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Reading Between the Lines: A Student Help Book

SECTION A: READING

Read the lines themselves, first of all, in the magazine article below (from a recent **IB** exam). Read them twice if you feel you need to. Then we'll read between them, using *CAPS*.

PASSAGE 1

Travel Tales: Indonesia's Wild Spin on Ping-Pong

In the Indonesian archipelago of Mentawai, ping-pong has evolved into an odd game of reflexes and relief.

by Eddy Patricelli

It's a blinding series of attacks. Arms and legs whip toward me. Tiny balls ricochet off my body. Spectators laugh with each barrage. I would duck, but there's no hiding. My attacker gathers a small orange piece of ammunition, raises it in his cupped hand for all to see, then crouches — his wooden racket drawn taut behind his ear as if he were steadying an arched bow. He glances my way. "Three seero."

At home, I love pingpong. Here in the Mentawai Islands, a tiny Indonesian archipelago, the game confuses me. I hold a weird paddle. The mahogany table before me is covered with sand. I want to brush it off, but the local teens here won't let me. Even weirder, they aren't cheering for my opponent. They aren't cheering for me. They seem to be cheering for the ball. Every time it bounces they make short bursts of odd noises. All of them are smoking. It's 7.05am.



An hour ago, shouts from these teens woke me from a bad dream. In it, a tsunami was rolling over this low-lying island, over my beach hut and my bed with me in it. My mind is a mess. An earthquake devastated the nearby city of Padang just days ago. Tsunami warnings have been constant. I'm told that's not unusual here. The region is one of the most seismically active in the world. Now these teens have given me something else to ponder: this game.

I look at the artwork carved directly into my pingpong paddle's open wooden face. A question gnaws at me: How does one hit a pingpong ball with a wooden sculpture?

Crouch. Uncoil. Slam. "Four seero."

The ball is dented, more cookie jar than sphere. I hold it up to the group. "It's broken," I tell them. A teen examines the ball and tosses it to my attacker, who again crouches and raises his paddle. "Four seero."

"Wait. What?" The teens nod for me to keep playing, to ignore the dented ball. "But ... but it's broken."

"Ball better this way," one of them says. *Better?*

Slam. The ball buzzes past me. "Five seero."

The teens point behind me. I scan the sand. No ball. They shout for me to find it, but even they don't speak a common language. Most hail from Padang, a developed city on Sumatra. A few were born here in the Mentawai Islands, a time capsule with its own vernacular. The only shared aspect of the two languages has neither a past nor a future tense. It's all right here, right now. It's all about the ball.

I find it 10 steps from the pingpong table. I look back at the teens; bed hair, bloodshot eyes and cigarette smoke.

I spot a different ball lying in the sand in perfect condition. "This one?" I ask, holding the new ball high.

"No no no," they protest. "Other ball. Other ball." I toss the mangled ball to my attacker. He tosses it back to me. It's my serve. I hold the dented ball up, raise my weird wooden paddle and look across the sandy table. None of this makes sense. *Whatever. Just swing.*

Contact. The ball bounces true. My attacker returns it. We rally. The teens shout at the ball — wishing, willing it in some fashion with each bounce. My attacker slams a winner. The teens sigh, clearly disappointed.

Yesterday, a local elder told me that only a few of these teens returned to Padang to see their families after the earthquake. "Earthquakes are part of life," he shrugged. "They're devastating, but ever-present."

"Six seero." My attacker wants me to serve. We rally. The teens shout at the ball, louder as the rally builds steam.

My attacker mis-hits. The ball rises high in the air, a lob — an easy slam for me. I turn my shoulders, crouch and uncoil — arms and body unleashing at ...

The ball bounces off its dent and darts sideways off the table. My swing parts yards of empty air. Roars of laughter fill it. Teens fall to their knees, wipe their eyes, lean on one another for support. Even my attacker, now lying in the sand, looks like a baby on his back, cooing at the world above.

Eventually, one of the teens holds the dented ball before me. "Ball better, yes?" he asks beaming. I nod, take the dented ball and smile. To the teens, to me, nothing at this moment could be better than an unexpected bounce that brings joy.

Kandui Resort 714-369-5621
info@kanduiresort.com

Adapted from the online magazine *ISLANDS* www.islands.com

Context

Reading between the lines, now, will allow us to look behind them, at the immediate *setting* in which the events it describes happen (the internal context), and also the wider *circumstances* within which the article was written (its external context).

