



Lesson 3: Details and Organization

Most writing contains a lot of little details. Remember, details are the small parts that make up the passage as a whole. Some details may seem unimportant. But in a well-written passage, all of the details work together to make a clear and complete story or idea. Changing a few important details can change the effect of a whole passage.

For example, does it matter what clothes the main character of a story decides to put on in the morning? It does if she's a famous pop singer. What she puts on gives the reader a clue about what's coming next. Maybe she's going to a performance or a talk-show appearance. Maybe she's going to the recording studio or just a restaurant around the corner for breakfast.


In all writing, details make things clearer for the reader. Fiction writers write from their imagination. They use details to help readers imagine a setting or character. Nonfiction writers write using facts. They use factual details to explain their ideas or to convince readers to agree with them.

On reading tests, questions about details are often the easiest type of question to answer. That's because the answer is right there in the passage in front of you. All you have to do is put your finger on it. The following tips will help you find the right details quickly.



TIP 1: Read the entire passage first.

When you first read anything, read it all the way through. Don't worry about remembering every detail. Just think about the big picture, by figuring out the main idea and theme. Make a map in your mind of where the important ideas and details are located. This will help you find the details you need later.



TIP 2: Find the details that support the main idea or theme.

Figuring out the main idea and theme of the passage on your first read will help you decide which details you should pay special attention to. The most important details are the ones that support the main idea or theme. They hold up the first floor and keep it from falling down.

Let's say that your older brother wants to convince you that the newest MP3 player to go on sale is the best one yet. He writes you a long e-mail all about how it has more memory and a battery that lasts a lot longer than other MP3 players. He also likes the crispness of the sound in the headphones. All of those statements are details that support his main idea: the new MP3 player is great.

Read the following passage. It will help you understand the tips in this lesson.

adapted from

Runaway Blues

by Rick Zollo

In the scene that follows, James Eldon is listening to his foster father, Jake, tell about saving the life of a red-tailed hawk. Jake and his wife, Ruby, operate a center where they care for hurt birds. Morgan is James Eldon's foster brother.

We're at home, sitting around the kitchen table. Jake is telling Morgan, Ruby, and me about his day. He took poor Mama Red Tail to have her X-rayed and ended up in a vet's office in Springtown.

"It's amazing . . . I brought Mama Red Tail to our family doctor, Doc Edwards. I was sure I was gonna have to put her down. Didn't seem like she had much of a chance. But when Doc took the X-ray, we noticed it was a clean break of the humerus. That's the upper bone of the wing," Jake says to me and Morgan, pointing to his upper arm.

"I knew that," Morgan says.

"No bits of broken bone. Just a real clean break. That's when I knew it was part of a cosmic plan."

"How's that?" Ruby asks.

"The very day I get my supplies to build the flight cage, I get this bird. I've been trying to get the money to pay for that flight cage for two years. The bird will be my first experiment using the cage. A perfect case study. Which means," he says to Morgan and me, "we gotta build that cage fast.

"Anyway, with the clean break of the wing, I called my buddy who's a vet in Buffalo, Bill Rawlins. He's busy, but I tell him it's important. 'Bring the bird to my office,' he says.

"So I drive Mama Red Tail to Buffalo. She was still a little shaky. But we had to operate on her before that bone started to set."

"You operated on the bird?" asks Morgan.

"Yeah. Only it wasn't easy. In fact, we almost lost her."

Jake picks up the box with Mama Red Tail inside and opens it. There's the bird, resting in a bunch of shredded newspapers, still sad and lonely, but no longer with a crooked wing. Instead, her wing is wrapped in a bandage, and something shiny sticks out of the top of the bandage.

"How'd you almost lose her?" asks Ruby. She wants Jake to tell the story, but Jake is busy with the hawk. We're waiting on his every word.

Jake takes Mama out of the box. "Morgan, get my shot and the medicine." As Morgan does that, Jake says, "We never used a sleeping drug on a bird before, and we used too much. Mama almost died on the spot. Woulda been a painless death, at least."

