
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE CHICKEN THAT LIVED WITHOUT A HEAD

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.

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!

THE CHICKEN THAT LIVED WITHOUT A HEAD

On September 10, 1945, a farmer in Fruita, Colorado chopped off a chicken's head for dinner. The chicken, later named Mike, didn't die. Instead, he lived for another 18 months without a head, becoming one of the most famous animals in American history and a genuine scientific curiosity.

When farmer Lloyd Olsen swung his axe, he missed Mike's jugular vein and left most of the brain stem intact. The brain stem controls basic functions like breathing, heart rate, and reflexes—it doesn't require the higher brain to operate. Mike could still walk, perch, and attempt to peck for food, though he obviously couldn't eat normally.

Olsen decided to care for Mike rather than finish the job. He fed the headless chicken a mixture of milk and water delivered directly into his esophagus using an eyedropper. He also used a small syringe to clear mucus from Mike's open throat so the bird wouldn't choke.

Word of the miraculous chicken spread quickly. A promoter convinced Olsen to take Mike on a national tour, where curious Americans paid 25 cents each to see the headless wonder. At the peak of his fame, Mike was valued at \$10,000 and featured in Life and Time magazines. He became a genuine celebrity.

Scientists from the University of Utah examined Mike and confirmed the remarkable survival was due to the precise location of the axe cut. Just a fraction of an inch in any direction and Mike would have died immediately like any normal chicken.

Mike finally died in March 1947 when he choked on a kernel of corn during a tour stop. Olsen had left the feeding syringes at the previous show and couldn't clear Mike's throat in time.

Today, Fruita celebrates "Mike the Headless Chicken Day" every May, complete with chicken-themed games and a "Run Like a Headless Chicken" race.

Word Count: 301 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: BBC

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How long did Mike live after losing his head?

- ☐ A) 18 days
- ☐ B) 18 weeks
- ☐ C) 18 months
- ☐ D) 18 years

2 What part of Mike's body kept him alive?

- ☐ A) His heart
- ☐ B) His brain stem
- ☐ C) His lungs
- ☐ D) His feathers

3 How did Lloyd Olsen feed Mike?

- ☐ A) Mike ate normally
- ☐ B) Through an eyedropper directly into his exposed esophagus
- ☐ C) Mike didn't need food
- ☐ D) Through a feeding tube in his stomach

4 What caused Mike's death after 18 months?

- ☐ A) Old age
- ☐ B) He choked on corn and Olsen couldn't clear his throat
- ☐ C) Infection
- ☐ D) He was hit by a car

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What does Mike's survival teach us about the brain stem's role?

- ☐ A) The brain stem is unimportant
- ☐ B) Basic life functions can continue with just the brain stem, even without higher brain regions
- ☐ C) Chickens don't have brains
- ☐ D) Heads are optional for all animals

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Why might Mike's story have captured public imagination in 1945?

- ☐ A) People had nothing else to do
- ☐ B) After WWII, a story of improbable survival and wonder provided welcome entertainment
- ☐ C) Chickens were extremely rare
- ☐ D) Television didn't exist

ANSWER KEY

The Chicken That Lived Without a Head

1. C) 18 months

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Mike the Headless Chicken would go on to live for another 18 months.'

2. B) His brain stem

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage explains: 'left most of the brain stem intact. The brain stem controls basic functions like breathing and heart rate.'

3. B) Through an eyedropper directly into his exposed esophagus

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'Olsen began feeding him directly through his exposed esophagus using an eyedropper.'

4. B) He choked on corn and Olsen couldn't clear his throat

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage explains: 'he choked on a kernel of corn' and 'Olsen had left the eyedropper used to clear Mike's throat in the previous town.'

5. B) Basic life functions can continue with just the brain stem, even without higher brain regions

DOK 3 — Analysis. Mike survived because his brain stem—controlling breathing, heartbeat, and basic movement—remained intact, showing these functions don't require the full brain.

6. B) After WWII, a story of improbable survival and wonder provided welcome entertainment

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The war had just ended in 1945. A lighthearted story about a miracle chicken would have been welcome relief from years of serious news.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Chicken That Lived Without a Head

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

- Mike's case seems impossible, yet it happened. What does this teach us about making assumptions?
- Some might say keeping Mike alive was cruel; others say it was fascinating. What do you think?
- Why do you think Mike's story captured public attention in 1945 and still interests people today?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research the brain stem and create a diagram showing which functions it controls versus the rest of the brain.
- Write a newspaper article about Mike as if you were a reporter in 1945.
- Compare Mike's story to other 'medical miracle' survival stories and identify common factors.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- BBC / Life Magazine archives