed; I hope she'll call.

October 9

Nisha phoned, and we both cried. A friendship is like a pizza. It's all bits and pieces, but you know a good one when you get it.

“Let’s Go, Babcock!”

Word Count: 317

The one time I solved a crime, it was thanks to my parrot ... or perhaps to the burglar ... or maybe even to both of them. I’m not really sure. I’ll tell you the story, and you can decide.

My parrot’s a beauty named Captain Wilberforce. My parents gave him to me for my tenth birthday. Captain Wilberforce is a talking parrot, and he has a bigger vocabulary than most of my friends. Each day I teach him to say something new. “So nice to see you” is one of his favourite sayings. “Feed me now” is another.

Lately, there have been a lot of break-ins in our neighbourhood. The burglars always strike in the early evening. Last week was our turn. I was the first one in the family to get home, and I noticed that our TV was missing. The kitchen window was broken, and my mom’s laptop was gone too.

At least they didn’t take my parrot. Captain Wilberforce was still in his cage. But instead of saying “So nice to see you,” he kept repeating something I’d never heard him say before. “Let’s go, Babcock!” he said over and over. “Let’s get out of here!”

The police came to check out the damage and see what was missing. They said it was always difficult to catch a burglar. “Without a witness, the chances aren’t good.”

That’s when I helped them to solve the crime. “Well, we do have a witness,” I told them. “My parrot, Captain Wilberforce, says there were two burglars, and one of them was named Babcock.”

The police officers checked their files at the station. Sure enough, someone with the name Babcock had a record for burglary. When they brought him in for questioning, the first thing he said was, “How did you know?”

“Well,” said one of the officers, “let’s just say a little *birdie* told us.”

The Case of the Dead Duck

Word Count: 238

The duck was lying in a stretch of yellowed grass along the river. It was definitely dead. It looked weird, and its feet were sticking straight up. The air smelled funny too, and it wasn't just because of the duck. Something bad had been dumped into the water.

We reported the dead duck to the police, but Kate and I decided to do our own investigation. We owed it to the duck.

We snooped around the river some more. We discovered tire tracks in some mud near the scene of the crime. The tracks were large and there were marks on the tread, probably those of a certain brand of tire. Kate ran home to get some goop she uses for casting animal tracks, and we made a cast of one of the tire tracks. The cast looked great. There's nothing like hard evidence.

We figured that only two companies in town use trucks big enough to make those tracks, so we searched their parking lots. Sure enough, right behind Ace Industries, we found a matching print. We wrote down the licence number of the truck. With the licence number and the cast of the tire track, we went back to the police. They soon found that Ace Industries had been dumping chemicals into the river, and the company was charged. Now Kate and I are local heroes—especially to the ducks!

Report from Planet B-12

Word Count: 353

I opened my first set of eyes and shut my second and third sets. I could see the man and woman in the observation room. They were holding each other's hands as their eyes darted around. I say their eyes, even though the pathetic creatures had only a single set each. Both subjects were damp with sweat, even though the room was quite cool, and I noticed they were trembling slightly. That's all I could detect with my first set of eyes.

I closed my first set of eyes and opened the second. This allowed me to view their internal organs. From that, I could assess their state of health. My goodness, how fast their hearts were beating! And the man—where had his appendix gone? Where were the woman's tonsils? I made my notes: Both subjects missing a few parts, but otherwise in good shape. That's all I could see with my second set of eyes.

I closed my second set and opened the third. Now I could see their emotions and I could read their thoughts. So many feelings all at once! Fear, of course, and confusion. It was also obvious they were in love with each other. They were both thinking the same thing—a very strange thought, it seemed to me: "If you are going to hurt one of us, let it be me. Just let my partner go."

Well, they didn't need to be concerned, this couple from the blue planet that some call Earth. After making our notes, we returned them to their home. Naturally, we stripped a few neurons first, so when they woke up it would all seem like a bad dream—and nobody believes in dreams anymore, do they?

On the way back to *our* home, to Planet B-12 in the star system Oculus, I couldn't stop thinking about the emotional confusion of those two research samples. Generosity, love, thinking of others first ... Why do they have such strange feelings? This is a mystery I'll never understand. Ah, well, sometimes I think I could use a fourth set of eyes!

