
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE FUNGUS THAT CONTROLS ANTS' MINDS

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 FUNGUS THAT CONTROLS ANTS' MINDS

Deep in the world's tropical rainforests, there exists a fungus that turns ants into zombies. It sounds like science fiction, but *Ophiocordyceps* is terrifyingly real—and scientists have been studying its mind-control abilities for over a century.

The infection begins invisibly. A carpenter ant foraging on the forest floor comes into contact with fungal spores. The microscopic spores attach to the ant's exoskeleton and begin penetrating it, entering the ant's body. Within days, the fungus has threaded through the ant's muscles, spreading like a network of tiny roots.

Then something remarkable—and horrifying—happens.

The infected ant stops behaving normally. Instead of following pheromone trails back to its colony, it wanders erratically, seemingly confused. The fungus is now influencing its brain. The ant begins to climb—up plant stems, up tree bark, up anything vertical—driven by an urge it cannot resist.

The fungus is guiding it to the perfect location: exactly 25 centimeters off the ground, on the north side of a plant, in an area with roughly 95% humidity and temperatures between 68-86°F. This precise microclimate is ideal for fungal reproduction. The ant has no say in the matter.

Once there, the ant performs its final act. Its jaws lock onto a leaf vein in a "death grip" so powerful that the ant remains clamped in place even after dying. Scientists have found that the fungus doesn't just take over the ant's brain—it actually destroys the muscles controlling the jaw, making the bite permanent.

Over the next few days, the fungus consumes the ant's body from within. Eventually, a long stalk erupts from the back of the ant's head—a grotesque antenna that releases thousands of new spores onto the forest floor below, where more ants will become infected.

Perhaps most disturbing: research suggests the ant remains aware throughout the process. The fungus manipulates the ant's muscles directly, like a puppeteer pulling strings, while leaving the brain itself largely functional. The ant knows something is wrong. It simply cannot stop it.

Ant colonies have evolved defenses. Workers identify infected members by smell and carry them far from the nest before they can climb. Some colonies avoid entire areas where infections have occurred. The evolutionary arms race between fungus and ant has been raging for at least 48 million years—with neither side winning permanently.

Word Count: 380 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: ABC News

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

How does the *Ophiocordyceps* fungus first enter an ant's body?

- ☐ A) Through contaminated food
- ☐ B) Through spores that attach to and penetrate the exoskeleton
- ☐ C) Through bites from infected ants
- ☐ D) Through contaminated water

2

What specific height and location does the fungus guide the ant to reach?

- ☐ A) The top of the tallest tree available
- ☐ B) Exactly 25 centimeters off the ground, on the north side of a plant
- ☐ C) Underground in the ant's nest
- ☐ D) The nearest body of water

3

What does the phrase 'evolutionary arms race' most likely mean?

- ☐ A) A war between ant colonies over territory
- ☐ B) A competition between scientists studying ants
- ☐ C) An ongoing cycle where both species develop defenses and counter-defenses over generations
- ☐ D) A race to see which species goes extinct first

4

What makes the 'death grip' permanent, according to the passage?

- ☐ A) The ant chooses not to let go
- ☐ B) The fungus destroys the muscles controlling the jaw
- ☐ C) The leaf has a sticky substance
- ☐ D) The ant dies instantly from the fungus

5

The passage says ant colonies have 'evolved defenses' against the fungus. Describe two defenses mentioned and explain what they suggest about the long history between ants and this fungus.

6

The passage suggests the infected ant 'remains aware' but 'cannot stop' what is happening to it—like 'a passenger in its own body.' This raises deep questions about control and identity. If a creature cannot control its own actions, is it still 'itself'? What does this make you think about what defines an individual's identity?

ANSWER KEY

The Fungus That Controls Ants' Minds

1. B) Through spores that attach to and penetrate the exoskeleton

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'spores attach to the ant's exoskeleton and begin penetrating it, entering the ant's body.'

2. B) Exactly 25 centimeters off the ground, on the north side of a plant

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage specifies: 'exactly 25 centimeters off the ground, on the north side of a plant.'

3. C) An ongoing cycle where both species develop defenses and counter-defenses over generations

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage describes ants developing defenses (removing infected members, avoiding areas) while the fungus continues to infect—a back-and-forth that has continued for '48 million years.'

4. B) The fungus destroys the muscles controlling the jaw

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'the fungus doesn't just take over the ant's brain—it actually destroys the muscles controlling the jaw, making the bite permanent.'

5. Sample Response:

Two defenses: (1) Workers 'identify infected members by smell and carry them far from the nest'—this shows ants have evolved chemical detection systems specifically for this threat. (2) Some colonies 'avoid entire areas where infections have occurred'—showing learned or inherited spatial memory. These complex behaviors suggest the threat has existed long enough for natural selection to favor ants that could detect and respond to it—consistent with the '48 million years' mentioned.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. If identity requires control over one's actions, then the ant has lost its identity—it's just a vessel for the fungus. But if awareness is what matters, the ant is still 'there,' trapped and suffering. This might connect to human experiences of feeling loss of control—addiction, mental illness, peer pressure—and whether those states change 'who someone is.' Strong responses will engage with the philosophical complexity and consider multiple perspectives on what makes someone themselves.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Fungus That Controls Ants' Minds

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

- The ant may remain aware while losing control of its body. What does this make you think about free will and identity?
- Ant colonies evolved defenses like removing infected members. Is this cruel or practical? How do human societies handle similar threats?
- This fungus has existed for 48 million years. What does that tell us about the 'arms race' between species?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Science: Research another parasitic relationship in nature. Create a life cycle diagram showing the process.
- Creative: Design a movie poster for a horror film inspired by *Ophiocordyceps*. Include a tagline.
- Writing: Write from the ant's perspective during infection. What might it 'experience' as it loses control?

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- ABC News / Dr. Andrei Poyarkov research