I look at the bird and feel sorry for her. She still doesn't know what's going on. I think of Princess, who looks so much like Mama, and how when Princess flies, she can soar over a mile up into the sky, making these great circles, just drifting in the wind. I think of how when she's hunting she can jump out of a tree and catch a rabbit in a blink of an eye. That's what Mama Red Tail was doing before she broke her wing, and she should be doing that now.

Jake sees me looking at the bird.

"Wanna hold her? Hold her here." And he sets the bird on my lap. "Be careful of her claws."

"So, what happened?" Ruby asks.

"When I got there, Bill was busy working on some dogs. So I plucked the feathers around Mama's broken wing and shoulder. By the time Bill finished with the dogs, we were ready to operate."

Morgan comes back with the shot for the hawk.

"James Eldon, hold up Mama's head and keep her beak open. Stroke her neck to help her swallow. We're giving her vitamin B-12, iron, an antibiotic, and water. Mama won't be ready for solid food for several days."

Morgan and I feed Mama Red Tail as Jake continues.

"We almost lost her, but she didn't die. It's all part of a plan. This bird was meant to break its wing so we could heal it by using the flight cage."

Jake touches the end of a shiny metal rod that sticks out of Mama's shoulder and right through the bandage. "We just screwed this rod into her wing, past where the break was. Now the wing is straight. In five or six weeks, when the bone heals, we'll unscrew it."

I look at the bird sitting on my lap. Morgan is feeding her, and I'm thinking maybe she doesn't have to die, after all. Maybe she will live to fly again.



TIP 3: Find the details that support ideas in the passage that are not the main idea.

Earlier, you learned to look out for details that support the main idea. Some questions on tests may ask you to use details to support other ideas in the passage. For example, the fact that Jake is a kind person is not the main idea of the passage from "Runaway Blues." However, many details from the passage support the idea that Jake is kind.

1. On the lines that follow, list details from the passage that support the idea that Jake is kind.



TIP 4: Scan the passage to find key words.

To scan means to look quickly over the passage for something. One way to answer detail questions is to scan the passage for key words from the question.

The key words are the most important words. Look at the following question about the passage you just read, but don't try to answer it yet.

Who is Mama?

The key word in this question is *Mama*. Now go back to the reading passage and look for *Mama*. Circle the word each time it appears in the passage until you find the answer to the question.

Now answer the question.


2. Who is Mama?
 - A. a female bird
 - B. James Eldon's mother
 - C. Morgan's mother
 - D. Jake's mother

CCSS: RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RI.7.1, RI.7.2

Now try two more. Scan the passage for key words from each question to help you find the answer.

3. What has Jake been trying to do for two years?
 - A. teach James Eldon to care for birds
 - B. get money to build a flight cage
 - C. help Mama to get well enough to fly
 - D. learn to operate on hurt animals

4. What did the doctor see after looking at the X-ray?
 - A. a clean break in a bird's wing
 - B. a metal screw in a broken bone
 - C. bits of broken bone in Mama's leg
 - D. a broken humerus in Jake's arm

 **TIP 5: Distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information.**

A short passage may have dozens of details. When you answer a detail question, look for the detail that is most relevant, or directly related, to the question. If the question is multiple-choice, eliminate the answers with details that do not have anything to do with the question. These details may appear in the passage, but if they are irrelevant, or unrelated to the question, they are not the correct answer.

Try the following question.

5. Why does Mama need an operation?
 - A. Mama looked just like another bird called Princess.
 - B. James Eldon has to be careful with Mama's claws.
 - C. Mama broke her wing jumping out of a tree.
 - D. Mama will not be able to eat solid food for a while.

First, cross out any answer choice that is irrelevant to the question. Then, choose the answer that most directly explains why Mama needs an operation.

**TIP 6: Notice how a passage is organized.**

To **organize** means to arrange something in a certain way. There are many ways authors can organize a passage. The way a passage is organized affects the way the details are presented.

