

Do machines think?

READING

LEVEL
Advanced

NUMBER
C1_4037R_EN

LANGUAGE
English



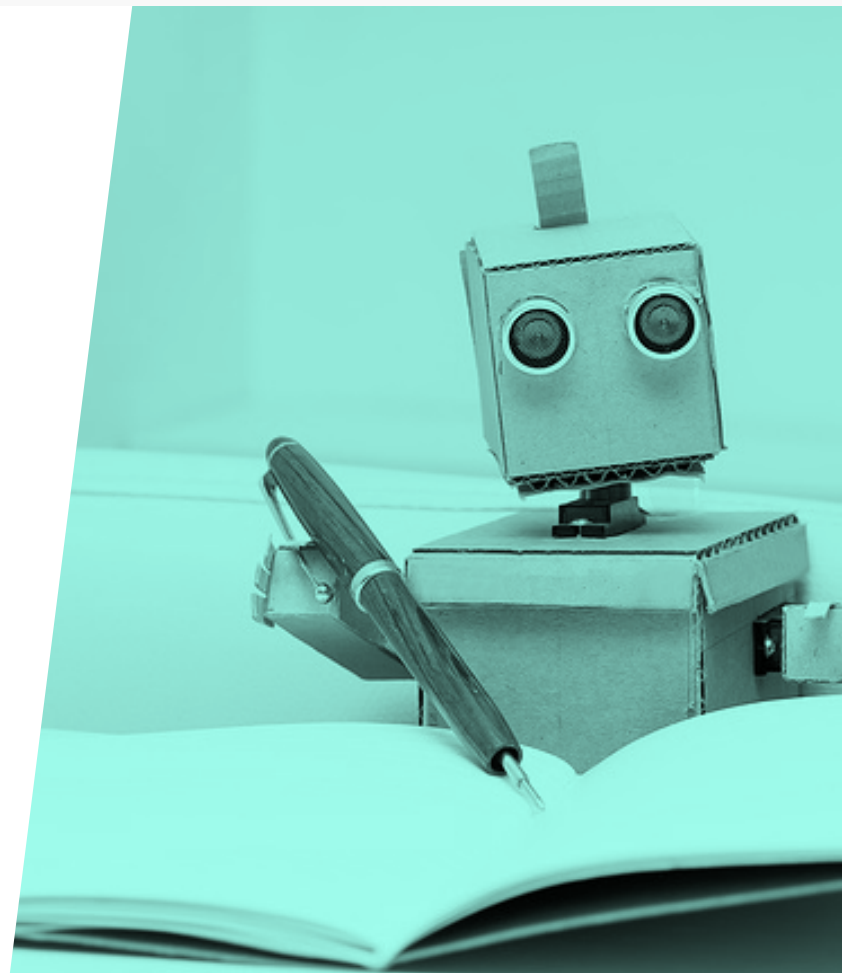
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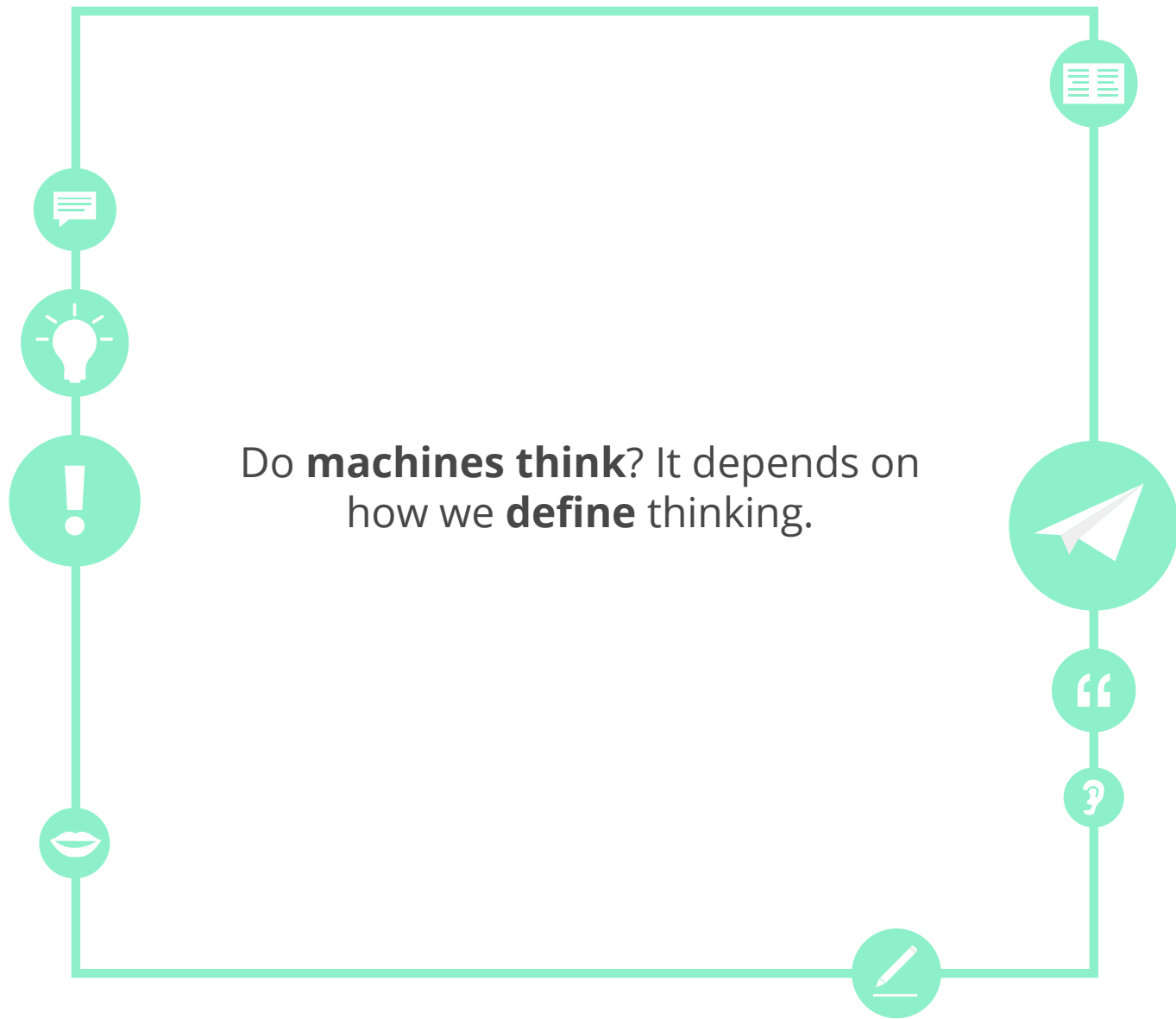