The internal context is important because it is often the route by which the writer takes the reader out into the passage's larger background, where we can begin to ask such questions as 'Who wrote this? To whom? Where, when and why? And why did he write it in this particular way?'

Setting first of all, then. What details in the passage give us a sense that this place is exotic, and has charm? Begin with the photograph.

Box 1.1 in the Answers Booklet

- o Palm trees
- o Thatched roof
- o The glass fishing-net floats hanging from the beams. They don't seem to have light bulbs in them so perhaps there's no electricity here.

Now the text.

1.2

- o The references to the location's faraway, secluded and special nature (it is part of '*a tiny Indonesian archipelago*', '*a time capsule with its own vernacular*', where only limited English is spoken – '*Ball better this way*')
- o The carved ping-pong bats, suggesting that art and craft play an important part in the lives of the people
- o The touching account of the young spectators – '*bed hair, bloodshot eyes and cigarette smoke*' – who, although needy, are cheerful and friendly, even sympathetic towards the writer...they are '*disappointed*' when he loses a point...and capable of hilarity ('*Teens fall to their knees, wipe their eyes*').

What jars with that generally attractive picture?

1.3

The references to tsunamis and earthquakes. This is also a hostile environment.

Circumstances: Why, then, is the writer here, in this paradoxical, distant and dangerous location? (Now we are beginning to look at the external context.) Are there any clues in the photograph?

1.4

You may not be able to see them clearly enough, but several of the spectators are wearing identical t-shirts, as if this is a resort and they work here.

So he's on holiday? Perhaps; but look at the acknowledgement of the article's source.

1.5

This is indeed a resort; but this is not a letter home to family: the article has been published in an online travel magazine.

Has he been paid, then, to write the article (or rewarded in some other way – with free travel and/or accommodation) by either the resort itself or the magazine, in order to make people want to go there? There's no way to know for certain; but when in a little while we examine the article's purpose we may at least be able to judge whether whoever paid him got good value.

How does the writer make us feel we ourselves have become part of the article's *internal* context?

1.6

He writes with a sense of immediacy, as if we are there (*'here'*) with him, using the present tense to bring us close in time also (*'It's all right here, right now'*).

At the same time, however, we are at home, in front of a screen of one kind or another, and are part of the passage's external context and members of the writer's...

Audience

Who are we? Browsers, certainly; but browsers looking for somewhere to go on holiday? Is the article written in such a way that it will draw us towards the Kandui Resort link and from there to the resort's booking form?

But what about the earthquakes and the tsunamis? Do we want to be surrounded, on our precious holiday, by noisy, cigarette-smoking teenagers, however friendly? Is the only available entertainment a 7.00 am game of pingpong with a broken ball? (And what sort of food will we need to eat?)

We may get as far as the booking form, if we're a very special audience (if we're young and adventurous and don't mind nightmares about being drowned); but we may well go somewhere else instead – on the ISLANDS website and ultimately on our travels.

So the article has a rather puzzling genesis. The Kandui Resort, if it funded the trip, has perhaps not been well served; and that may lead us to the conclusion that it was islands.com that set this in motion, perhaps by sending one of its staff members to Indonesia to bring back some travel tales.

Why would they do that, however, if those tales were going to raise serious questions in readers' minds, and few or no bookings were going to result?

1.7

To establish and maintain the website's reputation as in itself an interesting place to visit. Islands.com probably makes its money not from the bookings placed through it but from the paid advertisements it carries...and that revenue stream is very online-visitor-dependent.

Purpose

So we've already established at least part of the article's purpose ('to be interesting'), if somewhat speculatively. It only remains for us, then, to look at the methods by which the writer works to achieve that aim; and that has a lot to do with...

Style

You'll have noticed already that there is some overlap among the *CAPS* areas of focus: the *audience* are targets of the writer's *purpose*, and also virtual participants in the *context*; and the writer takes them into that by means of, among things, his *style* (e.g. his use of the present tense).

What other elements of the article's style capture our attention, bring the writing alive, and entertain us?

1.8

- o The excitement and drama of the game as he describes it, using strong action verbs in abbreviated sentences (*'Crouch. Uncoil. Slam.'*)
- o The sheer fun of the spectators' responses (*'Even my attacker, now lying in the sand, looks like a baby on his back, cooing at the world above'* – note the simile, with its suggestion of both merriment and innocence.
- o Imagery of war and weapons (*'barrage', 'ammunition', 'arched bow'*)
- o Repetition of key words (*'weird...even weirder...weird'*)
- o Italics for emphasis (*'Whatever. Just Swing.'*)
- o Exaggeration (*'My swing parts yards of empty air'*).