Common ways of organizing passages include:

- **cause and effect** – showing how one event leads to another. A passage about the life of a famous author might use this organizational method to explain what led him or her decide to start writing.
- **comparison and contrast** – describing how two or more things are alike and different. A review of three new high-definition television sets might use this method.
- **problem and solution** – identifying one or more problems and then describing one or more ways of solving each problem. A letter to the editor of a local newspaper might be organized this way to discuss how to deal with all the potholes on Sycamore Avenue.
- **question and answer** – asking a series of questions followed by answers either given by the author or others. Interviews in magazines and newspapers will often use this method. Sometimes it will be in the form of “frequently asked questions (FAQs)” that introduce readers to an unfamiliar topic or idea.
- **sequence of events** – presenting events or steps in the order they happen. This organizational method is commonly found in fiction. It can also be used in instructions or any kind of scientific article describing how a process works.

The organizational method the author chooses will affect the way he or she uses the supporting details. As you know, supporting details help readers understand the main idea or theme. The details in a science textbook, for example, will be concerned mostly with causes and effects or sequences of events.

While you read a passage, pay attention to the way it is organized. Doing so will help you make better sense of the story or information. It will also help you find important details later on.

6. Which of these best describes the way the passage from “Runaway Blues” is organized?
- A. cause and effect
 - B. comparison and contrast
 - C. problem and solution
 - D. sequence of events


TIP 7: Notice the order of events in the passage.

Sometimes, to make a story more interesting, writers will tell things in a different order than the order they happened. This is true even when most of a passage is organized as a sequence of events. On a test, you can probably expect questions about the order of events to be fairly straightforward. But you'll still need to read carefully to be sure.

You can answer test questions about sequence like you would any other detail question. Instead of looking for key words in the question, look for key words in the answer choices. Then scan the passage to find where each event occurs.

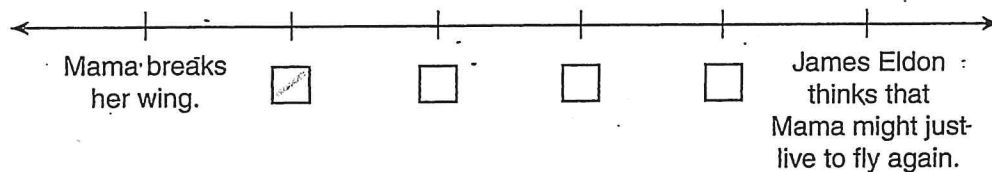
Practice scanning with the following question.

7. Which of the following events happens first?
- Mama nearly dies "on the spot."
 - James Eldon helps feed Mama.
 - Mama's wing is X-rayed.
 - Jake takes Mama to a vet.

Although James Eldon tells the story, we learn through Jake's words that Mama Red Tail has broken her wing. Jake describes the decisions made in her treatment that took place before James Eldon met Mama.

To understand the sequence of events in a passage, it may help to make a simple timeline of the events. A timeline shows important events in the order they happened. Just remember that some events do not take place at the same time as the action of the passage.

8. Fill in the letter of each answer choice from Number 7 in the correct place on the timeline.



LESSON PRACTICE BEGINS ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE.

Directions: This passage is about a great thinker. Read the passage. Then answer Numbers 1 through 8.

Genius in the Making

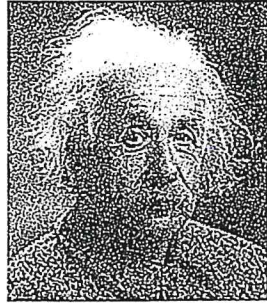
by Suki Webber

When you hear the name "Einstein," what comes to mind? A brilliant scientist? An amazing mathematician? A genius? If so, you might be surprised to learn that when Albert Einstein was a boy, his parents and teachers worried that his intelligence was below average. As a baby, Albert was late in learning to talk. Even after he started school, he kept silent for long periods of time. When he did say something, Albert spoke so slowly that his friends and teachers thought his brain worked slowly, too.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Albert was actually a naturally bright and curious child. But he had little patience with the strict discipline of the German school system. He found it hard to apply his natural gifts in an atmosphere that didn't allow him to pursue his interests in creative ways. As a student, he was frustrated. Perhaps Einstein would never have realized his true potential if it hadn't been for two people who recognized his promise.

