

“The Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel” from *Two Hot Dogs with Everything* by Paul Haven

Created by Student Achievement Partners

GRADE LEVEL: 6

GENRE: Literary

SUBJECT(S): English Language Arts

LENGTH: 18 pages

ASSESSMENT:

This Grade 6 Mini-Assessment is based on “The Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel.” This text is worthy of students’ time to read and also meets the expectations for text complexity at Grade 6. Assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will employ quality, complex texts such as this one.

Questions aligned to the CCSS should be worthy of students’ time to answer and therefore do not focus on minor points of the texts. Several standards may be addressed within the same question because complex texts tend to yield rich assessment questions that call for deep analysis. In this mini-assessment there are 6 questions that address the Reading Standards below and one Constructed Response question that addresses the Writing Standards below. We encourage educators to give students the time that they need to read closely and write to sources. While we know that it is helpful to have students complete the mini-assessment in one class period, we encourage educators to allow additional time as is necessary.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ADDRESSED:

RL.6.1 – RL.6.6, W.6.2, W.6.9

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NAME: _____

DATE: _____

PERIOD: _____

Today you will read a story that introduces the reader to the fictional Sluggers baseball team. You will then answer several questions based on the text. I will be happy to answer questions about the directions, but I will not help you with the answers to any questions. You will notice as you answer the questions that some of the questions have two parts. You should answer Part A of the question before you answer Part B, but you may go back and change your answer to Part A if you want to.

Take as long as you need to read and answer the questions. If you do not finish when class ends, come see me to discuss the ways you may have additional time.

Now read the passage and answer the questions. I encourage you to write notes in the margin as you read the passage.

Excerpt from “The Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel” from *Two Hot Dogs with Everything* by Paul Haven

- (1) In the history of baseball, no team had tormented its fans with more gut-wrenching defeats and wasted promise than the Sluggers. And in the history of rooting for baseball, no fans had been more devoted than Sluggers fans. Every bad bounce, every lopsided trade, every bitter loss, all were stamped onto the hearts of Sluggers fans—decade after frustrating decade—until misfortune became a part of them. Any of them could reel off a list of the team’s most famous failures. There were the Phantom Strikeout of 1907, the Snowed-Out Summer of 1934, the Triple-Play Tragedy of 1967. The first had broken the heart of Danny’s great-grandfather Zechariah Gurkin, the second had crushed the spirit of his grandpa Ebenezer, and the third still brought tears to the eyes of Danny’s parents, Harold and Lydia.

- (2) In fact, in the 108 years since an immigrant bubble-gum tycoon named Manchester E. Boddlebrooks founded the team, the Sluggers had won only one championship, and that was

in their very first year. Even that glorious season, as Danny or any other Sluggers fan could tell you, was tainted by tragedy.

- (3) It all started in the smoky clubhouse after the Sluggers won the World Series. At the time, all the players wore baggy wool pants and very small caps on their heads, and the gentlemen in the stands wore fancy top hats and had pointy mustaches that curled up at the ends like bicycle handlebars. Nobody realized how silly they looked because it was so many years ago.
- (4) Boddlebrooks wasn't just any bubble-gum tycoon. He was the type of bubble-gum tycoon people noticed. He weighed nearly three hundred pounds and had big, bushy sideburns and a kind smile. More than anything else, Boddlebrooks loved baseball, and he loved owning the Sluggers. He handed out gum and sweets to the players after most games, and on weekends he even let them come to his mansion outside town. The mansion was painted all red, the color of Boddlebrooks's most favorite flavor of gum, Winning-Streak Watermelon. It had a fountain in the back that spouted bubble-gum-flavored soda and a giant hot-air balloon that looked like the biggest bubble ever blown.
- (5) Everyone loved Boddlebrooks. Everyone, that is, except his younger brother, Skidmore.
- (6) Skidmore C. Boddlebrooks was thin and wiry. He always wore a black overcoat and hats that were slightly too big for him, so his eyes were hidden in shadow. In fact, nobody could ever remember seeing Skidmore Boddlebrooks's eyes at all. He gave everyone the creeps.
- (7) Why Skidmore hated his brother so much was anybody's guess, but most people thought it had something to do with the fact that he was violently allergic to bubble gum. Skidmore saw his brother's sweet, chewable candies as a personal insult. The fame and riches the gum brought Manchester made it even worse.
- (8) On the night the Sluggers won the championship, as Manchester and all his players were celebrating in the clubhouse, Skidmore crept up to his brother and pulled something out from beneath his jacket.

