1.1-5 Comprehension: Fiction Set 5: 30-minute Pack

GL ASSESSMENT / CSSE 11+ Entrance English (GL Assessment / CSSE style) · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

Five Minutes to Curtain

Source written for Revision Library (original, copyright-free). Fictional narrative created for 11+ comprehension practice.

Zainab Hussain had never known backstage could feel this loud in the dark. During the interval, the narrow corridor behind the wings filled with hurried footsteps, hissed instructions and the clatter of costume rails being wheeled into position for Act Two, while beyond the heavy velvet curtain the audience's chatter rose and fell like a tide she could not see. It was opening night of The Star Thief at Northgate Community Theatre, and Zainab, eleven years old and only one week into her very first job as a props assistant, still could not quite believe she was allowed to be here at all.

'Fifteen minutes,' called Mrs Adeyemi, the stage manager, without looking up from her clipboard. She had run the technical side of every Northgate production for longer than Zainab had been alive, and her calm, steady voice cut cleanly through the backstage chaos, a fixed point among all the hurry. 'Zainab, check every prop on this list against the table before Act Two starts. Nothing missing, nothing broken. Can you manage on your own for ten minutes? I have a costume disaster in the dressing room that will not mend itself.'

Zainab nodded, though her stomach had knotted itself tight with nerves. She had wanted exactly this kind of responsibility all week, ever since Mrs Adeyemi had first let her carry the prop box unsupervised, and she was not about to admit, on opening night of all nights, that the list of seven items now trembling slightly in her hands felt heavier than it looked.

The theatre itself was ninety-two years old, built in 1934, and much of what happened backstage still relied on the same rope-and-pulley systems installed when the building first opened. Nowhere was this more true than the trapdoor set into the centre of the stage, used in Act Two for the villain's dramatic vanishing trick, which was worked entirely by a single counterweight rope running up through the flies above the stage.

Zainab worked steadily down her list: the brass telescope, the folded star map, the tin lantern, the coil of silver rope, the wooden treasure chest, the glass compass, and the cloak lined with painted stars. Six items sat exactly where they should, each one checked and ticked off with satisfying precision. It was only as she reached for the seventh, tucked behind a stack of storage crates beside the trapdoor, that she noticed something else entirely.

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

The trapdoor's counterweight rope, thick as her wrist and usually smooth with age, had frayed almost through at one point, no more than a few threads holding the full weight of the mechanism together. Zainab crouched and touched it carefully, and a handful of loose fibres came away beneath her fingers like the last threads of an old jumper.

Her first thought was to find Mrs Adeyemi immediately, but the stage manager's voice was still audible from the dressing room corridor, tight with its own crisis, and the clock above the props table already read eight minutes to curtain. If the rope gave way mid-performance, with an actor standing on the trapdoor, the consequences did not bear thinking about. If she stopped the trick altogether without warning anyone, the whole carefully rehearsed scene would collapse in front of a packed house.

Zainab forced herself to think, rather than panic. She had spent three Saturday rehearsals watching the theatre's retired technician, old Mr Bellweather, explain exactly how the counterweight system worked, tracing the rope's path with his finger until she could have drawn the whole mechanism from memory. A spare coil of matching rope, she remembered, was kept precisely for emergencies, coiled on a hook just inside the props store.

She fetched it at a run, her heart hammering somewhere near her throat, and set to work exactly as Mr Bellweather had once shown her, threading the new rope through the pulley, tying it off with the same double, load-bearing knot he had made her practise until her fingers ached. Her hands were shaking, but she did not let herself stop to notice.

The two-minute call sounded through the tannoy just as Zainab tied the final knot and tugged it twice, hard, to test it. The rope held firm. Around her, the corridor emptied as the cast took their places, and somewhere beyond the curtain the house lights began, very slowly, to dim.

Ravi Okafor, who played the villainous Lord Vane and would be standing directly on the trapdoor within the next ten minutes, jogged past without a second glance, already muttering his opening lines under his breath. He had no idea how close his vanishing trick had come to vanishing for entirely the wrong reasons.

Act Two went perfectly. When Lord Vane's cloak swept dramatically over the trapdoor and he dropped from sight in a puff of stage smoke, the audience gasped, exactly as they were meant to, and Zainab, watching from the wings with her checklist still clutched in one hand, allowed herself, finally, to breathe out properly for what felt like the first time in twenty minutes.

