NOT BORING MEDIA

THE WORLD'S LONGEST HELD BREATH

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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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!

THE WORLD'S LONGEST HELD BREATH

In 2012, German freediver Tom Sietas held his breath underwater for 22 minutes and 22 seconds, setting a world record that pushed against the absolute limits of human physiology. Most people begin feeling desperate for air after just 30 seconds of breath-holding, and permanent brain damage typically begins after only 4-6 minutes without oxygen. Sietas's achievement seemed to defy what medical science says is possible for the human body.

Sietas prepared for this record attempt through years of dedicated training. He practiced meditation and advanced relaxation techniques to consciously lower his heart rate and minimize his body's oxygen consumption. In the hours before the attempt, he breathed pure oxygen from a tank for approximately 30 minutes, saturating his blood with extra oxygen reserves that would extend his time underwater. He also fasted beforehand, since the digestive process consumes significant amounts of oxygen.

During the actual record attempt, Sietas floated completely motionless in a swimming pool, conserving every possible bit of energy. His heart rate dropped to just 20 beats per minute—roughly one-third of a normal resting heart rate. His entire body entered a physiological state similar to hibernation, using the available oxygen as efficiently as humanly possible. Medical personnel monitored his vital signs continuously throughout the attempt.

The human body has a built-in survival mechanism called the 'diving reflex' that activates during breath-holding, especially when the face is submerged in cold water. The heart automatically slows down, and blood flow concentrates on the most vital organs—the brain and heart—while reducing circulation to the extremities. This reflex is stronger in trained freedivers like Sietas, but it exists in all humans, even newborn babies.

Breath-holding records at these extreme durations are genuinely dangerous. Without sufficient oxygen, brain cells begin dying within minutes, potentially causing permanent cognitive damage. Several people have died or suffered serious injury attempting such feats. Sietas trained only with extensive medical supervision and emergency resuscitation personnel standing by.

The record has since been broken. Croatian freediver Budimir Šobat held his breath for 24 minutes and 37 seconds in 2021, extending what we thought possible even further.

Word Count: 345 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Guinness World Records

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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 **How long did Tom Sietas hold his breath?**

- ◯ A) 12 minutes 22 seconds
- ◯ B) 18 minutes 22 seconds
- ◯ C) 22 minutes 22 seconds
- ◯ D) 30 minutes

2 **How low did Sietas's heart rate drop?**

- ◯ A) 60 beats per minute
- ◯ B) 40 beats per minute
- ◯ C) 20 beats per minute
- ◯ D) 5 beats per minute

3 **What is the 'diving reflex'?**

- ◯ A) A desire to swim
- ◯ B) Automatic heart slowing when face is submerged
- ◯ C) Fear of water
- ◯ D) Holding breath underwater

4 **Why did Sietas avoid eating before the attempt?**

- ◯ A) To lose weight
- ◯ B) Digestion uses oxygen
- ◯ C) Food makes you tired
- ◯ D) Rules required it

5 **Why are these records dangerous?**

- ◯ A) The water is cold
- ◯ B) The brain can be damaged by oxygen deprivation
- ◯ C) Pools are slippery
- ◯ D) Judges are strict

6 **What do these records suggest about human limits?**

- ◯ A) Limits don't exist
- ◯ B) Training can extend capabilities, but limits exist for safety reasons
- ◯ C) Everyone should try breath-holding
- ◯ D) Normal limits are wrong

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ANSWER KEY

The World's Longest Held Breath

1. C) 22 minutes 22 seconds

DOK 1 — Recall.

2. C) 20 beats per minute

DOK 1 — Recall.

3. B) Automatic heart slowing when face is submerged

DOK 2 — Inference.

4. B) Digestion uses oxygen

DOK 2 — Inference.

5. B) The brain can be damaged by oxygen deprivation

DOK 3 — Analysis.

6. B) Training can extend capabilities, but limits exist for safety reasons

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

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TEACHER GUIDE

The World's Longest Held Breath

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

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

- Should extreme physical feats be celebrated or discouraged given their risks?
- The diving reflex exists in all humans. What other hidden capabilities might we have?
- Where's the line between pushing limits and being reckless?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Safely test your own breath-holding time and research why it's so much shorter than records.
- Compare human diving reflexes to those of marine mammals.
- Research other extreme human performance records and their training methods.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- Guinness World Records

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