- (9) “Here, try this,” Skidmore said, revealing an enormous doughy concoction. “It’s a new snack food I’ve been working on. I call it a pretzel.”
- (10) Now, Manchester was an educated man with a passion for junk food, so he was well aware that the pretzel had been invented more than a thousand years before by a lonely European monk named Ralph who had a lot of time on his hands. But he didn’t want to embarrass his brother by pointing that out, and he had to admit, he had never seen a pretzel like the one Skidmore had concocted, as big as a man’s face and oozing with mustard.
- (11) Years later, Skidmore’s creation would become the standard ballpark pretzel, sold by screaming teenage vendors in every ballpark around the country. Every ballpark except one, that is. Out of respect, no pretzel has ever been sold at a Sluggers game because of what happened next.
- (12) “Hmm, what a strange idea,” said Boddlebrooks, his eyes twinkling with excitement at the Sluggers’ great victory.
- (13) But no sooner had he taken a bubble-gum-tycoon-sized bite out of the pretzel than Boddlebrooks raised his hands to his mouth, turned purple, and fell over dead, his enormous body crashing down on young Lou Smegny, the Sluggers’ lanky star shortstop, who never played another game.
- (14) The incident came to be known as the Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel, though nobody could ever actually prove that the pretzel was poisoned. Police ruled that Manchester had simply choked on the bread. Skidmore insisted that he felt terrible about the tragedy and would make his pretzels even doughier in the future. But the rumors started almost at once. And they grew louder when Skidmore inherited the Sluggers and the rest of his bachelor brother’s fortune.

- (15) No matter how Skidmore tried to win people over, nobody ever forgave him for giving his brother the suspicious snack. The Curse followed Skidmore wherever he went, and it certainly rubbed off on his team. From the moment Manchester Boddlebrooks choked on the world's first ballpark pretzel, the Sluggers began a string of failures never before seen by any team in any sport.
- (16) Over the next 107 years, the world saw the invention of the car and the plane and the television. Nations rose and fell. Man cured polio and created the Internet and even sent rockets into space. All this came to pass, but not once did the Sluggers win another championship.

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Questions for Students

1. The following question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: Which sentence best describes the point of view of the narrator of the story?

- A. He has full knowledge of the characters' thoughts so he can predict future events.
- B. He is one of the minor characters watching Skidmore and Manchester and takes part in the action.
- C. He is aware of what Skidmore is thinking, but he is not aware of what Manchester is thinking.
- D. He knows most of what happens in the story and why, but he does not know everything.

Part B: Which part of the text best describes how the author develops the point of view in Part A?

- A. The author has the narrator explain how Manchester felt about baseball and how he treated his players.
- B. The author has the narrator describe a night that occurred 107 years ago but not what happened later.
- C. The author has the narrator show how Sluggers fans responded to the team's record over many years.
- D. The author has the narrator tell how Manchester died but not whether the pretzel was poisoned.

2. How do paragraphs 5 and 6 contribute to the story?

- A. They hint at some ways that the baseball team can eventually get rid of the curse.
- B. They help establish that some of the events in the story take place outside of a baseball park.
- C. They start introducing the reason for the troubles described in paragraphs 1 and 2.
- D. They challenge the claim in paragraph 1 that the Sluggers will always lose.

3. The following question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: The author uses the word “crept” in paragraph 8 instead of a word like “walked” or “marched.” As used in the story, what does the use of the word “crept” suggest about Skidmore?

- A. that Skidmore is sly and sneaky
- B. that Skidmore is old and shrunken
- C. that Skidmore is cautious and careful
- D. that Skidmore is mean and grouchy

Part B: Which detail from the story best supports the same conclusion about Skidmore?

- A. “He always wore a black overcoat . . .”
- B. “. . . his eyes were hidden in shadow.”
- C. “. . . he was violently allergic to bubble gum.”
- D. “. . . saw his brother’s sweet, chewable candies as a personal insult.”

4. In paragraph 13 of the story, Manchester Boddlebrooks dies after taking a bite of a pretzel. Two different results of his death are described earlier in the story, before the reader knows exactly what happened. Draw a circle around two paragraphs before paragraph 13 that describe results that were caused by Manchester’s death.

5. Complete the chart below. For each character in the chart, choose one main quality from Box 1 that BEST describes each character and write it in the MAIN QUALITY column. Then choose one description from Box 2 that results from the character having this quality and write it in the RESULTS column.