The Invincibility Factor

Word Count: 376

I was so excited to find a summer job, especially in construction, that I didn't ask many questions. On the first day, I was working with Ronnie and Joe, laying pipe in a ditch. We were all the same age, seventeen. At lunch I said, "Isn't it great they have the three of us working together?"

Ronnie almost choked on his sandwich. "They're not doing us any favours, you know. They give the hardest and most boring jobs to the new guys until we prove ourselves. Are you ever naïve?"

"Actually, you're the naïve one," said Joe.

"What do you mean?" Ronnie and I said together.

"We're not working in the ditch because it's the hardest job," he explained. "We're working there because it's dangerous and nobody else will do it."

"How can it be dangerous?" asked Ronnie.

"Open your eyes!" exclaimed Joe. "That ditch is two metres deep. See any support materials? They're supposed to shore up the sides with planking so the dirt doesn't collapse and bury us. Or they're supposed to slope the sides, so there isn't so much vertical pressure. Oh, but that would take longer, and therefore cost more, so they don't do it."

I couldn't believe my ears. "You mean that ditch could collapse at any moment?"

“That’s right,” said Joe. “That’s why they have to get young guys to work there. Ever hear of the invincibility factor? That’s us—we think we’re invincible, that we’re going to live forever. Older guys have seen co-workers get injured or killed, so you won’t find *them* going down in that ditch.”

I had to decide whether I should complain about the unsafe conditions and risk losing my job or go back to work in the ditch knowing that it might collapse. In the end, I complained. Two minutes later, I was looking for another job. Then the next week, I saw the story in the newspaper. After a rainy night, the ditch did collapse. Both Ronnie and Joe were trapped inside, buried under two tonnes of mud. Rescuers managed to get them both out in time, but Ronnie suffered serious head and back injuries. I know now I’ll find another job, but that’s a chance Ronnie may never have.

The Quest

Word Count: 351

My name is Peter Drexel, and I'm what they call dyslexic. That means I have trouble reading and spelling. My visual memory isn't so great, and often I can't tell the difference between words that look alike. Even little words like **on** and **no**, or **saw** and **was**, can give me trouble.

My mother's name is Maryanne, and she is an amazing whistler. She can whistle any song she wants to, but I think her favourite is an oldie-goldie called "I Could Have Danced All Night." Whenever I hear her whistling that song, I know she's happy.

When my mother found out I had a learning disability, all she said was, "Don't worry. I've heard about a game we can play to help you spell better."

I forgot to tell you I have an older sister, Holly. Deep down inside, we like each other very much, but that doesn't mean we don't fight a lot. We're also very competitive. So when my mother brought this board game home, you can bet I wanted to come out the winner when I played against Holly.

Maybe you've played the game yourself. To start, you get some little square tiles, each with a letter printed on it. You use the tiles to spell out words on the board. You get different points for each letter, depending on what it's worth and where you placed it.

At first, Holly beat me every time. Then she started to get bored, while I worked harder at getting better. For some reason, being able to hold the separate letters in my hand and move them around

to form words made spelling seem easier. Holly was already a good speller, but for me this was all new.

Then one day I finally beat her. You know how? You get a lot of points for the letter **q**. I waited until I was able to spell the word **quest**, and I cleaned up. Holly looked really surprised, and I could hear my mother in the kitchen. She was whistling that song, “I Could Have Danced All Night.”

The Fifth Player

Word Count: 355

I was walking through the mall with Sophie, our bass player, and we were having another argument. I play the guitar, and we've put together a pretty good band, with Taylor on drums and Jean-Paul on electric organ. The only problem is that we sound just like every other garage band in Nova Scotia. There's nothing that sets us apart.

"We need a fifth player," I said. "Somebody who will give us a different sound. It's June now, and we're going to have lots of time to practise over the summer. If we're going to get another member, it should be soon."

"I think we're fine," said Sophie. "We just need more time together, that's all."

Well, we've already been together for six months—so much for that argument. I like Sophie, but sometimes I have to wonder why she never agrees with me.