The first person to help Albert was his uncle Jakob, who lived with the Einsteins in Munich, Germany. When Albert had trouble with algebra, Jakob recognized that the problem wasn't that Albert wasn't smart. It was that he couldn't understand the way math was taught in his school. It was focused on formulas and rules. Jakob told Albert that finding the answer to a math problem is like hunting an animal. You just need to know the right steps for hunting it down. This creative way of approaching learning opened up the world of mathematics for Albert. Soon he was studying algebra and geometry for the fun of it.

The other person who helped Albert was a family friend named Max Talmey. Max was a Russian of Jewish descent who was studying medicine in Munich. The Einsteins also were Jewish. It was a custom for Jewish families to invite a Jewish college student to dinner once a week. Albert's parents had first invited Max to dinner when Albert was in the German version of junior high. Even though Max was several years older than Albert, over the next few years, the two became close friends.



Each week, Max brought science books to Albert's house. He introduced Albert to astronomy, gravity, atoms, electricity, and other complex topics. Albert's school had been designed for the needs of average students—young people who were not yet ready for such difficult topics. With Max's encouragement, Albert started learning about things his schoolmates might never think about.

Albert and Max talked for long hours into the night about mathematics and science. They challenged each other with puzzling questions. It didn't take long before Max realized that he couldn't answer Albert's questions. Albert's natural ability and desire to learn had already taught him more than the college student knew.

Uncle Jakob and Max helped open the quiet youngster's mind to the wonders of learning. But this didn't make Albert's life at school any easier. Albert advanced so far so rapidly that, in class, he often asked questions that his teachers couldn't answer. He became bored. His teachers interpreted his boredom as laziness and disrespect.

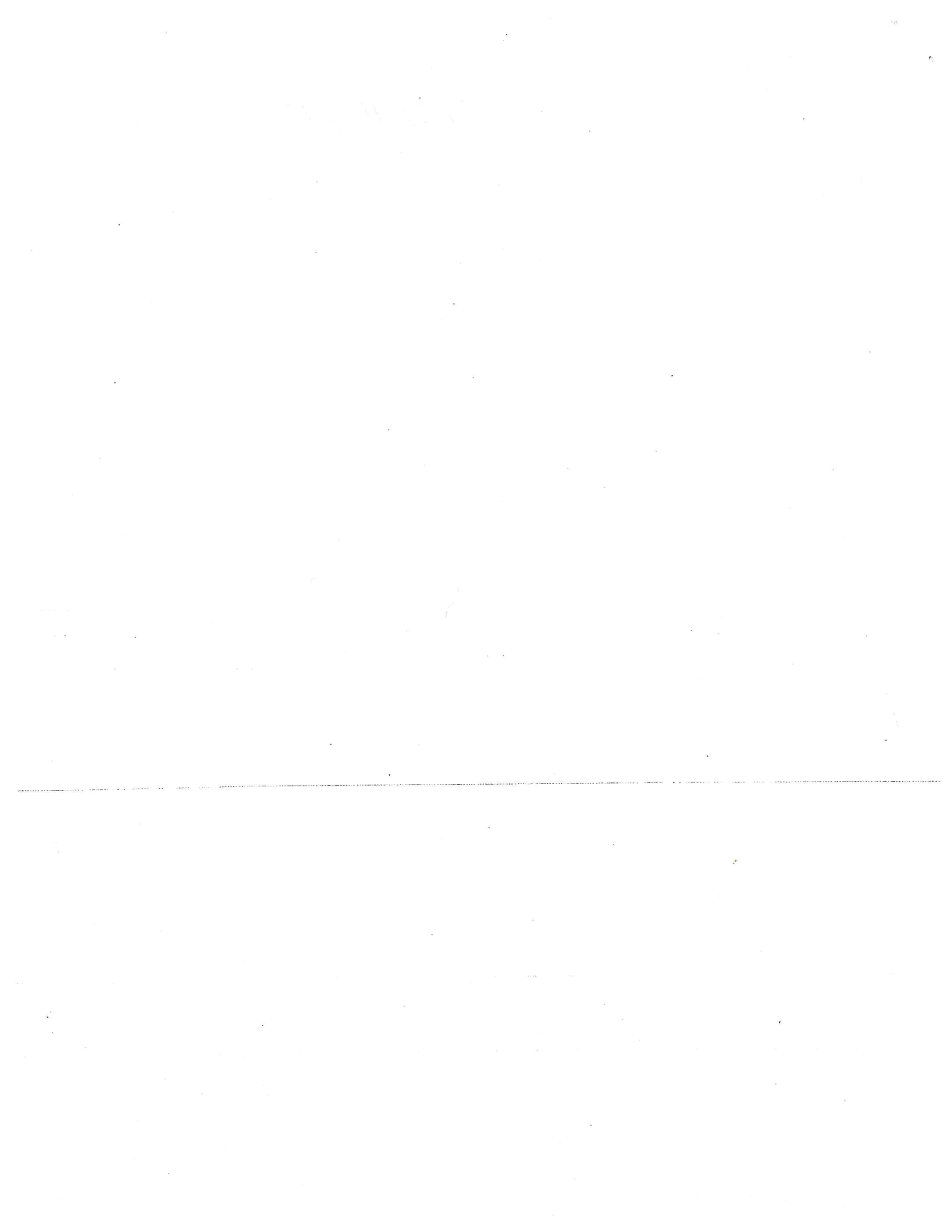
Before long, Albert was asked to leave school, and he was happy to oblige. His parents had moved from Munich to Italy, leaving Albert in Munich to earn his diploma. He missed them a lot. When he left school, Albert moved to Italy to be with his family. But he didn't give up on his education.