Goals

- Can read and understand a literary excerpt from Ambrose Bierce's short story 'Moxon's Master'.
- Can present my own views on the work and explain what I think it means to be 'alive' and what the nature of thinking is.







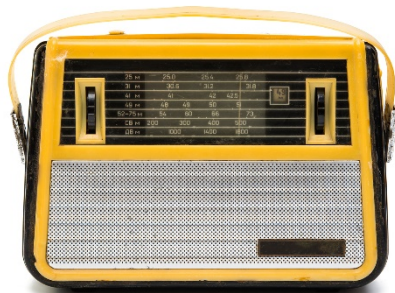
Machines

What machines do you use in your everyday life? Which are most useful to you?



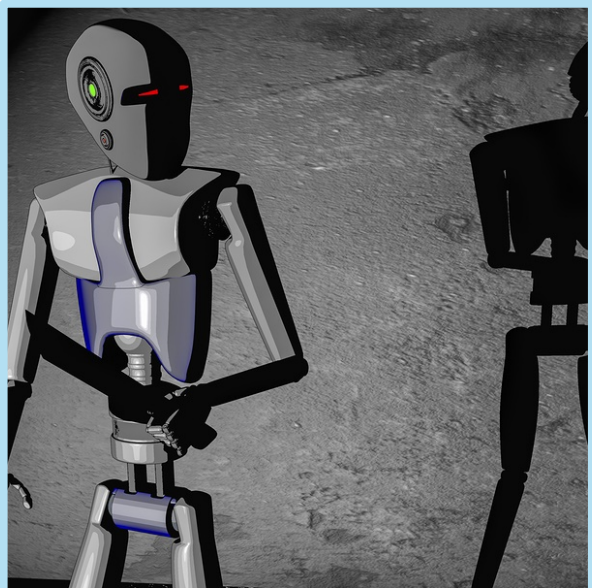


What is the purpose of these machines? Do you use them?





Machines in fiction



Are machines in fiction usually portrayed as good or evil? Intelligent or stupid? Discuss why you think this is.