We need at this early stage to make the point that the concept of 'style' as laid out in course outlines generally includes more than just language style – the choice and arrangement of words: it covers such things as genre ('type of writing') and mode ('means' or 'method', e.g. selection of detail, structure, illustration, layout and other visual and textual effects). We've already begun to look at some of those – for instance in identifying this as travel writing and examining the information carried by the photograph.

In its broadest definition, then, 'style' refers to 'the way something is done'.

So...we've covered all four CAPS areas and gathered enough knowledge of the passage to provide sound answers to any questions an examiner may ask.

Have we, however, missed something fundamental, to do with the passage's purpose? 'To be interesting' is a rather superficial and universal objective, is it not? Who would write something that they *didn't* want their audience to be interested by?

The GCE A Level AQA equivalent of *purpose* is *function* ('the job it does'), and that term points us towards a consideration of what the actual effect of the passage is, which may be something outside its purpose.

The first guiding question in the IB exam from which this passage was taken asked candidates to explain how the article's title could be understood in more than one way. That's the examiner drawing your attention to an aspect of the passage he himself has found significant (and one which doesn't fall too obviously within CAPS). Let's see how we might answer it.

Which single word in the title (the main title, that is) has more than one possible meaning?

1.9

'Spin'.

When a writer deliberately uses a word in a context where more than one of its possible meanings can apply (usually with comic effect) we call it a...

1.10

Pun – play on words. (That's something else you could have included under *Style*.)

What different meanings, in this context, can you give to the word 'spin'?

1.11

- o The spin on a ball
- o The spin (interpretation) we put on the facts of a situation or event, for our own purposes.

Apply both meanings to the article. Look for clues in its sub-title.

1.12

- o Because the ping-pong ball is mis-shapen, and the bats' surfaces are carved, the ball can spin off in unexpected directions. The game is therefore a real test of *'reflexes'*.
- o Because the teenagers' past and recent experiences (of tsunamis) have been so painful, and their future is so uncertain, they take *'relief'* in their version of pingpong, which brings them together in the present – *'right now'* – and in the shared language of the game. That is what the game means to them – their 'spin' on it: it is less of a game and more of a therapy.

We have noted, then, the literal meaning of 'spin', and also what additional importance pingpong has for the youngsters who rely on it to give them some release from the pain and anxiety they suffer. Is it possible to see the writer, however, as he further 'ponders' a game which doesn't *'make sense'*, putting his own spin on what he has experienced, and giving it an even deeper significance?

1.13

- o He comes to realise that in the context of a very uncertain world where *'Earthquakes are part of life'*, the young spectators are trying to exert some control over the ball, *'willing it in some fashion with each bounce'*, and that as well as an entertainment and a source of relief the game is an expression of the youngsters' need to feel that they can make a difference, by sheer force of will, to the way things 'bounce' in their lives.
- o He also sees the delight they take from the game as an affirmation of their belief that for every bad bounce, making the ball impossible to hit, there is a good one which brings the ball within reach – the *'unexpected bounce that brings joy'*...and that has implications for their whole existence.

The writer's struggle to understand his experience is central to the passage: it's what he himself wants to communicate, it gives the article depth, focus and cohesion, and it ensures that islands.com gets what it paid for: an engaging and thought-provoking piece of writing.

Part of the passage's function, then, lying beyond its purpose, is to help the writer towards that personal understanding, as he works to put his thoughts and feelings into words that will be understood by other people. In that way the passage itself provides a kind of therapy for the writer (whose *'mind is a mess'*), almost as surely as pingpong does for the youngsters at Kandui Resort.

Be aware, then, that writing can have more than one purpose (or function), detectable at different levels.

Guiding Questions

If the examiner has supplied you with guiding questions (as in the **IB Standard Level** exam, for instance, or the **AP Language and Literature** Free-Response Analysis prompt, and most **GCE A Level** exams) you will find that they relate, directly or indirectly, to the passage's content (the information it provides, the story it tells, the ideas and arguments it puts forward). This is the material that the *CAPS* elements, in effect, rotate around, and you should find that as you have worked through each of the four elements in Passage 1 you have come to a very good understanding of what the whole piece is 'about'.

Here is a generalised guiding question on the passage. You need not answer it (unless you have time and inclination); but you should by now be reassured that you could, more than satisfactorily, if you had to.

Analyse the methods by which the writer transports us to an unusual location, and leads us through his thinking about what he experienced there.