Before I knew it, we'd wandered into the open space in the centre of the mall. We were talking so much that we didn't notice the drumming until we were quite close. Several young men were there, sitting in a circle with their drums. A large crowd had gathered to watch this special performance of Mi'kmaq drumming that was being presented in honour of National Aboriginal Day. As the drummers stopped for a short break, one of the performers looked up, caught my eye, and gave a slight nod. It was Denny Cope, who goes to school with us. Sophie and I decided to stop for a while.

We found a couple of chairs and sat down. Soon the group started drumming again. Denny had his own drum, and I noticed he was really good. As I listened to the drumming, I realized it was different from anything I'd ever heard before, and I liked it a lot. I looked at Sophie and nodded in Denny's direction.

"You know what?" I whispered. "I think we may have found our fifth player. On Monday, I'm going to ask him if he'll join our band."

"You know what?" she said. "For once in your life, I think you're right."

Bessie's Ribbon

Word Count: 319

It was a blustery winter day at the top of Signal Hill. The last thing Bessie expected to see was a group of grown-ups flying a kite. “They must be mad!” she muttered to herself, for it was blowing rain and it was obvious that the big kite was getting soaked through. Bessie knew a lot about kites, and she could see right away that there was something else wrong with this one—it didn’t have enough of a tail.

Sure enough, the men got the kite partway up, but then it plunged to the ground. A young man wearing a felt hat and a heavy overcoat threw up his hands in despair as four other men scrambled after the kite. Bessie went over to him.

“Please, sir,” she said. “Your kite needs a longer tail.” Another man tried to shoo her away, telling her sternly that Mr. Marconi had no time to talk to a young girl. But the young man shrugged and said perhaps she was right.

Bessie thought for a moment, then untied the ribbon that held her thick braid of hair and held it out. Mr. Marconi took the ribbon and fastened it to the tail. The men tried to launch the kite again. It dipped and wavered, but finally the wind caught it. The kite soared higher and higher.

Mr. Marconi gave Bessie a formal bow. With a smile, he told her that she had saved an important experiment. He explained that the kite wire would catch a radio signal from far away, across the Atlantic Ocean. Someday, he said, the air all over the world would

be full of radio voices. And this day, December 12, 1901, would be famous in history.

When he finished, Mr. Marconi shook her hand, and Bessie turned for home. The wind sang in her ears, and she could almost hear strange voices in the air.

Changes

Word Count: 377

So many things are changing. For one, I'm leaving middle school and going into high school. The good thing is I'm getting bigger, and now the kids who used to pick on me leave me alone. The bad thing is *everyone* leaves me alone, and I'm wondering if I'll ever make any friends.

I've heard a few things about this high school. The good thing is they have a theatre program, and I'm seriously into acting. The bad thing is you have to audition. Yikes! That'll mean standing on stage while people stare at my awkward teenage body, judging every move I make. What if I start sweating or get the hiccups? How embarrassing will *that* be?

The day of the audition arrives. At the audition, I find out I have to do an improv scene, just me and one other person, making it up as we go along. Talk about pressure. Especially since that other person is a girl I really like as soon as I see her.

Our situation is this: two strangers sitting on a park bench. That's not much to work with, is it? Looking at Katie—the girl—I can see she's nervous, but before I can think of anything, she takes a deep breath, and in a fake British accent says, "I say, do you come here often?" In an instant, I decide I will play a guy who's down on his luck and lives in the park in a big cardboard box. I don't know why this idea pops into my head, but Katie keeps feeding me lines—lines that inspire me to say outrageous, funny things.

The teachers try not to laugh, but they can't help themselves. I work our routine in such a way that I can tell Katie I think she's really good looking, which I'd never be able to say if I weren't on stage. That line gets a laugh too, and suddenly it doesn't seem so frightening to tell a girl I like her. Then Katie comes up with the perfect ending, one that has us walking off stage hand in hand while everyone laughs and claps. For happily ever after? Too soon to tell, but at least we're off to a good start.

Sneezes

Word Count: 331

September 8

There's a new guy in my science class. According to the gossip, he transferred here from Sydney. He's really cool—tall, with a great smile—and all the girls are trying to get his attention. Will I ever be able to make him notice *me*? I have to discover a way!

