

Breaking the Time Barrier

Non-fiction

Content domain focus:

- 2b** retrieve and record information/identify key details from fiction and non-fiction
- 2d** make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text
- 2g** identify/explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases

Text summary

The text is a historical recount, based on the successful attempt on the world mile record by Roger Bannister in 1954. The writer, Geraldine McCaughrean, is an award-winning writer of children's fiction. She has also produced a collection of dramatic recounts of important moments from British history, in *Britannia: 100 Great Stories from British History*, from which this passage is taken.

Unit summary

The passage is a dramatic retelling of a historical event. The unit focuses on the children's ability to understand the importance of the event and its personal significance to the runner. The questions also look at the craft of the writer in bringing a historical event to life.



Teaching prompts

- Ask the children to name something that people in the past thought might never happen, but which has happened in living memory of themselves or their parents (e.g. the rapid evolution of technology to the iPad; Usain Bolt becoming the first Olympian to claim three consecutive gold medals in the 100m sprint; electing Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States).
- Ask: *What made it possible for these things to happen? Is there anything we now think is impossible, but which might happen one day in the future?*
- You could measure a height of 2.45 m in the classroom, and explain that it is the world high jump record, set in 1993 by Sotomayor from Cuba. In 1912, the record stood at 2.00 m.
- Explain that they are about to read the story of how an English runner, Roger Bannister, broke the four-minute barrier for the mile in 1954 – something people thought could not be done.

Revisiting the text

Ask the children to:

- explain what they have learned from the passage, either to do with the event itself, or the experience of attempting the impossible. Ask: *What would it be like to succeed in doing something people thought could not be done? Would you stop then, or continue to improve on what you have done?*
- share their thoughts on whether Geraldine McCaughrean succeeded in bringing the event to life (referring to the final question). Invite the children to explore how she attempted to do this.

You could add further questions to challenge the more able: *How did she know, given that she was not present (it happened over 60 years ago)? Is there anything that she may have needed to invent or imagine? Is this allowed in a historical account?*

Ask if there were any questions they found difficult; if so, resolve these.

Finally, ask the children to do further research into the event to check the facts.

**Answers**

1. He was trying to run his fastest-ever race/break the world record for the mile. [2b]
2. Any two from: the weather/strong wind/rain; the pressure of exams; the belief that it was impossible. [2b]
3. Any two from: the weather improved/the wind dropped; the support of the crowd; his friend and running partner Chris Brasher; his own determination to succeed. [2b]
4. a) There was a false start (the second bang was to stop the race). [2d]
b) Bannister was angry because this was a further obstacle/he was already tense, and this made things worse. [2d]
5. The description combines two things: everyone in the stadium was tense and excited (holding their breath) – even the wind; the wind stopped blowing, making running easier for Bannister. [2g]
6. ignore him [2d]
7. He breaks the tape across the winning line. [2d]
8. He proves that it is possible to run a mile in less than four minutes. [2d]
9. The crowd is only interested in hearing the “three minutes”, which means he has broken the four-minute barrier. [2d]
10. Expect children to say she does succeed in bringing the race to life. Look for the following examples in their responses: She tells the story through Bannister’s eyes./ She builds up the tension before the race./ She describes the race as if it were happening./ She lets us know what the atmosphere was like, and what Bannister was feeling. [2g]

**Assessment**

This is a substantial passage, testing the children’s reading speed and stamina, so their ability to read the passage and answer the questions is the first thing to assess here. As this is Year 5, you may wish to be flexible in your allocation of time at this stage.

Questions 1–4 require information retrieval, but they are more challenging than in previous units, requiring thought and careful selection of material. Questions 5 and 6 look at the children’s ability to respond to the writer’s use of language. Questions 7, 8 and 9 may prove more challenging for children unfamiliar with the sport. However, they should be accessible to careful and thoughtful readers. Question 10 asks for an appreciation of the writer’s craft and an assessment of the effectiveness of the piece. This is quite challenging, so look for evidence of understanding rather than a fully formed answer.

Next steps

The children gradually need to build their reading speed and stamina to enable them to access longer and more challenging texts in the allotted time. This is something that needs to be addressed sensitively throughout Years 5 and 6.

The children also need to become used to evaluating as well as understanding the writing they meet. For this they will need to experience a broad range of texts, and texts of varying quality, and be encouraged to understand what makes a good text.