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

'Are you serious? - do you really believe that a machine thinks?'

I got no immediate reply; Moxon was apparently intent upon the coals in the grate, touching them **deftly** here and there with the fire-poker till they signified a sense of his attention by a **brighter glow**. For several weeks I had been observing in him a growing habit of delay in answering even the most trivial of commonplace questions. His air, however, was that of **preoccupation** rather than **deliberation**: one might have said that he had 'something on his mind.'

Presently he said:

'What is a "machine"? The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: "Any instrument or organization by which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced." Well, then, **is not a man a machine?** And you will admit that he thinks - or thinks he thinks.'



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*



'If you do not wish to answer my question,' I said, rather **testily**, 'why not say so? - all that you say is mere **evasion**. You know well enough that when I say "machine" I do not mean a man, but something that man has made and controls.'

'When it does not control him,' he said, rising **abruptly** and looking out of a window, whence nothing was visible in the **blackness** of a **stormy** night. A moment later he turned about and with a smile said: 'I beg your pardon; I had no thought of evasion. I considered the dictionary man's unconscious testimony suggestive and worth something in the discussion. I can give your question a direct answer easily enough: I do believe that a machine thinks about the work that it is doing.'



Atmosphere

What sense do we get of the atmosphere in the room, both from the descriptions of the place inside and out, and from the descriptions of the men's behaviour?



the blackness of a stormy night

testily

abruptly

a brighter glow

preoccupation
rather than
deliberation



Man and machine

How do you feel when you read this quotation? Do you agree with Moxon's view? In what ways could man be viewed as a machine? In what ways can we differentiate man and machine?

//

Well, then, is not a man a machine?

//



Do machines think?

Are you surprised by Moxon's final answer that he does believe that machines think? What do you think he meant by this?





Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

That was direct enough, certainly. It was not altogether pleasing, for it tended to confirm a sad suspicion that Moxon's devotion to study and work in his machine-shop had not been good for him. I knew, for one thing, that he suffered from **insomnia**, and that is no light **affliction**. Had it affected his mind? His reply to my question seemed to me then evidence that it had; perhaps I should think differently about it now. I was younger then, and among the blessings that are not denied to **youth** is **ignorance**. **Incited** by that great stimulant to **controversy**, I said:

'And what, pray, does it think with - in the **absence of a brain**?'

The reply, coming with less than his customary delay, took his favourite form of **counter-interrogation**:

'With what does a plant think - in the absence of a brain?'

'Ah, plants also belong to the philosopher class! I should be pleased to know some of their conclusions; you may omit the premises.'



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*



'Perhaps,' he replied, apparently unaffected by my **foolish** irony, 'you may be able to infer their convictions from their acts. I will spare you the familiar examples of the sensitive mimosa, the several **insectivorous** flowers and those whose **stamens** bend down and shake their **pollen** upon the entering bee in order that he may fertilize their distant mates. **Roots** of the eucalyptus will **prolong** themselves incredibly in search of moisture.'