Afterwards, Mrs Adeyemi found the old, frayed rope coiled neatly on the props table, exactly where Zainab had left it as evidence, with a note explaining what she had done. The stage manager said nothing for a long moment, turning the worn rope over in her hands, before looking up at Zainab with an expression she could not quite read.

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

'You should have come and got me,' she said at last, though her voice had none of its earlier sharpness. 'But you fixed it properly, and you fixed it in time, and I am not sure I could have done it faster myself.' She paused. 'Same time next Saturday, Zainab. I think this job suits you.'

Zainab said nothing, but as she carried her checklist back towards the props table, she found she was smiling in a way she could not quite stop, and the noise of the audience beyond the curtain, applauding a trick they would never know had almost gone wrong, no longer sounded like a tide she could not see, but like something she was, at last, quietly and properly a part of.

1 Look at paragraph 3. Why does Zainab not admit that the props list 'felt heavier than it looked'?

- ☐ A) She is too tired to speak
- ☐ B) She thinks the list is unimportant
- ☐ C) She does not understand what is on the list
- ☐ D) She is proud of the responsibility and does not want to seem unable to cope, especially on opening night
- ☐ E) She has already lost the list

---

2 Look at paragraph 7. Why does Zainab hesitate before deciding what to do about the frayed rope?

- ☐ A) She is weighing up two difficult choices, both with serious consequences, in very little time
- ☐ B) She has been told never to touch the trapdoor
- ☐ C) She wants to find someone else to blame for the damage
- ☐ D) She does not think the rope is a real problem
- ☐ E) She does not know what a counterweight rope is

---

3 Look at paragraph 7. Explain why the detail that the clock read 'eight minutes to curtain' increases the tension of this moment.

(2)

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

4 Look at paragraph 8. Explain what this paragraph suggests about why Zainab feels able to fix the rope herself.

(2)

---

5 Which technique does the writer use in the phrase 'the audience's chatter rose and fell like a tide she could not see' (paragraph 1)?

- ☐ A) Onomatopoeia
- ☐ B) Alliteration
- ☐ C) Direct speech
- ☐ D) Rhyme
- ☐ E) Simile

---

6 Explain the effect of the simile in paragraph 1, 'the audience's chatter rose and fell like a tide she could not see', on the reader's understanding of backstage life.

(2)

---

7 Why might the writer have used the short sentence 'The rope held firm.' (paragraph 10) immediately after Zainab finishes her repair?

- ☐ A) To introduce a new character
- ☐ B) To end the scene with no resolution
- ☐ C) To slow the pace down and add more description
- ☐ D) To create a sudden release of tension after a dramatic build-up
- ☐ E) To confuse the reader about what has happened

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

8 Look at paragraph 11. What does Ravi Okafor's lack of awareness, jogging past 'without a second glance', emphasise about Zainab's actions?

- [ ] A) That her repair was not really necessary
- [ ] B) That she solved the problem quietly and effectively, without anyone else needing to know
- [ ] C) That Ravi did not trust her
- [ ] D) That the trick had already failed once before that night
- [ ] E) That Ravi was responsible for checking the rope himself

---

9 Look at paragraph 13. Explain what Zainab's action of leaving the old rope 'coiled neatly on the props table...with a note explaining what she had done' suggests about her character.

(2)

---

10 What does Mrs Adeyemi say near the end of the extract that suggests Zainab will keep her job as props assistant?

- [ ] A) 'Same time next Saturday, Zainab. I think this job suits you.'
- [ ] B) 'Nothing missing, nothing broken.'
- [ ] C) 'You should have come and got me.'
- [ ] D) 'I have a costume disaster in the dressing room.'
- [ ] E) 'Fifteen minutes.'

