

# JOHN HENRY

## Part 1: A Naturally Gifted Driver

- 1 It is believed that John Henry was born with a hammer in his hand. Yep, that's the truth I tell you. He came into the world just like any other baby, but in his hand was a large, shiny, steel hammer.
- 2 Just as all babies do, John grew up. When it was time for him to adventure into the world on his own, he left home and took his hammer with him.
- 3 Now, lifting that hammer as a child resulted in John becoming very strong. Naturally, finding a job that required a lot of strength is exactly what would fit John.
- 4 While walking, he saw glimmers of fire in the distance. Like a moth attracted to light, he continued towards the flickers. As he got closer, he heard what sounded like bells being played. When he finally arrived at his destination, he met a crew of working men building a railroad. It was the gleaming steel of the hammers that flashed in the sunlight that caught Mr. Henry's attention. Right at that moment, John's face grew the widest grin because he knew that was the place he wanted to stay.
- 5 Immediately, John searched out the man in charge and said, "Excuse me. I'd like to help construct this fine railroad you are building.
- 6 As you and I know, John was a massive man. Can you believe that the boss looked at him and dared to ask him, "Why should I hire you?"
- 7 Well, John wouldn't take no for an answer. He looked at the overseer of the railroad and said, "Because I am in the mood for pounding steel. I guarantee that I'll be the best steel driver you have ever seen."
- 8 Let me tell you something, the man in charge challenged John by saying, "Well, I'll believe it when I see it." He then turned to his crew and announced, "If he's going to hammer, someone has to hold the spike. Who here is going to do that?"
- 9 Nervously, the workers all shook their heads and yelled in unison, "He'll miss it for sure and smash our hands!"
- 10 John quickly spoke up and said, "Hold up. I'll hit that spike, and I'll hit it straight. I'll pound it right into the track. I promise on my honor that..."
- 11 Would you believe that the boss interrupted John by saying, "I'm sorry, fellow, but if none of my workers will volunteer, I'm afraid you will need to leave."
- 12 John looked at all the red-faced men, staring at the ground. Suddenly a voice nervously spoke up out of the group and hesitantly said, "I'll do it." Little Willie stepped forward. He wasn't tough and strong like the others, but his bravery made up for it. "I'll hold the spike," he said. "Just promise me you will take it easy this first time," Little Willie continued.
- 13 John Henry raised his hammer as high as he could. He brought it down so fast; it seemed like lightning coming from the sky. BLAM! Little Willie finished his small prayer, looked at his hands, and whistled. You wouldn't believe it, but John drove that spike into the ground with just one hit. The workers dropped their jaws, and the boss's eyes grew large.
- 14 "You sir have a job," he said to John Henry. From then on, John Henry hammered from dawn till dusk. No job was too difficult, or too big. "You can count on me," John Henry said. "I'm the best steel driver there's ever been."



**I can figure out the meaning of difficult words and phrases using clues in the text.**

**1. PART 1: Read the sentence below.**

"Like a moth attracted to light, he continued towards the flickers."

**What type of figurative language did the author use in the sentence above?**

- a. Onomatopoeia
- b. Synonym
- c. Alliteration
- d. Simile

**I can figure out why an author used specific words to write their story.**

**PART 2: Which reason best explains why the author chose to use this sentence in the story?**

- a. It helps the reader learn that moths are attracted to light.
- b. It helps the reader imagine how the flashes of light attracted John Henry.
- c. It helps the reader understand that there are insects around John Henry.
- d. It helps the reader infer that John Henry believes that the light is something dangerous.

**I can support inferences with evidence from the text.**

**2. Which sentence below best helps the reader understand that this story is a tall tale?**

- a. "He came into the world just like any other baby, but in his hand was a large, shiny, steel hammer." Paragraph 1
- b. "As you and I know, John was a massive man." Paragraph 6
- c. "John quickly spoke up and said, "Hold up. I'll hit that spike, and I'll hit it straight. I'll pound it right into the track. I promise on my honor that..." Paragraph 10
- d. "'You can count on me," John Henry said. "I'm the best steel driver there's ever been.'" Paragraph 14

**I can figure out the meaning of difficult words and phrases using clues in the text.**

**3. Read the sentence below.**

"Nervously, the workers all shook their heads and yelled in unison, "He'll miss it for sure and smash our hands!"