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

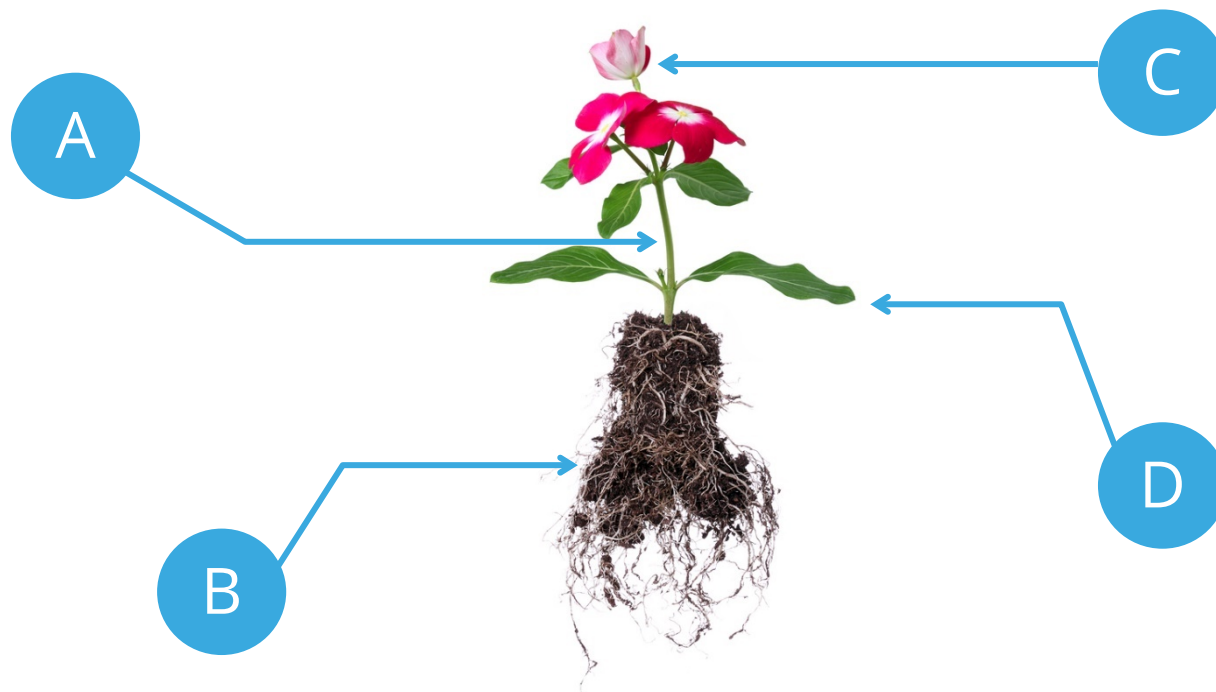


A well-known **horticulturist** relates that one entered an old **drain-pipe** and followed it until it came to a break, where a section of the pipe had been removed to make way for a stone wall that had been built across its course. The root left the drain and followed the wall until it found an opening where a stone had fallen out. It **crept** through and following the other side of the wall back to the drain, entered the unexplored part and resumed its journey.'



Vocabulary

Can you name the parts of this plant? Do you know any more parts of a plant that weren't mentioned in the previous text?





How do plants think?

Moxon gives several examples of ways in which plants think. Do you agree with this? Discuss whether you believe that this is really thinking.



roots

pollen

stamen

insectivorous



Plants and machines

Continuing from the previous page,
if **plants** do not think, but they are
alive, is thinking central to being
alive? Is a **brain** a necessity?



Redefining thinking

On the other hand, if a **plant** does think, should we **redefine** what thinking means? Should we also redefine the **senses** of smell, sight, and hearing, all of which plants are said by some to possess?



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

Moxon was speaking with unusual animation and **earnestness**. As he paused I heard in an adjoining room known to me as his 'machine-shop,' which no one but himself was permitted to enter, a singular **thumping** sound, as of someone **pounding** upon a table with an open hand. Moxon heard it at the same moment and, visibly **agitated**, rose and hurriedly passed into the room whence it came. I thought it odd that anyone else should be in there, and my interest in my friend - with doubtless a touch of **unwarrantable** curiosity - led me to listen intently, though, I am happy to say, not at the keyhole.



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

There were confused sounds, as of a **struggle** or **scuffle**; the floor shook. I distinctly heard hard breathing and a hoarse whisper which said 'Damn you!' Then all was silent, and presently Moxon reappeared and said, with a rather sorry smile:

'Pardon me for leaving you so abruptly. I have a machine in there that **lost its temper** and **cut up rough**.'

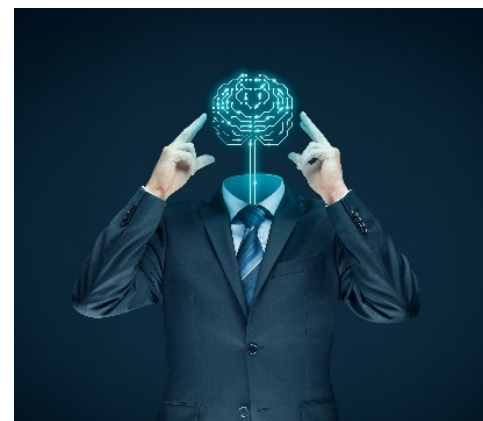
Fixing my eyes steadily upon his left cheek, which was **traversed** by four parallel **excoriations** showing blood, I said:

'How would it do to trim its nails?' I could have spared myself the **jest**; he gave it no attention, but seated himself in the chair that he had left and resumed the interrupted monologue as if nothing had occurred:



Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

'Doubtless you do not hold with those (I need not name them to a man of your reading) who have taught that all matter is **sentient**, that every **atom** is a **living, feeling, conscious** being. I do. There is no such thing as dead, **inert** matter: it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the **contagion** of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with, as those of man when he is fashioning it into an instrument of his will. It **absorbs** something of his intelligence and purpose - more of them in proportion to the complexity of the resulting machine and that of its work.

