

Pirate Comprehension.

Read the information and answer the questions in complete sentences.

Remember to use your best handwriting.



For as long as people have used boats and ships to transport valuable goods, there have been pirates determined to steal from those boats and ships. Over 2000 years ago, in Ancient Greece, traders regularly crossed the short distances between the Greek islands and the mainland. They were attacked by robbers in boats who would take their cargo. Since that time (and probably before), criminals have taken to the water to try to gain goods or money by force.

Western historians have named one particular period in history as the 'Golden Age of Piracy'. Our idea of how a pirate looks and behaves comes from this period. Most books, films and cartoons about these fearsome people depict pirates from this period, approximately 350 years ago. These stories can be fun - children enjoy dressing up and playing pirates - but if you had met one of these historical characters, you would have been lucky to escape with your life. They were fierce, murderous individuals who wreaked havoc on the many trade ships crossing the oceans at that time!



The 'Golden Age', between 1650 and 1720, was an ideal time for pirates to flourish. European countries were investing considerable time and money into overseas exploration, mainly to make money. The only method of travelling around the globe was by ship; and the ships would either be carrying valuable goods or the gold used to pay for them. The types of goods that were most valuable might surprise a modern person; they were ingredients used to flavour food (like sugar, pepper, cocoa and nutmeg) and tobacco.

Trade ships sailed a triangular route: first from Europe to West Africa and then on to the Caribbean islands, a group of small islands on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. On the first leg of the journey, ships carried goods and money to Africa. Here they collected slaves who were then forcibly taken across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, where they worked on large farms called plantations. On the final leg, the ships carried valuable food goods from the Caribbean back to Europe. These ships, crossing the Atlantic and trading in the Caribbean, were vulnerable to attack by pirates who struck quickly and ruthlessly. They would sail alongside the trade ship, jam its rudder and board it to do battle.

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The goods ships were armed with cannons but their sailors had little reason to fight to defend their cargo. Often, they would rather surrender to the pirates than battle it out. At that time sailors lived terribly harsh lives. They were paid badly and ill-treated, living in cramped quarters with poor hygiene and a poor diet. They were at risk of dying in battle, drowning, malnutrition or succumbing to a tropical illness. They might even be killed by their own shipmates, as rivalry and disagreements were often resolved in fights or duels.



It is not surprising that sailors, even captains, were ready to change sides and become pirates: although their lives were dangerous and equally unpleasant, they might at least be rewarded with money, excitement and a certain amount of comradeship. Pirates may have seemed an unruly and ferocious mob but they did have a form of control and honour. They called their rules, 'a pirates' code'. This set out how they behaved and how they divided their spoils. They swore allegiance to the code over a bible, crossed-pistols or a skull. For many, it was a better, fairer life than the legitimate one they had left behind.



The many hundreds of islands of the Caribbean provided an ideal hiding and hunting ground for pirate ships. The pirate captains and sailors knew the waters well and were able to sail quickly in their smaller, lighter, heavily armed ships. They attacked quickly and viciously, stole the goods from the trading ship, then escaped at high speed. The smaller size and weight of the pirates' boats allowed them to sail in shallower waters; they were able to escape from a heavier ship that might become grounded on sand banks or rocks, hidden below the surface of the water.

Sometimes, pirates would steal a whole ship, perhaps recruiting sailors who were willing to become pirates too, before throwing the remaining men into the sea. The stolen boat would then be adapted to make a new pirate ship. Weaponry would be added and the structure would be changed, to make it more suitable for piracy.

Many pirates flew special flags to warn trade ships that they were approaching. This would give the ship's crew a chance to surrender without a fight. The original flag was red, representing blood. Some pirates had their own unique flags; if they had a fearsome reputation the sight of this special flag would probably be enough to make the trade ship

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give up immediately! The skull and crossbones flag, known as the 'Jolly Roger', is the most famous flag – its symbol means death.



Through stories, the way in which a pirate looks and behaves has become fixed in our imagination. He (it is usually a 'he', although there are several famous female pirates) will probably carry a cutlass (a curved sword) or pistols in his thick, black leather belt. He might own a talking parrot and have just one leg; or he might wear a patch over his eye and a thick beard. Pirates force their victims to 'walk the plank'. They like to drink rum and say things like 'yo-ho-ho' and 'arrrr!'. Many of these things have been exaggerated over the years by books, films and songs, but they have their roots in historical reports about pirates.

One example is the infamous pirate, Edward Teach, who was known as 'Blackbeard'. He dressed in a terrifying manner, making best use of his size and appearance. He carried many weapons – pistols, knives and swords. It is believed that he wove cloth into his hair and beard which he would then set on fire to frighten his victims. His reputation meant that most captains and sailors would admit defeat and surrender before he attacked.

Although it was considered unlucky to have a woman on board a ship, there were a small number of famous female pirates with equally fierce reputations. Anne Bonny and Mary Read were two such women. One story tells how they helped another famous pirate called Calico Jack. Accompanied by just one other pirate they managed to defend their ship because all the other crew members were too drunk or scared to fight!

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By 1715, the European governments were growing tired of the pirate problem. In some respects, they had encouraged the situation, even giving some pirates a licence to attack ships belonging to other countries (these pirates were called 'privateers'). Now, though, the situation had spiralled out of control and no ship was safe from attack. It was hampering trade, as ships were increasingly unwilling to sail into waters known to be frequented by pirates. England sent Royal Navy ships to do battle. The pirates were offered a pardon if they surrendered, and many did. Any that persisted were hunted down; their ships were burnt and their crews imprisoned or killed.



Nowadays, pirates are very different from these historical figures. They operate in powered motorboats and are armed with automatic weapons, such as machine guns. They may steal small amounts of goods or the personal possessions of those on board the boat. They might steal the boat itself or kidnap the people on board. The pirates believe that they can hold these people for ransom and that their family or governments will pay for their release. The governments and the international community find it very difficult to control these pirates because they operate from small islands or coastal regions where they can merge back into the general population, unrecognisable as pirates.

1. How many years have Pirates been attacking traders?
2. What were pirates?
3. What did the European traders want to buy?
4. Where did the slaves come from?
5. Why were sailors happy to become pirates?
6. What is a mutiny?
7. Why could pirate ships could outmanoeuvre trading ships?
8. What was the Jolly Roger?
9. Who had a famous facial hair?
10. Why were there only a few women pirates?
11. Why did governments want to stop piracy?
12. What is a ransom?