Characters	Main Quality	Result
Manchester Boddlebrooks		
Skidmore Boddlebrooks		
Sluggers fans		

Box 1

Possible Main Qualities	
fierce	loyal
fashionable	envious
foolish	generous

Box 2

Results	
suffers heartbreak	inspires affection
feels lonely	works harder
causes misfortune	fools everyone

6. The following question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A Which statement best expresses a main theme of the story?

- A. Not all families are happy ones.
- B. Playing the game counts for more than winning.
- C. Some things in the universe cannot be explained.
- D. There are two sides to every story.
- E. People should hold on to their beliefs.

Part B How does the last paragraph of the excerpt help reinforce this theme?

- A. It suggests that things are always changing, and consequently the Sluggers will eventually win the World Series.
- B. It suggests that the past century has seen many achievements, but the Sluggers still have not been able to win another World Series.
- C. It suggests that disappointment is just part of life, but the bitter sadness the Slugger fans feel is greater than normal.
- D. It suggests that baseball is not really important, and Sluggers fans should realize that their team's fate does not matter.
- E. It suggests that humans live in a world full of conflict, and there is always a winner and a loser in every battle.

Information for Teachers: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses for the Text

Regular practice with complex texts is necessary to prepare students for college and career readiness. This text has been placed at grade 6 for the purpose of this exemplar. This section of the exemplar provides an explanation of the process that was used to place the text at grade 6, illustrating why this text meets the expectations for text complexity in Reading Standard 10. Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards and the Supplement to Appendix A: *New Research on Text Complexity* lay out a research-based process for selecting complex texts. According to Appendix A of the CCSS, the first step in selecting grade-level appropriate texts is to place a text within a grade band according to a quantitative text complexity score.

The quantitative data is below:

"The Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel"	Quantitative Measure #1	Quantitative Measure #2
	Flesch-Kincaid: 9.3	Lexile: 1170

After gathering the quantitative measures, the next step is to place the quantitative scores in the Conversion Table found in the Supplement to Appendix A (www.corestandards.org/resources) and determine the **grade band** of the text:

Figure 1 reproduces the conversion table from the Supplement to Appendix A, showing how the initial results from Flesch-Kincaid and the Lexile measure were converted to grade bands.

Figure 1: Updated Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Ranges from Multiple Measures⁷

Common Core Band	ATOS	Degrees of Reading Power [®]	Flesch-Kincaid [§]	The Lexile Framework [®]	Reading Maturity	SourceRater
2 nd – 3 rd	2.75 – 5.14	42 – 54	1.98 – 5.34	420 – 820	3.53 – 6.13	0.05 – 2.48
4 th – 5 th	4.97 – 7.03	52 – 60	4.51 – 7.73	740 – 1010	5.42 – 7.92	0.84 – 5.75
6 th – 8 th	7.00 – 9.98	57 – 67	6.51 – 10.34	925 – 1185	7.04 – 9.57	4.11 – 10.66
9 th – 10 th	9.67 – 12.01	62 – 72	8.32 – 12.12	1050 – 1335	8.41 – 10.81	9.02 – 13.93
11 th – CCR	11.20 – 14.10	67 – 74	10.34 – 14.2	1185 – 1385	9.57 – 12.00	12.30 – 14.50

Qualitative Analysis for “The Curse of the Poisoned Pretzel”

Category	Notes and comments on text, support for placement in this band	Where to place within the band?					
		Early 6 – Mid 6	End 6 – Early 7	Mid – End 7	Early – Mid 8	End 8	NOT suited to band
Structure (story structure or form of piece or sentence demands if notable)	This passage is structured mostly chronologically, with the exception of the first two paragraphs, which outline the results of the events in the rest of the story.						
Language Clarity and Conventions (including vocabulary load)	The majority of the words in this text are readily accessible for 6 th graders. “Concoction” may present a challenge for some, although the context surrounding the word will enable students to determine meaning. The conventions used in the text include some complex sentences, which add some complexity to the text.						
Knowledge Demands (life, content, cultural/literary)	Prior knowledge of what a pretzel is will better enable students to understand some of the details in the story; however, if a student is unaware of pretzels, they can tell from textual evidence that it is a snack. It is not necessary for students to have any context of baseball, as specific baseball terms are not used in the text.						
Levels of Meaning (chiefly literary)/ Purpose (chiefly informational)	There is a single story line in the text and only one level of meaning: There is a curse on the Sluggers because of Skidmore’s actions in the past, thus resulting in a losing streak and pretzels no longer being served in their ballpark.						
Overall placement Grade 6	Justification: The structure and vocabulary used, combined with the single level of meaning and lack of need for prior knowledge make this text readily accessible for grade 6 students, starting as early as the first few weeks of the school year.						