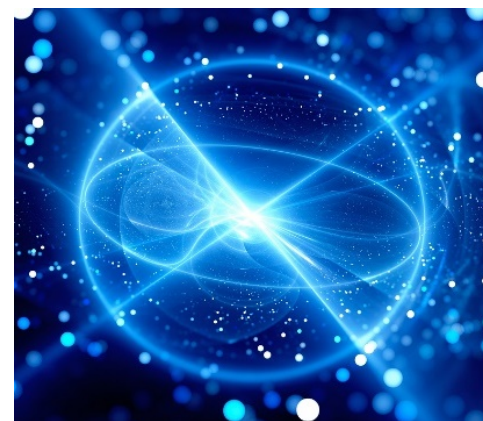




Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

'Do you happen to recall Herbert Spencer's definition of "Life"? I read it thirty years ago. He may have altered it afterward, for anything I know, but in all that time I have been unable to think of a single word that could profitably be changed or added or removed. It seems to me not only the best definition, but the only possible one.

"Life," he says, "is a definite combination of **heterogeneous** changes, both **simultaneous** and **successive**, in correspondence with external **coexistences** and sequences."

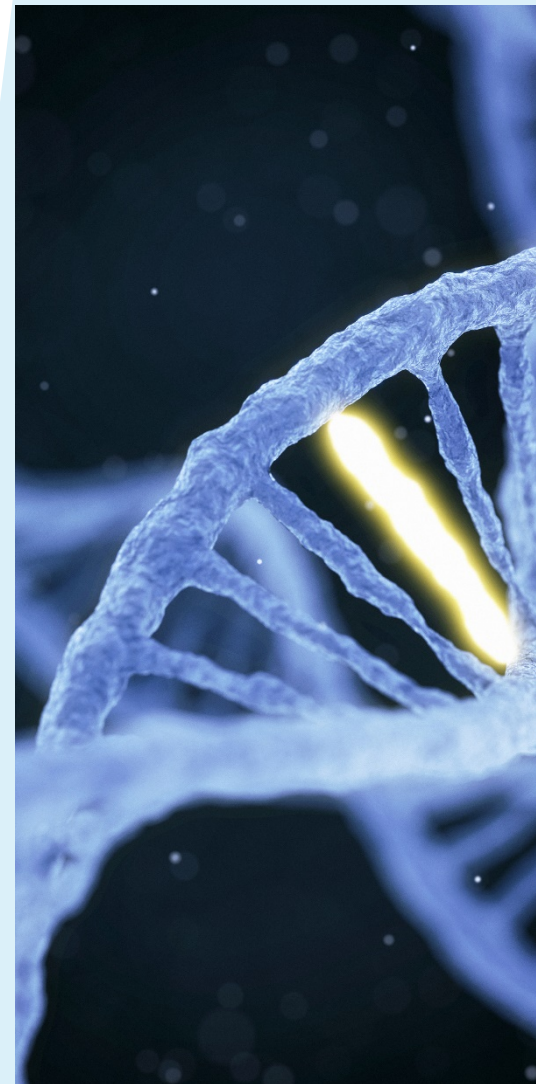




Ambrose Bierce's *Moxon's Master*

'That defines the **phenomenon**,' I said, 'but gives no hint of its **cause**.'

'That,' he replied, 'is all that any definition can do. As Mill points out, we know nothing of cause except as an **antecedent** - nothing of effect except as a **consequent**. Of certain phenomena, one never occurs without another, which is dissimilar: the first in point of time we call cause, the second, effect. One who had many times seen a rabbit pursued by a dog, and had never seen rabbits and dogs otherwise, would think the rabbit the cause of the dog.'





The struggle

What do you think of the description of the struggle that takes place?
Does the fight seem mechanical? Do you believe a machine can lose its temper?





Is everything alive?

What do you understand by the quotation below? Have you ever heard anything similar to this?

Moxon says that he believes:

all matter is **sentient**, that every **atom** is a **living, feeling, conscious** being.



Do you agree with Moxon that everything is alive? In what ways do you think things can live?



