

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE PRISON BREAK USING DENTAL FLOSS

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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THE PRISON BREAK USING DENTAL FLOSS

In 1994, two inmates at a West Virginia prison attempted one of the most patient escapes in criminal history. Using nothing but dental floss, they spent months sawing through the iron bars of their cell window—strand by strand, night after night.

Dental floss seems like an unlikely tool for a prison break. But Robert Shepard and Timothy Morgan discovered that when you rub waxed floss back and forth against metal repeatedly, it acts like a very slow saw. The process takes enormous patience—estimates suggest they worked for several months, secretly sawing for hours each night after lights out.

The inmates were clever about hiding their progress from guards. They mixed soap, paint chips, and dust to create a paste that matched the color of the bars exactly. Each morning, they carefully filled in their cuts so guards wouldn't notice anything unusual during routine inspections. The deception worked for weeks.

Their plan was ultimately discovered before they could complete their escape. Guards noticed something suspicious during a routine cell check and found the nearly severed bars. Both men faced additional charges for the attempted escape.

The dental floss incident led to policy changes at many prisons across the country. Some facilities began limiting the length of floss given to inmates. Others switched to dental picks or pre-cut strands that couldn't be used for extended sawing. A product designed for dental hygiene had suddenly become a security concern.

The story became legendary in prison security circles. It demonstrated that inmates with enough time and determination could turn almost anything into an escape tool. It also showed the value of patience—a resource that prisoners have in abundance.

Shepard and Morgan's attempt ultimately failed, but it earned them a strange kind of fame. Their dental floss escape became a case study in prison security, proving that the most dangerous tool isn't always the most obvious one.

Word Count: 279 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How long did the inmates work on their escape?

- A) A few days
- B) About two weeks
- C) Several months
- D) Several years

2 How did they hide their progress?

- A) They hung a curtain
- B) They filled cuts with a paste matching the bars
- C) They only worked during inspections
- D) They bribed guards

3 Why does dental floss work as a cutting tool?

- A) It contains acid
- B) When rubbed back and forth, it acts like a slow saw
- C) It heats up and melts metal
- D) It doesn't actually cut

4 What change did prisons make after this incident?

- A) They removed all bars
- B) They limited floss length or switched to picks
- C) They stopped dental care
- D) They increased meal portions

5

What does this story reveal about prison security challenges?

- A) All escapes involve violence
- B) Determined inmates can weaponize everyday items given enough time
- C) Prisons have perfect security
- D) Dental floss should be banned everywhere

6

Why might this story be valuable for security professionals beyond prisons?

- A) Everyone needs dental hygiene
- B) It demonstrates that creative threats can come from unexpected sources
- C) Dental floss is widely available
- D) Security only matters in prisons

ANSWER KEY

The Prison Break Using Dental Floss

1. C) Several months

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'they spent months sawing through the iron bars.'

2. B) They filled cuts with a paste matching the bars

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage explains: 'They mixed soap, paint chips, and dust to create a paste matching the color of the bars.'

3. B) When rubbed back and forth, it acts like a slow saw

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'when you rub waxed floss back and forth against metal, it acts like a very slow saw.'

4. B) They limited floss length or switched to picks

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'Some facilities began limiting floss length... Others switched to picks or pre-cut strands.'

5. B) Determined inmates can weaponize everyday items given enough time

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage states: 'inmates with enough time and determination could turn almost anything into an escape tool.'

6. B) It demonstrates that creative threats can come from unexpected sources

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The lesson that 'the most dangerous tool isn't always the most obvious one' applies broadly to security thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Prison Break Using Dental Floss

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The inmates showed incredible patience, working for months. When is patience a valuable trait, and when might it be used for harmful purposes?
- Prisons now limit dental floss because of this escape attempt. Is this a reasonable security measure or an overreaction?
- The passage says prisoners have 'time in abundance.' How might having unlimited time change how you approach problems?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Calculate how many strokes of dental floss it might take to cut through a 1-inch iron bar (research the abrasive properties of waxed floss).
- Research other creative prison escape attempts throughout history and create a presentation on the most ingenious methods.
- Design a 'security audit' checklist that identifies everyday items that could potentially be misused, and suggest how to mitigate risks.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin / Vice