

## AMAZON SUPERSNAKE

### The Giant Anaconda

Major Percy Fawcett had heard tales from local Indians of a giant snake living in the rivers of Brazil, but he didn't believe them. A surveyor for the Royal Geographic Society of London, Fawcett was skeptical of such legends. Then one day in 1907, he was drifting down the Rio Abuna. All at once, he saw the large triangular head of a snake near the bow of the boat. The tales *were* true, he thought to himself.

<sup>2</sup> "It was a giant anaconda," Fawcett later claimed. Taking his rifle, he "smashed a .44 soft-nosed bullet into its spine, 10 feet below the wicked head." The wounded snake struggled to move the upper part of its body onto the riverbank. Its tail, though, still thrashed in the water around the canoe. Fawcett wrote: "We stepped ashore and approached the reptile with caution. It was out of action, but shivers ran up and down the body.... As far as it was possible to measure, a length of 45 feet lay out of the water, and 17 feet in it, making a total length of 62 feet."

<sup>3</sup> Was this accurate? Could a snake really be that big? Fawcett was a credible witness. (He was the real-life inspiration for Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones.) Still, hunters have often exaggerated the size of their prey. A 62-foot snake was too incredible for the experts at the Royal Geographic Society to believe. They ignored his report.

<sup>4</sup> Fawcett could not drag the huge snake out of the jungle, so he could not prove his claim. From time to time, though, other people have seen even longer snakes. In the late 1940s, there were reports of another massive snake in Brazil. This creature was said to be between 60 and 150 feet long with glowing green eyes. Newspaper stories reported that it battled army soldiers and even knocked over buildings. But again, none of these wild tales was confirmed.

<sup>5</sup> Today we know that the anaconda is real enough. And it is such a fierce creature that it is easy to see why people might exaggerate its true size and abilities. Padre Gumilla, a Jesuit priest, lived in Venezuela in the 1600s. He wrote that the anaconda could hypnotize its prey. The priest also claimed that the snake killed by shooting invisible poisonous vapors from its mouth. None of these claims is true. Still, the truth about the anaconda is scary enough. This is one animal you want to see only if it is behind a glass window at the zoo.

<sup>6</sup> The anaconda is the world's largest snake. A few of the specimens that have been found measure up to 40 feet long—about the length of a school bus. The anaconda's head has a prominent red stripe, and its olive-colored body has black markings. In the water, the snake is constantly flicking its menacing tongue. It uses its sense of taste to discover what is going on around it. The anaconda is also the heaviest snake—especially after it eats. One female anaconda weighed in at 500 pounds.

<sup>7</sup> The giant anaconda is a kind of boa constrictor. To kill, it sinks its teeth into an animal. It then wraps itself around the prey. The snake literally squeezes, or constricts, the prey into submission. Next, the snake takes its poor victim underwater. There it swallows the animal whole. Unfortunately, the victim is often still alive and might remain so for hours in the beast's stomach!

<sup>8</sup> It may take up to a week for the snake to fully digest its meal. During this time, it spends its time basking in the sun by a riverbank. When the snake doesn't have a full stomach, though, it is extremely dangerous. If you ever go camping in the Amazon, take care. It would be most unwise to go for a swim in the river after dark. The anaconda can sneak up on its prey with great cunning, barely rippling the water. And the snake can swim much faster than humans. That is why the anaconda is so feared by the native people of the region. These jungle residents regard the monster as one of the seven "curses" of the Amazon.

<sup>9</sup> Most of the time the anaconda feeds on fish, birds, crocodiles, turtles, and deer. Early Spanish settlers called the snake *matatoro*, or "bull killer." There is no proof that an anaconda ever really ate a bull, but it is possible. Like most snakes, it can unhinge its jaw. That allows it to swallow an animal larger than itself.

<sup>10</sup> Attacks on humans are rare. But once in a great while they do occur. In April 1977, an attack took place in a remote region of Peru. An 18-foot anaconda killed three children aged 7, 11, and 13. The children had been fishing on a boat. Witnesses said that a big snake toppled the boat and then crushed the children.