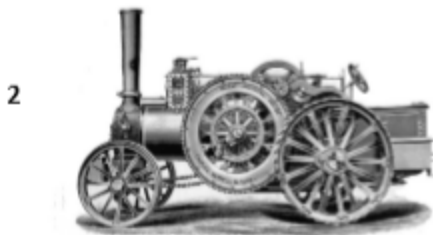
**Which word below is a synonym for the word unison?**

- a. fear
- b. excitement
- c. together
- d. confusion

## JOHN HENRY

### Part 2: Who's the Best Driver?

Good ole' John worked tirelessly and could hit a rail spike in the ground faster than you can lick your lips. Things were going remarkably until they arrived at a mountain. The crew boss was quite discouraged and shook his head in bewilderment, saying, "Well boys, we're going to have to figure out how to get through the mountain. If we want to get our full pay, we need to burrow through this monstrous rock all the way to the other side. I'm not sure how we'll do it."



Just then, wouldn't you know it, a stranger arrived riding on the most unusual piece of machinery. That stranger introduced himself and the contraption that he was riding. "This here's a steam drill," the man said. It can cut right through that rock with ease. As a matter of fact, it is stronger than six men combined."

That got John's anger soaring, and he challenged the man by saying, "Not if I'm one of the men!"

Before you knew it, the challenge was on... man versus machine. We called it the *Rumble Against the Rubble*. The contest put John Henry and the villainous machine right next to each other. The first one through to the other side would be the winner. John took one look at that machine and said, "I'll die before I let that machine win. After all, a man be a man, and a machine is nothing but a machine."



So Little Willie got into place. He held the biggest spike he had against the mountain side. Then, with a wink and a nod from Willie, John lifted his hammer. During this same time, the stranger flipped some switches and turned some gadgets. Then the crew boss's pistol cracked in the air, and the race was on.

I could hear John grunt with every swing of the hammer. Clang! Bang! Again, and again, he struck the spike as hard as he could. Pieces of rock began to fly, and in no time at all, a hole began to form.

The machine screamed to life. It hissed and roared as it dug into the mountain.

Sweat trickled down John Henry's back. We threw cold water over John and Willie. John's hammer got so hot, we even poured water on the heated steel, causing it to


8 steam. Each of us were worried that his hammer may burst into flames at any moment!

The race lasted for hours. Slowly, the mouth of the tunnel began to open. Dust and rock showered down on us as these two forces of nature pressed on. John Henry and the machine appeared to be neck and neck.

As John furiously worked, Willie noticed that his breath grew ragged. His heart beat against his chest so hard, that you could hear it echo against the walls of the cave. Concerned, Little Willie asked, "Mr. Henry, how are you feeling?"

11 "I feel fine," John Henry said. "I feel powerful. Most importantly, I feel free."

Then he saw the machine pulling ahead. Quickly, John commanded me to give him another hammer. So, I handed him a hammer and he began swinging both hammers at once. He moved so fast, he was a blur.

13  The machine didn't stand a chance. You know why? A machine is nothing but a machine, but John Henry was the man of all men!

14 The machine shuddered. It coughed and groaned. Finally, it stopped altogether. The man who ran the machine was astonished about what had happened. The contest was finished, and John Henry had conquered the iron beast!

15 John Henry looked dazed as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Little Willie reached out to his friend and said, "John...are you okay?"

16 "I'm a little tired Willie. However, I feel powerful and I feel free."

17 Then John Henry sank to the ground. He closed his eyes forever, and his hammer was still in his hand.

## Who's the Best Driver?

### Part 2: Questions

I can figure out why an author used specific words to write their story.

4. Read the sentence from paragraph 1 below.

"Good ole' John worked tirelessly and could hit a rail spike in the ground faster than you can lick your lips."

Which reason best explains why the author chose to write this sentence in the story?

- a. To help the reader understand John Henry's strength using exaggeration.
- b. To show that John Henry was careless while working.
- c. To help the reader discover that John licked his lips when hitting the rail spike.
- d. To show that Willie had to be fast when getting spikes for John.

I can determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text.

5. What does the word bewilderment mean as it is used in the sentence below:

"The crew boss was quite discouraged and shook his head in bewilderment, saying, "Well boys, we're going to have to figure out how to go through the mountain."

- a. frustration
- b. sorrow
- c. happiness
- d. confusion

I can explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

6. Which sentence provides the best evidence that the narrator is a member of the railroad crew?

- a. "Just then, wouldn't you know it, a stranger arrived, riding on the most unusual piece of machinery." Paragraph 2
- b. "Again, and again, he struck the spike as hard as he could." Paragraph 6
- c. "Quickly, John commanded me to give him another hammer." Paragraph 12
- d. "He closed his eyes forever, and his hammer was still in his hand." Paragraph 17

I can figure out why parts of the story are important to the theme, setting, or plot.