Consequences

What consequences could there be if we believe that all matter is alive?

Causing harm, pain,
and death

Rights in society





Herbert Spencer

What do you think of Herbert Spencer's definition of **life**?
Moxon believes it is the best and only possible definition.
Do you agree?





Write a letter

Write a letter to Moxon explaining why you do or do not agree with his supposition that man is a machine. You should write no more than 150 words.

- Remember to tell Moxon why you are writing in the introduction.
- In the main body of the letter, explain your opinion, giving reasons and examples.
- In the final paragraph, you could ask a question, or suggest a meeting.

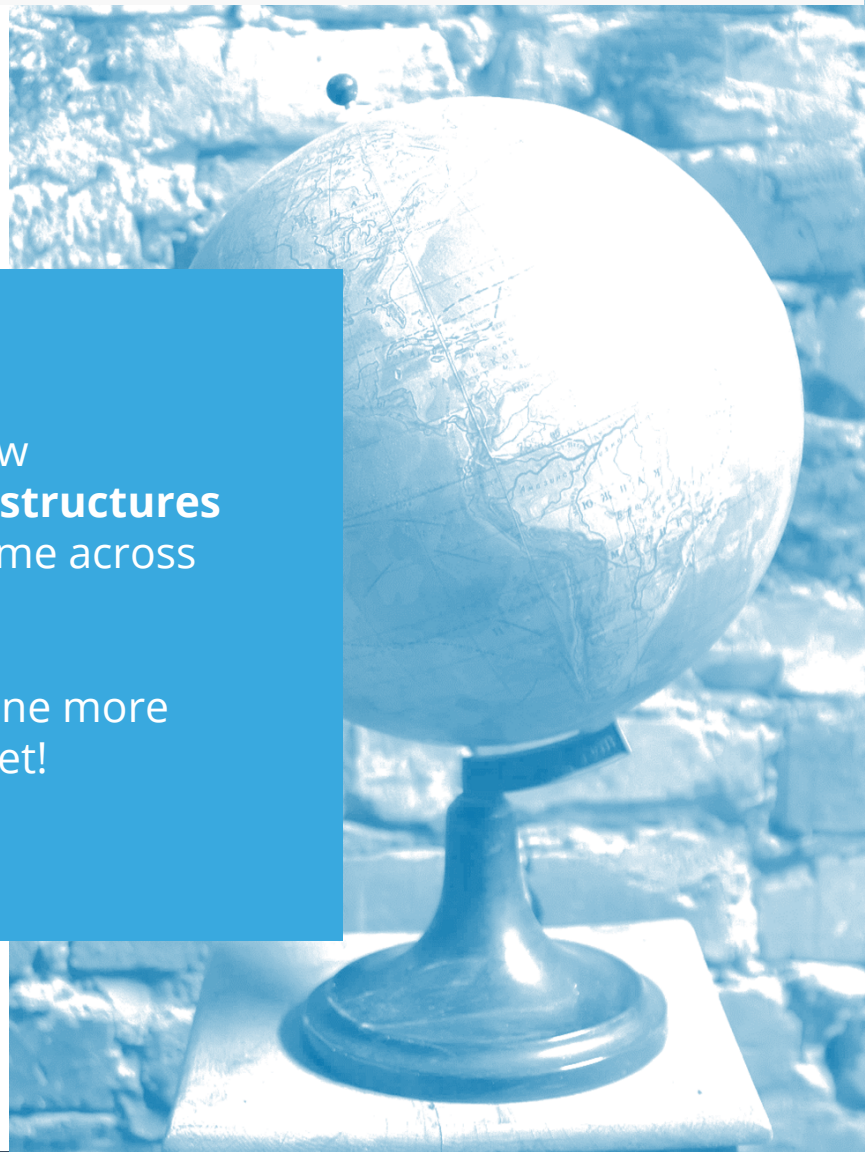




Reflect on this lesson

Take a moment to review any new **vocabulary, phrases, language structures** or **grammar points** you have come across for the first time in this lesson.

Review them with your teacher one more time to make sure you don't forget!