<sup>11</sup> Despite its size, little is known about the anaconda. The snake spends most of its time in murky rivers with just its head above the surface. Shy by nature, it seldom emerges from the water long enough to be seen. And it inhabits a part of the world where very few people live. So when it does leave the water, there may be no one around to see it. Few attempts have been made to study the snake in its natural habitat. Even the experts can't agree on how large this snake might grow. It's quite possible that the largest specimens have not been found yet.

*If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on.*

**Reading Time: Lesson**

\_\_\_\_\_ : \_\_\_\_\_

Minutes

Seconds

## **A** Finding the Main Idea

One statement below expresses the main idea of the article. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other statement explains only part of the article; it is too narrow. Label the statements using the following key:

M—Main Idea

B—Too Broad

N—Too Narrow

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. When Major Percy Fawcett reported that he had seen a 62-foot snake, the Royal Geographic Society didn't believe him.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The anaconda is one of the most fascinating animals in the world.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The giant anaconda, the world's largest snake, is a kind of boa constrictor about which little is known.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 15 points for a correct M answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 5 points for each correct B or N answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score:** Finding the Main Idea

## **B** Recalling Facts

How well do you remember the facts in the article? Put an X in the box next to the answer that correctly completes each statement about the article.

1. Major Percy Fawcett was a surveyor for
  - ☐ a. Steven Spielberg.
  - ☐ b. the Royal Geographic Society.
  - ☐ c. Padre Gumilla.
2. To discover what is going on around it, the anaconda uses
  - ☐ a. its sense of smell.
  - ☐ b. invisible poisonous vapors.
  - ☐ c. its sense of taste.
3. After the anaconda sinks its teeth into an animal, it
  - ☐ a. bites its head off.
  - ☐ b. wraps around and squeezes its prey.
  - ☐ c. drags it up onto the riverbank.
4. The native people of the Amazon jungle regard the anaconda as
  - ☐ a. harmless and shy.
  - ☐ b. *matatoro*, or "bull killer."
  - ☐ c. one of the seven curses of the Amazon.
5. The anaconda spends most of its time
  - ☐ a. in trees.
  - ☐ b. on land.
  - ☐ c. in rivers.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Recalling Facts

### **C Making Inferences**

When you combine your own experience and information from a text to draw a conclusion that is not directly stated in that text, you are making an inference. Below are five statements that may or may not be inferences based on information in the article. Label the statements using the following key:

**C—Correct Inference      F—Faulty Inference**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The anaconda poses a great threat to human life around the world.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Major Percy Fawcett led an adventurous life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Padre Gumilla purposely fooled people with his inaccurate stories about the anaconda.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Scientists have made few attempts to study anacondas because they feel that these snakes are simply not very interesting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. As a general rule, most people should avoid swimming in the Amazon River.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Making Inferences

### **D Using Words Precisely**

Each numbered sentence below contains an underlined word or phrase from the article. Following the sentence are three definitions. One definition is closest to the meaning of the underlined word. One definition is opposite or nearly opposite. Label those two definitions using the following key. Do not label the remaining definition.

**C—Closest      O—Opposite or Nearly Opposite**

- 1. Its tail, though, still thrashed in the water around the canoe.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. lashed out
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. was visible
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. lay still
- 2. Still, hunters have often exaggerated the size of their prey.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. underrated
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. recorded
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. overstated

3. The snake literally squeezes, or constricts, the prey into submission.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a. attack mode  
 \_\_\_\_\_ b. a state of surrender  
 \_\_\_\_\_ c. unconsciousness
4. The anaconda can sneak up on its prey with great cunning, barely rippling the water.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a. silence  
 \_\_\_\_\_ b. dullness  
 \_\_\_\_\_ c. slyness
5. The snake spends most of its time in murky rivers with just its head above the surface.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ a. dark  
 \_\_\_\_\_ b. warm  
 \_\_\_\_\_ c. clear

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 3 points for each correct C answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 2 points for each correct O answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score:** Using Words Precisely

Enter the four total scores in the spaces below, and add them together to find your Reading Comprehension Score. Then record your score on the graph on.

