Why Can't I Stop Hearing That Song?

Educational reading passage. Named speakers and quotations are fictional illustrations.

[1] It usually begins innocently. You hear a few seconds of a song in a shop, or a classmate hums a jingle from an advertisement. Hours later, the same short tune is still playing in your head, over and over, while you are brushing your teeth, doing your homework or trying to fall asleep. Scientists have a name for this irritating experience: an "earworm", a word borrowed from German.

[2] Earworms are remarkably common: when researchers have asked large groups of people about them, almost everyone admits to having had one, and many say they get them every week. Interestingly, the tune is rarely a whole song. Most of the time it is a short section, often the chorus, which repeats itself like a scratched record. People who listen to music every day, or who play an instrument, seem to get them more often than others.

[3] Why does the brain behave in such a strange way? One explanation is that it dislikes unfinished business. When we hear only part of a familiar tune, the brain tries to complete it, and when it cannot, it keeps replaying the part it knows. Songs with a simple, catchy melody and a few unexpected notes are especially likely to get stuck, because they are easy to remember but slightly surprising at the same time.

[4] Earworms also tend to appear when the mind is not fully occupied. Walking, showering and waiting in a queue are typical moments. Stress and tiredness can make them worse, which may explain why so many students complain about them during the exam season. Some people even notice that a particular song returns whenever they are in a certain place, because the brain has linked the tune with that location.

[5] For most people, earworms are harmless, if annoying. However, **they** can be a real nuisance during an exam or when someone is trying to concentrate on difficult work. So what can be done? Three people who have thought about the problem offer very different advice.

[6] Grace Taylor, a secondary school music teacher, recommends listening to the whole song from beginning to end. "Once the brain hears the ending, it feels the job is done," she explains. "Trying to block the tune out almost never works. The harder you push it away, the more firmly it stays."

[7] Daniel Harris, who studies memory at a university, prefers a different approach. He suggests giving the brain a task that needs words, such as solving a crossword or reading a few pages of a novel. "Language and music compete for some of the same space in our heads," he says. "If you keep that space busy, the tune has nowhere to go." Surprisingly, he adds, chewing gum may also help, because moving the jaw can interrupt the silent "singing" inside your head.

[8] Not everyone wants to get rid of their earworms, however. Margaret Bell, a retired pianist, says she has learned to live with them. "Some of my favourite pieces of music started as tunes I could not forget," she says. "I would rather have a song in my head than an empty silence." For her, the earworm is not a pest but a sign that the brain is enjoying itself.

[9] Whichever method you choose, there is some comfort in knowing that earworms do not last forever. They often fade away on their own, sometimes when you are busy enjoying something else. Of course, by the time you have finished reading this article, you may already be humming a tune you thought you had forgotten.

Words to help you

jingle [1] — a short, catchy tune used in an advertisement

chorus [2] — the part of a song that is repeated after each verse

catchy [3] — easy to remember and pleasant to sing

occupied [4] — busy with something

nuisance [5] — something that causes trouble

retired [8] — no longer working because of age

Questions — 17 marks

1. (para 1) What is the best meaning of "innocently" in paragraph 1? (1 mark)

A. quietly
B. noisily
C. in an ordinary, harmless way
D. on purpose

2. (para 2) Decide whether each statement is True, False or Not Given. Circle the answer. (2 marks)

Statement			
(a) Only a small number of people have ever had an earworm. (para 2)	True	False	Not Given
(b) People who play an instrument have earworms that last longer than other people's. (para 2)	True	False	Not Given

3. (para 3) According to paragraph 3, why does the brain keep playing the same part of a tune? Answer in your own words. Answer in complete sentences. (2 marks)

4. (para 4) Complete the summary. Write ONE word in each blank, using the information in paragraph 4. (2 marks)

Earworms often come when the mind is not (a) _____ busy, for example in the shower. Feeling stressed or (b) _____ can make them worse.