Eventually, Albert was admitted to a university in Switzerland. At the university, he began a lifelong study of physics that would make him one of the most well known people of the twentieth century. But you have to wonder, would the world know Albert Einstein's name if it hadn't been for the caring efforts of a helpful uncle and an encouraging friend?

1. Which of these is the best summary of the passage?
 - A. Uncle Jakob recognized that Albert had above-average intelligence.
 - B. Max Talmey often discussed math and science with Albert late into the night.
 - C. Einstein was a naturally bright and curious child but was bored by what he was taught in school.
 - D. Einstein struggled with school but grew up to become one of the most important scientists of the 20th century.

2. According to the passage, Albert Einstein struggled in algebra until
- A. he attended the German version of junior high.
 - B. he moved to Italy to be with his family.
 - C. his teachers thought he was lazy and told him so.
 - D. an uncle revealed a new approach to math.
3. Which question is answered in paragraph 4?
- A. Who was the first person to help Albert with algebra?
 - B. What was a weekly custom that the Einsteins observed?
 - C. Why was Albert asked to leave school?
 - D. Where did Albert live before moving to Italy?
4. What is the main idea of paragraph 5?
- A. Max brought various math books to Albert's house.
 - B. Max tried to persuade all average students to read.
 - C. Albert asked Max detailed questions about stars.
 - D. Albert used Max's books to study advanced science.

5. Which organizational method is used in this passage?
- A. question and answer
 - B. sequence of events
 - C. comparison and contrast
 - D. main idea and supporting details
6. Which word in this passage has a prefix that means *opposite of*?
- A. rapidly
 - B. disrespect
 - C. laziness
 - D. encouraging
7. Based on the passage, the word *oblige* means
- A. agree.
 - B. argue.
 - C. win.
 - D. hear.
8. What is the overall theme of the passage?
- A. Don't postpone until tomorrow what you can do today.
 - B. Loyal friends and family are important to young people.
 - C. Children should expect answers to challenging questions.
 - D. It's important to invite smart people to your home.



Lesson 3: Details and Organization (Answer Key)

Runaway Blues

1. **Details:** Jake is sad that Mama Red Tail may need to be put down. He patiently teaches James Eldon and Morgan. He offers to let James Eldon hold Mama Red Tail.
2. "A"
3. "B"
4. "A"
5. "C"
6. "D"
7. "C"
8. "C" "D" "A" "B"

Genius in the Making

1. "D"
2. "D"
3. "B"
4. "D"
5. "B"
6. "B"
7. "A"
8. "B"