7. Which idea below best explains why paragraph 4 is important to the story?

- a. The reader learns that John Henry is willing to give his life to defeat the steam drill in the challenge.
- b. The reader learns that the workers named the challenge "The Rumble Against the Rubble."
- c. The reader learns the rules of the contest between John Henry and the steam drill.
- d. The reader learns that the person operating the steam drill accepted John Henry's great challenge.

# JOHN HENRY

## Part 3: Will the Real John Henry Please Stand Up?

- 1 Nobody truly knows if John Henry actually existed. However, Scott Nelson, a history professor from the College of William and Mary, believes that he has evidence of John Henry's existence. While writing a book about the American Civil War, Mr. Nelson discovered some sketchy historical information. Mr. Nelson took the information and began to prove most of the facts that he came across, making his opinion that John Henry was an actual real person more plausible.



2

So, who was John Henry? Mr. Nelson's research paints a different picture of the beloved folktale hero. Nelson's John Henry was a large, muscular man who was from New Jersey. At the age of 18, John worked for the Union Army near Petersburg, Virginia, in 1866. During his time serving the Union army, Henry was imprisoned for stealing from a grocery store while on duty in Richmond, Virginia. Henry would spend the next 10 years in prison at the Virginia State Penitentiary.

3

At this prison, the warden would rent out inmates to the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad for 25 cents a day. These inmates were borrowed to help drill through the Allegheny Mountains. According to documents, Nelson reports that "John Henry worked on the team that was assigned to drill the Lewis Tunnel in West Virginia." This is the same exact location where steam drills were being tested against workers with hammers.

4

During this time, the hammer man worked in partnership with another person known as a shaker. The shaker was someone who would hold a piece of metal that looked like a chisel against the mountain rock. The hammering man would then strike a powerful blow with the sledgehammer. Dust and debris would suffocate many of the workers, killing them inside the cave.

5

By 1874, any records of John Henry had vanished. There wasn't any mention of John Henry being released from prison. According to Mr. Nelson, this evidence suggests that he died while working on the railroad and not inside the prison. If he had died in the prison, his death would have been recorded.

6

Nelson finishes by writing, "To help keep a speedy work pace, songs with rhythm were created to help the hammer man and the shaker work together. These songs became tales and stories like those of John Henry."



## Will the Real John Henry Please Stand Up?

### Part 3: Questions

I can determine the central idea of texts using exact details as evidence.

8. The author of "John Henry: Who's the Best Driver?" and Scott Nelson would most likely agree that:
- a. John Henry could hit a rail spike through the ground with a single swing of his hammer.
  - b. John Henry was considered a real hero to the railroad crew that he worked alongside.
  - c. John Henry died while creating the tunnel through a mountainside.
  - d. John Henry defeated the steam drill engine in a race to tunnel through a mountainside.

I can figure out the meaning of difficult words and phrases using clues in the text.

9. Read the sentence below from paragraph 2 from the story "Will the Real John Henry Please Stand Up?"

"Mr. Nelson's research paints a different picture of the beloved folktale hero."

What does the phrase "paints a different picture" mean?

- a. Scott Nelson's research of John Henry is similar to the heroic deeds found in the tall tale story.
- b. The pictures used in the text for Scott Nelson are different than the pictures used in the Tall Tale story.
- c. The tall tale story makes John Henry look like a hero, while Scott Nelson makes John Henry appear different.
- d. Since there isn't a real picture of John Henry, Scott Nelson created a different picture of what John Henry looked like.

I can determine the central idea of texts using exact details as evidence.

10. Compared to the tall tale story, how does Scott Nelson believe that John Henry really died?
- a. John Henry died defeating a steam drill in the mountains.
  - b. John Henry died in the Virginia State Prison.
  - c. John Henry died when the tunnel he was working inside of caved in.
  - d. John Henry died from breathing in too much rock dust.

I can figure out the meaning of difficult words and phrases using clues in the text.

11. Read the sentence below.

"While writing a book about the American Civil War, Mr. Nelson discovered some sketchy historical information."

Which word below is a synonym for the word sketchy?

- a. perfect
- b. unclear
- c. honest
- d. ancient

