

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by Ambrose Bierce

Pre-Reading Vocabulary Practice

Optional Post-Reading Quiz Included

Practice words: delirium, dictum, exalted, imperious, ineffable, martinet, presaging, preternaturally, summarily, vulgar

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Vocabulary Preview 2

Answer Key — Preview 3

Caution: share only if self-checking

OPTIONAL POST-READING QUIZ

Vocabulary in Context 4

Answer Key — In Context 5

Caution: do not share with students

About the Pre-Reading Activity (open-dictionary; ungraded or completion grade):

Students preview 10 words from the upcoming reading, each in a sentence that supports understanding. They choose the best meaning from 3 choices.

About the Optional Post-Reading Quiz (use after reading, or skip):

Same words, now in real excerpts from the text, with questions that build reading and analytical skills.



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Vocabulary Preview

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Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Read each prompt. Then choose the best meaning for the bold word.

1. Burning with fever, he drifted in and out of **delirium** all night.

- A. a wave of crushing exhaustion
- B. a deep, dreamless sleep
- C. a confused, hallucinating state

2. The coach's **dictum** that effort beats talent guided the whole team.

- A. a casual suggestion
- B. an authoritative saying
- C. a half-joking remark

3. The triumphant music **exalted** the listeners, sweeping them up entirely.

- A. moved to quiet reflection
- B. raised to an intense state
- C. stirred to mild irritation

4. She felt an **imperious** need to speak the truth aloud.

- A. urgent; not to be denied
- B. sudden but soon gone
- C. vague and half-formed

5. Holding her newborn for the first time, she felt an **ineffable** joy.

- A. too great to hold inside
- B. too great to put into words
- C. too good to be believed

6. The new supervisor is a real **martinet**, feared throughout the office.

- A. a strict enforcer of rules
- B. a loud, boastful show-off
- C. a sly, scheming manipulator

7. A sudden hush fell over the courtroom, **presaging** the verdict.

- A. foreshadowing what is to come
- B. openly announcing the news
- C. quietly recalling the past

8. The tracker had a **preternaturally** keen sense of smell.

- A. gained through long training
- B. ordinary and unremarkable
- C. beyond what is natural

9. The referee **summarily** ejected the player for arguing.

- A. loudly and with anger
- B. briefly, in a few words
- C. at once, without formality

10. In the old play, the noble lords scorned the **vulgar** townsfolk.

- A. common or low-born
- B. loud and unruly
- C. crude and offensive

ANSWER KEY
Vocabulary Preview
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#	KEY
1	C
2	B
3	B
4	A
5	B
6	A
7	A
8	C
9	C
10	A

Vocabulary in Context

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Name _____ Date _____ Period _____ Score _____ / 10

Read each excerpt carefully. Then choose the best answer to each question.

1 “Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded.”

As it is used in the passage, the phrase “no vulgar” most nearly suggests that the condemned man is...

- A. a man of no common rank
- B. a man of crude manners
- C. a man of violent temper

2 “Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with that gallant army which had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth, and he chafed under the inglorious restraint ...

The passage most strongly suggests that the circumstances keeping Farquhar from the army were...

- A. deliberately chosen by him
- B. compelling and not to be ignored
- C. minor and soon forgotten

3 “No service was too humble for him to perform in the aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.”

Which choice best describes the narrator’s attitude toward the dictum Farquhar embraces?

- A. stirred by his sudden outburst
- B. critical of the principle he lives by
- C. amused by an offhand remark

4 “... any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels, or trains will be summarily hanged.”

According to the text, a civilian caught interfering with the railroad will be...

- A. put to death at once
- B. held until the war ends
- C. tried before a judge

5 “He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert.”

In context, the word “preternaturally” emphasizes that his senses had become...

- A. sharper than is natural
- B. dulled by his ordeal
- C. calm and steady at last

6 “Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined [his senses] that they made record of things never before perceived. ... The humming of the gnats ... the beating of the dragonflies’ wings, the strokes of the water spiders’ legs ... all these made audible music.”

Use of the word “exalted” helps show that Farquhar’s senses are...

- A. gradually returning
- B. unnaturally heightened
- C. becoming confused

7 “How coldly and pitilessly—with what an even, calm intonation, presaging, and enforcing tranquility in the men—with what accurately measured interval fell those cruel words: ‘Company! ... Attention! ... Shoulder arms! ... Ready! ... Aim! ... Fire!’”

The author describes the chant as ‘presaging’ tranquility in order to...

- A. praise the lieutenant’s leadership
- B. show the soldiers’ nervous panic
- C. show death approaching with cold order

8 “The officer,” he reasoned, “will not make that martinet’s error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot.”

Farquhar escaped the bullets because they all arrived while he was deep under water. Why does he call the officer’s command to fire all at once a ‘martinet’s error’?

- A. he rigidly ordered, “ready, aim, fire”
- B. he failed to tell them to aim with care
- C. he waited too long to give the order

9 “Doubtless, despite his suffering, he had fallen asleep while walking, for now he sees another scene—perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium.”

It can reasonably be inferred that calling the scene a ‘delirium’ hints that...

- A. he merely dozed off while walking
- B. he has fully regained his health
- C. his journey home may be unreal

10 “At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity.”

In the passage, Farquhar’s wife is characterized as...

- A. anxious about his return
- B. weary from long waiting
- C. radiant with unspeakable joy

ANSWER KEY
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#	KEY	NOTE
1	A	Here 'vulgar' carries its older sense of 'common' or 'low-born,' not the modern 'crude.' The narrator's point is that this gentleman is no ordinary criminal.
2	B	
3	B	The narrator's 'frankly villainous' marks gentle irony toward Farquhar's romantic self-justification.
4	A	
5	A	
6	B	
7	C	
8	A	Farquhar expects the officer to next fire at will.
9	C	Event comprehension. 'Delirium' is Bierce's planted hint that the vivid escape is a dying man's hallucination.
10	C	This radiant reunion is the dying man's last illusion, an instant before the killing blow — the story's central irony.