---

11 Look at paragraph 11. What does 'muttering' suggest about how Ravi said his opening lines?

- [ ] A) Reading them from a script for the first time
- [ ] B) Shouting them loudly and clearly
- [ ] C) Saying them quietly and indistinctly, half to himself
- [ ] D) Refusing to say them at all
- [ ] E) Singing them tunefully

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

12 Look at paragraph 4. In which year was Northgate Community Theatre built?

- [ ] A) 1901
- [ ] B) 1920
- [ ] C) 1934
- [ ] D) 1955
- [ ] E) 1978

---

13 How many items were on Zainab's props list?

- [ ] A) Seven
- [ ] B) Eight
- [ ] C) Ten
- [ ] D) Five
- [ ] E) Six

---

14 Look at paragraph 6. What does 'frayed' mean, as used to describe the counterweight rope?

- [ ] A) Tied in a tight knot
- [ ] B) Painted a bright colour
- [ ] C) Coiled up neatly
- [ ] D) Brand new and unused
- [ ] E) Worn away and starting to unravel

---

15 Look at paragraph 9. What does 'hammering' suggest about Zainab's heart?

- [ ] A) It was beating slowly and calmly
- [ ] B) It was beating hard and fast, showing fear or urgency
- [ ] C) It had stopped completely
- [ ] D) It was making a loud noise others could hear
- [ ] E) It was aching with sadness

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

16 Look at paragraph 2. What does 'cut cleanly through' suggest about the way Mrs Adeyemi's voice sounded amid the backstage noise?

- ☐ A) It was confused and difficult to follow
- ☐ B) It was angry and shouted
- ☐ C) It was clear and easily heard above the surrounding chaos
- ☐ D) It was harsh and unpleasant to hear
- ☐ E) It was quiet and hesitant

---

17 What was the name of the play being performed on opening night?

- ☐ A) Under the Big Top
- ☐ B) Lord Vane's Revenge
- ☐ C) The Ice Palace
- ☐ D) The Vanishing Act
- ☐ E) The Star Thief

---

18 How long had Zainab been working as a props assistant?

- ☐ A) One day
- ☐ B) One week
- ☐ C) One month
- ☐ D) One year
- ☐ E) Six months

---

19 According to paragraph 2, what did Mrs Adeyemi ask Zainab to check?

- ☐ A) The audience seating
- ☐ B) The costume rails
- ☐ C) The trapdoor mechanism
- ☐ D) Every prop on the list against the table
- ☐ E) The lighting rig

---

20 Find and copy one word from paragraph 3 that shows Zainab's hands were shaking slightly as she held the list.

.....

.....

(1)

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

21 Explain how the writer builds tension across paragraphs 6 to 10, referring to at least two techniques and using evidence from the text.

(3)

---

22 Look at paragraph 14. Explain what Mrs Adeyemi's comment, 'I am not sure I could have done it faster myself,' suggests about her true feelings towards what Zainab did, despite her earlier words of caution.

(2)

---

23 Explain how the description of the audience's applause in the final paragraph echoes and develops the image used in paragraph 1, and what effect this has on the reader.

(3)

---

24 In your own words, summarise the problem Zainab discovers and how she solves it, and explain why this was significant.

(3)

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

Mark scheme · 1.1-5 Comprehension: Fiction Set 5: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

D **B1**

Answer: D) She is proud of the responsibility and does not want to seem unable to cope, especially on opening night

Question 2

A **B1**

Answer: A) She is weighing up two difficult choices, both with serious consequences, in very little time

Question 3

idea that it introduces a strict, ticking countdown, showing Zainab has very little time to solve a serious problem **B1**

idea that it heightens urgency because the consequences of running out of time are serious (an actor could be hurt, or the trick could fail in front of the audience) **B1**

Answer: The exact countdown creates a sense of a ticking clock, showing Zainab has almost no time left to act, which heightens the tension because the consequences of failing, injury or a ruined performance, are so serious.

Question 4

idea that she draws on specific past experience or training (three Saturdays watching Mr Bellweather) rather than guessing blindly **B1**

idea that she has a clear, remembered plan, for example knowing exactly where the spare rope is kept, rather than panicking **B1**

Answer: She feels able to fix it because she has genuine relevant experience, having watched the retired technician Mr Bellweather explain the mechanism in detail, and she remembers precisely where the spare rope is kept, giving her a clear plan rather than blind panic.

Question 5

E **B1**

Answer: E) Simile

Question 6

idea that it suggests the audience feels like a huge, powerful, ever-present force, like the sea, even though it cannot be seen from backstage **B1**

idea that it conveys how mysterious or unknown the audience feels to Zainab, building atmosphere and a sense of the unfamiliar from the very first line **B1**

Answer: The simile makes the unseen audience feel like a huge, powerful, natural force, similar to the sea, conveying how mysterious and slightly overwhelming the hidden audience feels to Zainab as she experiences backstage life for the first time.