Correct Answer(s) and Distractor Rationales

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
1 Part A	D	RL.6.6, RL.6.1	<p>A. Although the narrator is aware of the feelings of the characters on some issues, he does not know their thoughts about everything, and therefore he cannot predict future events.</p> <p>B. Although the narrator is aware of various events, he is not a character in the story and therefore does not take part in the action.</p> <p>C. Although the narrator is aware of Skidmore’s feelings toward his brother, he does not know if Skidmore intentionally harmed Manchester or if Manchester suspects foul play.</p> <p>D. This is the correct answer. The narrator can chronicle the events of the story and in most instances knows why certain things occurred, but he is not aware of everything: For instance, he doesn’t know if the pretzel was poisoned or not.</p>
1 Part B	D		<p>A. Although the author does have the narrator explain how Manchester felt about baseball and how he treated his players, this fact does not develop the idea that the narrator is not aware of everything (the correct answer in Part A).</p> <p>B. Although the narrator describes a night that occurred 107 years ago, he also described what happened later by documenting the Sluggers continued losing streak.</p> <p>C. Although the author does have the narrator show how Sluggers fans responded to the team’s losing record, this fact does not develop the idea that the narrator is not aware of everything (the correct answer in Part A).</p> <p>D. This is the correct answer. The author has the narrator describe the event leading to Manchester’s death, but does not reveal whether the pretzel was poisoned.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
2	C	RL.6.5, RL.6.3, RL.6.1	<p>A. The paragraphs focus on the relationship of the main characters, not the solution to the curse.</p> <p>B. Although some of the events discussed in the text take place outside of the park, paragraphs 5 and 6 focus on the relationship of the main characters, not the setting for the events.</p> <p>C. This is the correct answer. Paragraphs 5 and 6 introduce the fact that Skidmore dislikes his brother, which leads to troubles described earlier in the text.</p> <p>D. The paragraphs focus on the relationship of the main characters rather than challenging the claim that the Sluggers will always lose.</p>
3 Part A	A	RL.6.4, RL.6.1	<p>A. This is the correct answer. The word “crept” helps develop the idea that Skidmore is sly and sneaky.</p> <p>B. Although the word “crept” sometimes indicates slowness in step which is sometimes related to age, there is no other textual support for “old and shrunken,” but the idea of “sly and sneaky” is supported by further contextual evidence.</p> <p>C. Although Skidmore is cautious enough to leave the actual poisoning of his brother in question, the word “crept” is not meant to show this careful side of his personality.</p> <p>D. Although Skidmore can be described as mean if one believes he dislikes his brother enough to poison him out of jealousy, the word “crept” is not used to show meanness but rather sneakiness.</p>
3 Part B	B		<p>A. Although the color black is often associated in stories with evil, the fact that Skidmore’s eyes were hidden in shadow is a stronger indication of his sneakiness.</p> <p>B. This is the correct answer. Skidmore wore hats that were too big for him so that “his eyes were hidden in shadow.” This implies that he was sneaky and sly and had something to hide.</p> <p>C. Although it is true that Skidmore was violently allergic to bubble gum, this fact does not further support the idea that he was sneaky and sly.</p> <p>D. Although Skidmore viewed his brother’s candies as a “personal insult,” this fact does not further support the idea that he was sneaky and sly.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options																				
4	Two of the three following paragraphs: 1, 2, or 11	RL.6.3, RL.6.1	<p>Paragraph 1: This paragraph describes one result of Manchester’s death: the long history of Sluggers’ losing seasons.</p> <p>Paragraph 2: This paragraph also supports the result that the Sluggers began to lose and played poorly for the 107 years after Manchester’s death.</p> <p>Paragraph 11: This paragraph explains the second result of Manchester’s death: pretzels are not sold at the Sluggers’ baseball games.</p>																				
5	<table border="1" data-bbox="369 526 709 824"> <thead> <tr> <th>Main Quality</th> <th>Result</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>generous</td> <td>inspires affection</td> </tr> <tr> <td>envious</td> <td>causes misfortune</td> </tr> <tr> <td>loyal</td> <td>suffers heartbreak</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Main Quality	Result	generous	inspires affection	envious	causes misfortune	loyal	suffers heartbreak	RL.6.3, RL.6.1	<table border="1" data-bbox="903 487 1764 867"> <thead> <tr> <th>Main Quality</th> <th>Rationale</th> <th>Result</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>generous</td> <td>Paragraph 4 details Manchester giving out candy to players and inviting them to his home.</td> <td>inspires affection</td> </tr> <tr> <td>envious</td> <td>Paragraph 7 says of Skidmore’s dislike for his brother, “fame and riches... made it even worse.”</td> <td>causes misfortune</td> </tr> <tr> <td>loyal</td> <td>Paragraph 1 states, “no fans had been more devoted than Sluggers fans.”</td> <td>suffers heartbreak</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Main Quality	Rationale	Result	generous	Paragraph 4 details Manchester giving out candy to players and inviting them to his home.	inspires affection	envious	Paragraph 7 says of Skidmore’s dislike for his brother, “fame and riches... made it even worse.”	causes misfortune	loyal	Paragraph 1 states, “no fans had been more devoted than Sluggers fans.”	suffers heartbreak
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6 Part A	C	RL.6.2, RL.6.5, RL.6.1	<p>A. Although Skidmore did not like his brother, the text does not suggest Manchester had similar feelings. The idea that not all families are happy ones is not a main theme of the story.</p> <p>B. Although it is clear that the Sluggers continue to play the game even though they keep losing, they do so in hopes of eventually winning, so playing the game does not count for more than winning.</p> <p>C. This is the correct answer. The repeated mysterious events (Manchester’s suspicion death, the subsequent losing streak) and their effects establish this theme.</p> <p>D. Although we hear only one side of the story, Skidmore’s possible innocence is not discussed in any significant way.</p> <p>E. Although the Slugger’s fans continue to believe in their team, the main theme is the mysterious workings of the universe rather than the fact that people should hold on to their beliefs.</p>																				