Score	Question Type
_____	Finding the Main Idea
_____	Recalling Facts
_____	Making Inferences
_____	Using Words Precisely
_____	Reading Comprehension Score

## Author's Approach

Put an X in the box next to the correct answer.

1. What does the author mean by the statement "Fawcett was a credible witness"?
- ☐ a. Fawcett could not be trusted.
- ☐ b. Fawcett could be counted on to report what he saw accurately.
- ☐ c. Fawcett frequently gave evidence in legal trials.

2. The main purpose of the first paragraph is to
- ☐ a. inform the reader about the Royal Geographic Society.
  - ☐ b. entertain the reader with an adventure story.
  - ☐ c. introduce the reader to the possibility that a giant snake exists.
3. Choose the statement below that best describes the author's position in paragraph 8.
- ☐ a. The anaconda is particularly dangerous in the water.
  - ☐ b. No one should ever go camping in the Amazon area.
  - ☐ c. The native people of the Amazon do not respect the giant anaconda.
4. The author probably wrote this article in order to
- ☐ a. tell the reader about Major Fawcett.
  - ☐ b. describe the qualities of the giant anaconda.
  - ☐ c. convince the reader that the giant anaconda should be wiped out.

\_\_\_\_ Number of correct answers

Record your personal assessment of your work on the Critical Thinking Chart on.

## Summarizing and Paraphrasing

Follow the directions provided for question 1. Put an X in the box next to the correct answer for question 2.

1. Reread paragraph 10 in the article. Below, write a summary of the paragraph in no more than 25 words.

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Reread your summary and decide whether it covers the important ideas in the paragraph. Next, decide how to shorten the summary to 15 words or less without leaving out any essential information. Write this summary below.

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2. Read the statement about the article below. Then read the paraphrase of that statement. Choose the reason that best tells why the paraphrase does not say the same thing as the statement.

Statement: In the 1940s, newspaper stories reported that a snake 60 to 150 feet long with glowing green eyes had fought against army soldiers and knocked over buildings in Brazil.

Paraphrase: In the 1940s, soldiers told newspaper reporters in Brazil that they had seen a huge snake with shiny green eyes destroy some buildings.

- ☐ a. Paraphrase says too much.  
☐ b. Paraphrase doesn't say enough.  
☐ c. Paraphrase doesn't agree with the statement about the article.

\_\_\_\_ Number of correct answers

Record your personal assessment of your work on the Critical Thinking Chart on.

## Critical Thinking

Follow the directions provided for questions 1, 3, and 4. Put an X in the box next to the correct answer for the other questions.

1. For each statement below, write O if it expresses an opinion and write F if it expresses a fact.

- \_\_\_\_ a. The anaconda is the world's largest and heaviest snake.  
 \_\_\_\_ b. Major Fawcett was the inspiration for Indiana Jones.  
 \_\_\_\_ c. The anaconda is the greatest curse of the Amazon.

2. From the article, you can predict that if Major Fawcett hadn't shot the anaconda, the snake might have

- ☐ a. overturned Fawcett's boat and crushed him.  
☐ b. swallowed the boat.  
☐ c. shot poisonous vapors from its mouth.

3. Choose from the letters below to correctly complete the following statement. Write the letters on the lines.

On the positive side, \_\_\_\_\_, but on the negative side \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. an anaconda attacked three young children in 1977  
 b. anacondas are fascinating and impressive creatures  
 c. no one knows how large the snakes might grow

4. Reread paragraph 3. Then choose from the letters below to correctly complete the following statement. Write the letters on the lines.

According to paragraph 3, \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. experts at the Royal Geographic Society ignored Fawcett's report  
 b. Fawcett was a credible witness  
 c. they thought Fawcett was exaggerating the size of the anaconda

5. What did you have to do to answer question 2?

- ☐ a. find an opinion (what someone thinks about something)
- ☐ b. find a cause (why something happened)
- ☐ c. make a prediction (what might happen next)

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of correct answers

Record your personal assessment of your work on the Critical Thinking Chart on.

## Personal Response

What was most surprising or interesting to you about this article?

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## Self-Assessment

From reading this article, I have learned

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