Question 7

D **B1**

Answer: D) To create a sudden release of tension after a dramatic build-up

Question 8

B **B1**

Answer: B) That she solved the problem quietly and effectively, without anyone else needing to know

Question 9

idea that she is honest and transparent, choosing to explain what happened rather than hide it **B1**

idea that she is responsible and professional, treating the incident seriously enough to leave clear evidence and explanation for the stage manager **B1**

Answer: Leaving the rope and a note shows Zainab is honest and does not try to hide what happened, and also shows she is responsible and professional, treating a serious incident with the seriousness it deserves rather than simply staying quiet about it.

Question 10

A **B1**

Answer: A) 'Same time next Saturday, Zainab. I think this job suits you.'

Question 11

C **B1**

Answer: C) Saying them quietly and indistinctly, half to himself

Question 12

C **B1**

Answer: C) 1934

Question 13

A **B1**

Answer: A) Seven

Question 14

E **B1**

Answer: E) Worn away and starting to unravel

Question 15

B **B1**

Answer: B) It was beating hard and fast, showing fear or urgency

Question 16

C **B1**

Answer: C) It was clear and easily heard above the surrounding chaos

Question 17

E **B1**

Answer: E) The Star Thief

Question 18

B **B1**

Answer: B) One week

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk

Question 19

D **B1**

Answer: D) Every prop on the list against the table

Question 20

trembling **B1**

Answer: trembling

Question 21

identifies a language feature, for example the simile 'like the last threads of an old jumper', making the danger feel fragile and physical, with brief comment on effect **B1**

identifies the ticking clock detail ('eight minutes to curtain', the 'two-minute call'), creating a countdown structure that increases urgency, with brief comment on effect **B1**

identifies physical description of Zainab's fear or effort (heart 'hammering', hands 'shaking'), conveying the pressure she is under, with brief comment on effect **B1**

Answer: Tension builds through the fragile, physical simile of the fraying rope ('like the last threads of an old jumper'), the ticking countdown of exact times ('eight minutes to curtain', the 'two-minute call'), and the physical descriptions of Zainab's fear, such as her heart 'hammering' and her shaking hands, all combining to convey mounting pressure and danger.

Question 22

idea that despite the mild reprimand ('you should have come and got me'), she is genuinely impressed by Zainab's speed and competence **B1**

idea that the comment shows respect and trust rather than real anger, softening the earlier caution **B1**

Answer: Although Mrs Adeyemi begins by gently correcting Zainab for not fetching help, the admission that she is 'not sure I could have done it faster myself' reveals genuine respect and admiration for Zainab's speed and competence, showing the earlier caution was not real anger.

Question 23

identifies that paragraph 1 compares the audience to 'a tide she could not see', and the final paragraph returns to this exact image **B1**

identifies the change: the sound no longer feels unknown, but now feels like 'something she was...quietly and properly a part of', showing a shift in Zainab's feelings **B1**

comments on the effect, for example that it creates a satisfying, circular structure that shows Zainab's growth from nervous newcomer to trusted member of the backstage team **B1**

Answer: The final paragraph deliberately echoes the opening simile of the audience as 'a tide she could not see', but now the same sound feels like something Zainab is 'quietly and properly a part of', creating a circular structure that shows how far her confidence and sense of belonging have grown across the extract.

Question 24

identifies the problem in the student's own words (the trapdoor's counterweight rope had frayed almost through, making the vanishing trick dangerous for the actor) **B1**

identifies how she solves it in the student's own words (fetches a spare rope from the props store and re-ties the mechanism correctly, using knowledge she had learned earlier from Mr Bellweather) **B1**

explains the significance (prevents a possible injury or a ruined performance, and shows Zainab can be trusted with real responsibility, leading to her being asked back) **B1**

Answer: Zainab discovers that the rope holding up the stage trapdoor mechanism has almost worn through, making the villain's disappearing trick dangerous. Drawing on what she had learned from the theatre's retired technician, she replaces it with a spare rope and reties it correctly just in time, preventing a possible accident or a ruined show, which shows she can be trusted with genuine responsibility and earns her the job for future performances.

© Revision Library | revisionlibrary.co.uk