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
6 Part B	B	RL.6.2, RL.6.5, RL.6.1	<p>A. Although the paragraph shows change is a constant, this fact does not support the fact that some things in the universe cannot be explained.</p> <p>B. This is the correct answer. Many significant advancements were made during the hundred year period after the pretzel incident, but despite all of that progress, the Sluggers’ record did not change, proving that some things in the universe cannot be explained – some things change quickly while other things never change.</p> <p>C. Although the paragraph mentions the Sluggers’ continued losses, it also includes many inventions that would be considered triumphs, so it does not suggest that disappointment is just part of life, nor does it support a theme of the mysterious workings of the universe.</p> <p>D. Although the paragraph mentions many scientific inventions, it does not suggest that baseball is unimportant, nor does it support a theme of the mysterious workings of the universe.</p> <p>E. Although the paragraph mentions the fall of nations, it is only a minor detail in a list of human triumphs and does not support a theme of the mysterious workings of the universe.</p>
7 Optional writing prompt	See top-score bullets in last column	RL.6.6, RL.6.1, W.6.2, W.6.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The author states outright that Skidmore hated Manchester (paragraphs 5 and 7) • Skidmore felt insulted by his brother’s gum business and jealous of his success (para 7) • Skidmore chooses to look creepy—he wears a black overcoat and too-big hats (para 6) • He hides his eyes, suggesting he cannot be trusted (para 6) • Author uses sinister language for Skidmore. “His eyes were hidden in shadow” (para 6); he “crept up to his brother and pulled something out from beneath his jacket” (para 8) • The curse is real; the Sluggers have lost for 107 years in a row, which suggests that somebody is being punished for something!

Language of the Common Core State Standards Addressed by this Mini-Assessment

RL.6.1	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RL.6.2	Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
RL.6.3	Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
RL.6.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.
RL.6.5	Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.
RL.6.6	Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.
W.6.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
W.6.9	Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Additional Resources for Assessment and CCSS Implementation

Shift 1 – Complexity: *Regular practice with complex text and its academic language*

- See Appendix B for examples of informational and literary complex texts:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf
- See the Text Complexity Collection on www.achievethecore.org

Shift 2 – Evidence: *Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational*

- See Close Reading Exemplars for ways to engage students in close reading on <http://www.achievethecore.org/steal-these-tools/close-reading-exemplars>
- See the Basal Alignment Project for examples of text-dependent questions:
<http://www.achievethecore.org/basal-alignment-project>

Shift 3 – Knowledge: *Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction*

- See Appendix B for examples of informational and literary complex texts:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf