

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE DISEASE THAT MAKES YOU DANCE TO DEATH

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!

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THE DISEASE THAT MAKES YOU DANCE TO DEATH

In the summer of 1518, a woman named Frau Troffea stepped into the streets of Strasbourg, France and began dancing. She didn't stop for days. Within a month, approximately 400 people had joined her in a bizarre and terrifying epidemic of compulsive dancing that continued until dancers collapsed from exhaustion, heart attacks, and strokes. Dozens of people literally danced themselves to death.

The Dancing Plague of 1518 remains one of the strangest and most disturbing events ever documented in human history. Contemporary witnesses described dancers moving frantically and continuously, unable to stop even as their bodies broke down from the exertion. Their feet bled, their muscles failed, but still they danced. Local authorities, desperately trying to help and believing the afflicted simply needed to 'dance it out,' actually hired professional musicians and constructed wooden stages—which only seemed to make the epidemic worse by giving the dancers more reason and space to continue.

Historians and scientists have proposed various explanations for this mass phenomenon. Some suggest ergot poisoning—a fungus that grows on grain and produces chemicals with effects similar to the drug LSD—may have caused hallucinations and involuntary movements. Others point to mass psychogenic illness, a documented phenomenon where psychological distress spreads through communities and manifests as shared physical symptoms without any biological cause.

The most compelling theory combines psychological and historical factors. In 1518, the people of Strasbourg had suffered through years of devastating famine, widespread disease, and brutal winters. Stress, hopelessness, and desperation were epidemic throughout the population. Under such extreme psychological pressure, people can become highly vulnerable to suggestion and shared psychological episodes that seem impossible under normal circumstances.

Similar dancing plagues occurred in multiple locations throughout medieval Europe, though the 1518 Strasbourg outbreak was the largest and best documented. The phenomenon largely disappeared after the 17th century, though modern researchers have documented comparable mass psychological events in schools, factories, and communities—groups suddenly developing shared physical symptoms with no identifiable physical cause.

The Dancing Plague remains a haunting reminder that the mind and body are connected in ways we still don't fully understand.

Word Count: 340 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Gemological Institute of America (GIA)

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How many people eventually joined the dancing?

- A) About 40
- B) About 100
- C) About 400
- D) About 4,000

2 What did authorities do that made things worse?

- A) Arrested dancers
- B) Hired musicians and built stages
- C) Banned dancing
- D) Called doctors

3 What is ergot poisoning?

- A) A dance move
- B) A fungus that produces LSD-like chemicals
- C) A type of plague
- D) Exhaustion

4 Why was Strasbourg vulnerable to mass hysteria?

- A) People loved dancing
- B) Years of famine and hardship created extreme stress
- C) Music was popular
- D) Government encouraged it

5

What modern events parallel the Dancing Plague?

- A) Dance competitions
- B) Mass psychogenic illness in schools and factories
- C) Music festivals
- D) Exercise classes

6

What does this suggest about the mind-body connection?

- A) They are separate
- B) Psychological distress can cause physical symptoms and spread through communities
- C) Dancing is dangerous
- D) Medieval people were less intelligent

ANSWER KEY

The Disease That Makes You Dance to Death

- 1.** C) About 400

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 2.** B) Hired musicians and built stages

DOK 1 — Recall.

- 3.** B) A fungus that produces LSD-like chemicals

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 4.** B) Years of famine and hardship created extreme stress

DOK 2 — Inference.

- 5.** B) Mass psychogenic illness in schools and factories

DOK 3 — Analysis.

- 6.** B) Psychological distress can cause physical symptoms and spread through communities

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Disease That Makes You Dance to Death

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

- Could mass hysteria happen today, or does modern communication prevent it?
- Authorities made things worse by hiring musicians. What does this teach about responding to crises we don't understand?
- If stress can cause physical symptoms, how should we think about 'psychosomatic' illness?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research other historical mass hysteria events and compare causes.
- Create a presentation about how stress affects the body.
- Write a historical fiction journal entry from someone who witnessed the Dancing Plague.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- Gemological Institute of America (GIA)