September 10

Well, he noticed me all right, and what a disaster! Shelley Burns knows a cousin of his, and this cousin introduced her to him. Shelley then promised me she'd bring him over to my table at lunchtime if I would let her borrow my leather jacket whenever she wants. I floated around in a daze all morning, and then at twelve o'clock I hurried into the washroom to make sure I looked OK. I filled my tray in the cafeteria, though I had trouble managing a single bite. Then Shelley brought Eric over—Eric Revel is his name. He grinned and said, "Hi!"—and I sneezed all over him! It was *really* embarrassing, and I know it happened because I was stressed out. For as long as I can remember, I've always sneezed whenever I'm nervous. My dentist hates it!

September 11

More ghastly disasters. I ran into Eric in the corridor twice today, and I sneezed both times. He'll think I've got some weird disease or something! Now we've been assigned to work on a science project together, so I'm delighted, but also a bit desperate.

September 12

Eric and I started work on our assignment today. Immediately my nose began to prickle, but I'd thought of a strategy. I inhaled deeply, counted to ten, and then gave him a great big smile. I don't know why but, although my eyes watered a bit, I DIDN'T SNEEZE! You know what, Dear Diary? I bet my science project *and* my Eric project are going to turn out fine—if I can just get him to stop offering me a tissue every time he sees me!

Scribbles

Word Count: 311

I stood there with the can in my hand. I couldn't believe what I'd just done. I'd spray-painted my initials in crimson letters across the side of the school, while Danny and the other guys fell down laughing. They claimed it was very artistic. Danny's the one who got me into it. When my family moved here, I had trouble meeting people. When Danny and his friends let me hang around with them, I was so grateful that I went along with whatever they did. They thought painting scribbles on buildings was just hilarious, so I started doing it too.

The next day when I got to school, the scribbles practically jumped off the wall at me. They made the whole place look trashy. When the principal made an announcement about it, Danny's blond head swung around. He smirked and gave me a thumbs-up, but I felt as if those bright red letters were branded right across my forehead. I could imagine what my grandfather would say if he found out, because he's a Mi'kmaq elder and he talks a lot about respect. So, after school, I dug out some money I'd saved and headed for the hardware store. I asked the guy there how to remove paint, and he said he had something that worked, but it would take a lot of scrubbing.

He was right! Hours later, I was just scrubbing away the last of the scribbles when I heard someone behind me. It was Danny. I knew he wasn't going to be pleased, but I just told him the wall looked crummy, and that people might think *we* were garbage because we

went to a place that *looked* like garbage. Danny frowned, but then he shrugged and said painting stuff was pretty boring anyway. So that's how I got my nickname—just call me Wipeout.

Lazy Susan

Word Count: 371

Once I left hospital, I had to decide what to do with the insurance money. Since I'd be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, I wanted to spend it on something to help me get around better. Maybe a car with special controls to allow me to drive? Not for this geek. What I really wanted was a powerful laptop, a laser printer, and Internet access. That way I could travel not just locally, but globally.

First thing I looked for once I got set up was Web sites for young writers. I found one that sponsors a contest every year. You send them a story, they post it, and other people can post comments on it. At year-end, they give prizes for the three best stories.

I wrote about a homeless woman I know who dresses in shabby clothes and carries everything she owns in a shopping cart. My friends and I used to tease her, calling her Lazy Susan and other mean names. Not very nice, were we?

I guess being in a wheelchair makes you look differently at people. Now I don't feel like teasing her. Instead, I wonder what she was like when she was my age and what happened in her life that left her living on the street.

I can't ask her because she still runs away whenever she sees me. So I had to use my imagination to explain why her life turned out the way it did. I worked hard on the story. I ended up rewriting it five times before sending it in. I didn't win any prizes, but people from London, Tokyo, and Miami all posted comments saying how much the story had moved them.

That encouraged me to write more stories about people I had never thought about before I had my accident. If any good comes out of losing the use of my legs, it will be this: it made me develop a sensitivity I didn't have before. That, in turn, made me want to communicate what I see and feel. Using your imagination and experience to reach someone on the other side of the world isn't a small thing; it's very satisfying.