



Dangers Along the Oregon Trail Printable Reading Comprehension

Word Count: 352 | Lexile 970

For many pioneer families, the Oregon Trail promised land and a fresh start, but the 2,000-mile journey also demanded constant judgment and teamwork. Wagon trains moved at a walking pace for months, crossing open prairies, desert basins, and mountain passes. Every mile carried risks—from hidden river currents to sudden storms—and the difference between a delay and a disaster often came down to planning ahead and listening to experienced scouts.

By far the leading killer was disease—especially cholera—not raids or animal attacks. River water shared by thousands of travelers could become contaminated, and the symptoms struck quickly. Boiling water, camping upstream of crowded crossings, and burying waste away from creeks reduced the risk, but families still lost loved ones within days. Fevers, dysentery, and accidental gunshot wounds added to the toll.

Water crossings were another constant hazard. High spring flows turned even shallow rivers into traps that could tip a wagon, drown oxen, or wash away food and tools. Crews scouted for safe fords, lightened loads, double-teamed animals, and sometimes paid to use a ferry. When no ferry existed, they might caulk wagon seams and float across, but a sudden gust or hidden snag could flip the entire outfit.

Weather shaped nearly every decision. Thunderstorms churned trails into axle-deep mud; heat dried out stock and people; early snows near the Blue Mountains or the Cascades could close high routes altogether. Headwinds and dust led to fatigue, and fatigue led to mistakes—falling under wheels, mishandling firearms, or losing control on steep descents. A broken axle, a lame ox, or a lost team could halt progress for days while predators and cold nights pressed in.

Finally, choices at trail forks carried long-term consequences. A shortcut might save miles but pass long stretches with little grass or water; the established road might be safer but slow and crowded. Leaders weighed the health of livestock, the condition of wagons, and the supplies left in the barrels. Success depended less on luck than on steady discipline: set a sustainable pace, keep tools ready, share watch duty, protect drinking water, and adapt plans when the land demanded it.

1. Which statement best captures the central idea of the passage?

- A. The Oregon Trail was a long journey filled with diverse hazards, and success depended on planning, teamwork, and careful choices.
- B. Most wagon trains finished quickly because the route was easy and well supplied.
- C. The main difficulty of the trail was boredom rather than danger.
- D. Only professional scouts could travel the Oregon Trail safely.

2. **According to the passage, what caused the greatest number of deaths on the trail?**

- A. Animal attacks on livestock and people
- B. Waterborne disease such as cholera
- C. Wagon breakdowns
- D. Conflicts between wagon trains

3. **Which combination of actions is described as a safer approach to river crossings?**

- A. Crossing where water is fastest to finish sooner
- B. Driving heavier loads so wagons won't float
- C. Scouting fords, lightening loads, double-teaming animals, or paying for ferries when available
- D. Waiting for nightfall to avoid wind

4. **How did weather influence travel on the Oregon Trail?**

- A. Weather rarely affected progress because wagons were enclosed.
- B. Storms, heat, and early snow could halt movement, exhaust people and animals, and force route changes.
- C. Only wind mattered; rain and snow were helpful.
- D. Weather only influenced when to cook meals.

5. **Which practice in the passage is presented as reducing health and safety risks?**

- A. Firing guns each night to scare away animals
- B. Forcing a faster pace to finish early
- C. Loading wagons to maximum capacity
- D. Boiling water and camping away from crowded riverbanks

6. **Why were choices at trail forks so critical for wagon leaders?**

- A. Forks always led to towns with extra supplies.
- B. All forks were identical; the choice was mostly symbolic.
- C. The wrong route could add weeks, drain grass and water, and increase exposure to storms and breakdowns.
- D. Taking a shortcut guaranteed a faster, safer trip.

7. **Select ALL factors from the passage that increased the risk of accidents.**

- Traveler fatigue from wind, dust, and long days
- Hiring professional guides for every wagon
- Rushing wagons down steep descents
- Careless handling of firearms around camp

Answers

1 A

2 B

3 C

4 B

5 D

6 C

7 Traveler fatigue; Rushing wagons; Careless handling of firearms