5. (para 5) What does "**they**" in paragraph 5 refer to? (1 mark)

6. (paras 6–8) Who would most likely say each of these? Write **G** (Grace Taylor), **D** (Daniel Harris) or **M** (Margaret Bell). (3 marks)

Statement	Person
(a) "Keep your mind busy with words, and the music will leave."	_____
(b) "Don't fight the tune. Let it reach its end."	_____
(c) "A tune that will not go away can be a gift."	_____

7. (para 7) Which of these does Daniel Harris NOT suggest? (1 mark)

A. chewing gum
B. listening to the song again
C. doing a crossword
D. reading part of a story

8. (para 8) Why is Margaret Bell happy to keep her earworms? Give TWO reasons. Answer in your own words. Answer in complete sentences. (2 marks)

9. (para 9) What does the writer suggest in the last sentence of the article? (1 mark)

A. Most earworms disappear within a few hours.
B. Readers should stop reading the article now.
C. Humming helps people forget a song.
D. Reading about earworms may give you one.

10. (whole passage) Which piece of advice in the article would you try first? Give ONE reason. Answer in complete sentences. (1 mark)

Comprehension answers

Question 1

C

Para 1: the earworm starts with something ordinary, like a song in a shop. A is tempting, but the song is not described as quiet.

Question 2

(a) **False** (b) **Not Given**

(a) Para 2: "almost everyone admits to having had one". (b) Para 2 says these people get earworms "more often", but it never says the earworms last longer.

Question 3

The brain wants to finish a tune it knows. When it cannot finish it, it repeats the part it already knows.

Any answer that gives both points: (1) the brain tries to complete / does not like an unfinished tune; (2) so it repeats the part it knows. One mark for each point.

Para 3, sentences 2–3

Question 4

(a) fully (b) tired

(a) completely, totally (b) exhausted

Para 4: "not fully occupied"; "Stress and tiredness can make them worse."

Question 5

earworms

the tunes stuck in your head

Para 5

Question 6

(a) **D** (b) **G** (c) **M**

(a) Para 7 (b) Para 6 (c) Para 8

Question 7

B

Para 7. Listening to the whole song is Grace Taylor's advice in para 6, not Daniel Harris's. A is tempting because it is a surprising idea, but he does suggest it.

Question 8

Some of her favourite music began as tunes that she could not forget. She also prefers having a song in her head to having silence.

Any two of: some favourite pieces began as earworms; she prefers a song to silence; she sees it as a sign that her brain is enjoying itself.

Para 8

Question 9

D

Para 9, last sentence: "you may already be humming a tune". A concerns duration, but it is not what the last sentence suggests.

Question 10

Own answer. Example: I would try listening to the whole song first, because Grace Taylor says the brain stops repeating a tune once it hears the ending.

Any relevant approach from paras 6–8, including accepting the earworm, with a sensible reason. Award 1 mark only when both the approach and reason are given.

Paras 6–8

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Grammar Usage

Answer every question on this page.

PART C Word formation

Fill in the correct form of the word in capitals. Not every answer is a noun.

1. A new study has produced a _____ result. (SURPRISE)
2. Athletes who retire early are no less _____ in later life. (SUCCESS)
3. The _____ was carried out over eleven years. (INVESTIGATE)
4. Its author warns against reading the figures _____. (CARE)
5. The gap between the two groups was barely _____. (MEASURE)
6. One official called the conclusion _____. (MISLEAD)

PART D Prepositions

Fill in one suitable preposition.

1. There is no simple solution _____ a problem of that kind.
2. She showed a natural talent _____ languages very early.
3. He is entirely dependent _____ the programme.
4. The two studies differ _____ one another in method.
5. She is deeply involved _____ the campaign.
6. Their conclusions are at odds _____ the earlier report.

PART E Relative clauses

Join each pair of sentences. Put the preposition before the relative pronoun.

1. That is the sports centre. She trained at it for nine years.

_____

_____

2. It was a decision. Everything else followed from it.

_____

_____

Answers **C** 1 surprising / surprise · 2 successful · 3 investigation · 4 carelessly · 5 measurable · 6 misleading **D** 1 to / for · 2 for · 3 on / upon · 4 from · 5 in / with · 6 with **E** 1 That is the sports centre at which she trained for nine years. · 2 It was a decision from which everything else followed.

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