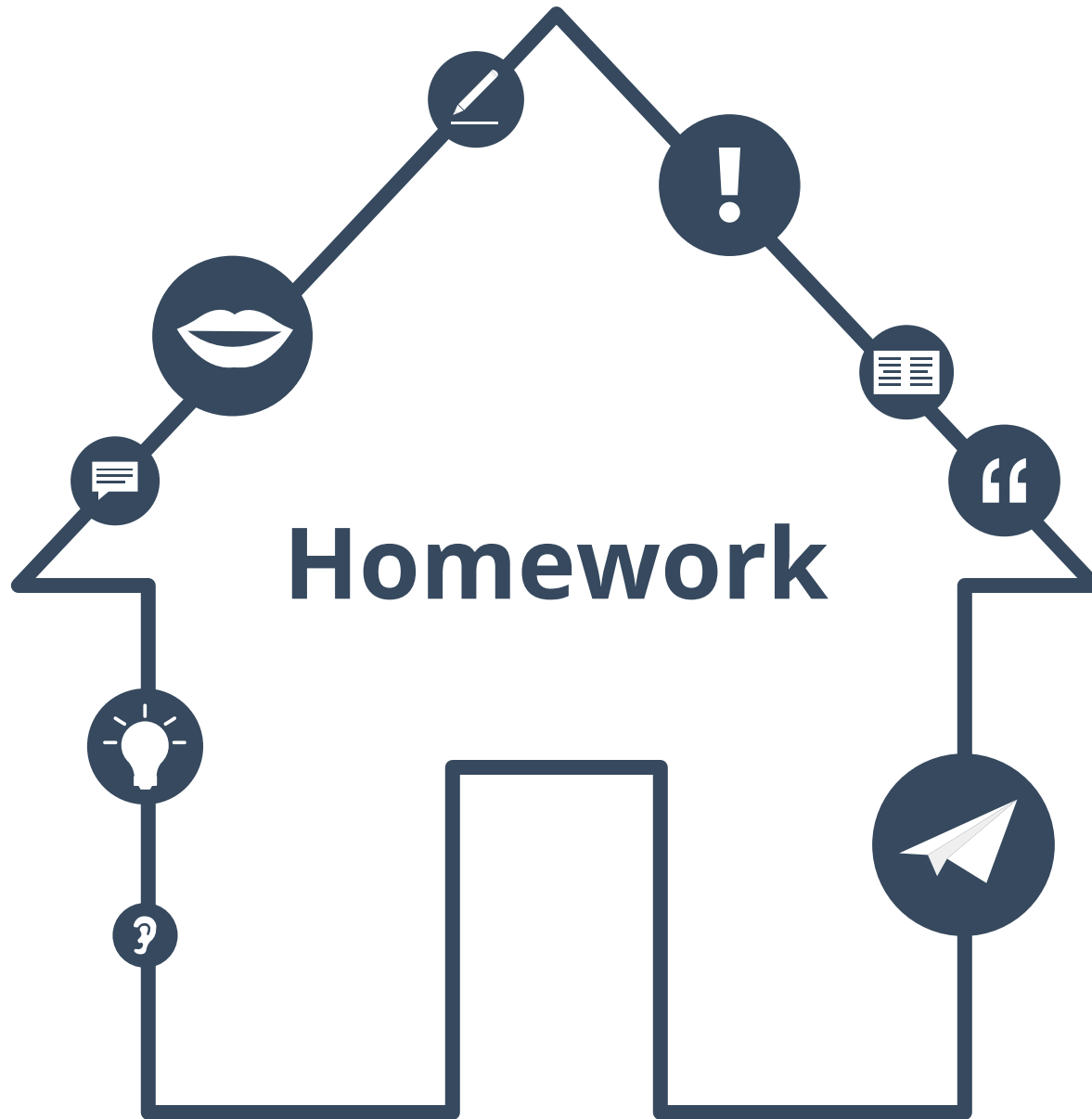




Answer key

Exercise p. 15

A. stem, B. roots, C. flower, D. leaf





Fill in the gaps

1. In the first part of the excerpt, Moxon claims that man is a machine because of a dictionary _____.
2. We are told that Moxon suffers from the _____ of insomnia.
3. The narrator says that Moxon is inciting _____ in saying that machines think.
4. Moxon gives the example of the roots of a plant climbing through a _____ as proof that they think.
5. Moxon believes that all matter is _____.

drainpipe

definition

controversy

affliction

sentient



Lists

Write two lists of reasons why you believe machines can think, and why they can't. Can you come to an easy conclusion?

Machines can think

Machines can't think



Homework answer key

Exercise p. 32

1. definition, 2. affliction, 3. controversy, 4. drainpipe, 5. sentient



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