
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE ARTIST WHO PAINTED WITH FLIES

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 ARTIST WHO PAINTED WITH FLIES

Los Angeles artist John Knuth doesn't paint with brushes, palette knives, or any traditional tools. Instead, he creates his abstract artworks using approximately 250,000 houseflies. Knuth discovered that when flies consume colored sugar water and then walk across a canvas surface, they leave behind intricate, pointillist-style patterns that no human hand could possibly create. The resulting paintings sell for thousands of dollars and hang in galleries worldwide.

Knuth developed his unusual technique over years of careful experimentation. He raises houseflies from larvae in controlled conditions, then releases them into special enclosures containing prepared canvases. The flies are provided with food sources mixed with watercolor pigments in specific colors chosen by the artist. As the insects eat the colored water and then walk across the canvas surface, they regurgitate and excrete tiny dots of pigment, gradually building up complex abstract patterns over several days.

The creative process represents controlled chaos in its purest form. Knuth can influence the overall color palette and the general areas of activity on the canvas, but he cannot predict or control the decisions of individual flies. Each painting emerges from a collaboration between artistic intention and unpredictable insect behavior—nature and human creativity working together in ways neither could achieve alone.

Art critics have praised Knuth's work for raising profound questions about authorship and the nature of creativity itself. Who is the true artist: the human who designed the system and chose the colors, or the flies who actually made the physical marks on the canvas? Can something be considered art if its creators have absolutely no concept of what art means?

Up close, viewers can see the individual tracks left by fly legs and the tiny regurgitation marks that create the texture. From a distance, the pieces look like shimmering, luminous fields of carefully orchestrated color.

Knuth says he's deeply interested in cycles of life, death, and transformation. Houseflies live only about 28 days, but their brief existence creates something permanent. The paintings will outlast their tiny makers by decades, perhaps centuries.

Word Count: 335 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Atlas Obscura

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

How many flies does Knuth use?

- ☐ A) 2,500
- ☐ B) 25,000
- ☐ C) 250,000
- ☐ D) 2.5 million

2

How long do the flies live?

- ☐ A) 7 days
- ☐ B) 28 days
- ☐ C) 3 months
- ☐ D) 1 year

3

How do flies create the paintings?

- ☐ A) They're trained
- ☐ B) They eat colored water and leave marks walking
- ☐ C) Knuth guides each one
- ☐ D) They choose colors

4

What question does this work raise?

- ☐ A) Whether flies are smart
- ☐ B) Who is the artist when humans design systems but creatures make marks
- ☐ C) Whether paint is necessary
- ☐ D) If galleries should close

5

Why can't Knuth fully control the results?

- ☐ A) He's lazy
- ☐ B) He sets conditions but can't control individual fly decisions
- ☐ C) Flies are trained artists
- ☐ D) He lies

6

What does this suggest about creativity?

- ☐ A) Art requires complete control
- ☐ B) Creativity can emerge from systems with unpredictable outcomes
- ☐ C) Only humans make art
- ☐ D) Flies are superior

ANSWER KEY

The Artist Who Painted With Flies

1. C) 250,000

DOK 1 — Recall.

2. B) 28 days

DOK 1 — Recall.

3. B) They eat colored water and leave marks walking

DOK 2 — Inference.

4. B) Who is the artist when humans design systems but creatures make marks

DOK 2 — Inference.

5. B) He sets conditions but can't control individual fly decisions

DOK 3 — Analysis.

6. B) Creativity can emerge from systems with unpredictable outcomes

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Artist Who Painted With Flies

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

- Are Knuth's fly paintings 'real' art? What makes something art?
- Who deserves credit when art is created by a system?
- Would you display fly-made art in your home?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research other artists who use unusual materials or processes.
- Design an art project that uses natural processes you can't fully control.
- Write a gallery description for one of Knuth's paintings.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- Atlas Obscura / NPR