

Quiz B: RI.4.5

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

“Going Bananas”

A Famous Fruit

- 1 How do you like your bananas? On top of cereal? In a smoothie? In banana bread or a banana split? Bananas are the most popular fruit in the world. They are also the world’s most important crop after rice, wheat, and corn. Bananas are as common in our diet as apples and oranges. In fact, Americans eat more bananas than apples and oranges put together. Walk through the fruit aisle in any grocery store. You’ll find a huge display set up just for bananas. Bananas taste good and are good for you. But the most interesting things about bananas may be less well known.
- 2 Bananas have no set growing season. They are available year round. And they are also the cheapest fruit in the store. But why are they cheaper than other fruits—such as apples—which are grown in the United States? Bananas are grown thousands of miles away, in the tropics! Where do bananas grow? And how do they make it to our grocery stores?

Banana Republics

- 3 Bananas are not native to the Americas. In fact, they were first grown in South Asia. Bananas have been an important crop in South Asia since at least 5000 B.C. The popular fruit did not arrive in the Americas until thousands of years later. Portuguese colonists first brought them to South and Central America in the 1500s. Around this time, colonists started “banana plantations” in Brazil and on some Caribbean islands. The Portuguese were the first to view the banana as a cash crop. A cash crop is grown mainly to sell and make a profit, rather than feed the population. (Coffee, tobacco, and cotton are other cash crops.)
- 4 North Americans did not enjoy bananas until hundreds of years later. After the American Civil War ended in 1865, bananas were brought to Boston, Massachusetts. They became widespread in the 1880s. Around this time, two U.S. companies, United Fruit (now Chiquita) and Standard Fruit (now Dole), saw a chance to make a great deal of money off the banana industry. These two companies built banana plantations in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. These companies gained from these small, poorer countries. They used the cheap labor found in these countries. They also took advantage of the often unstable governments there. In the end, these companies became a powerful political force in the region. They often took control of land illegally. They set unfair prices. And they used payouts to control elections and stop workers from organizing. Countries where this happened became known as “banana republics.”

An Unfair Trade?

- 5 These companies did not always have negative effects on the host countries. In fact, the large banana companies set up much-needed transportation and communication networks. The host countries were often thankful to the fruit giants for the advancements. That is, until they figured out what they’d given away. The people found they no longer had the right to control their own transportation and communication companies. They also no longer had the right to set prices and elect leaders.



- 6 In addition, these companies also counted on banana breeding. There are more than 1,000 varieties of bananas, but only one is sold largely in the United States—the Cavendish. The five main growers of bananas worldwide stick to this variety to save money. First, they are picked by underpaid workers. Next they must be shipped in cooled containers. Bananas only survive two weeks after being cut from the tree. In a given shipment, all the bananas ripen at the same time. This lowers the costs companies might suffer due to overripe or unripe fruit.

A Growing Problem

- 7 As tough as these circumstances are, things have gotten worse for banana growers. Grocery stores have slashed banana prices. This technique helps grocers in several ways. For one thing, it gets buyers in the door. Buyers are likely to assume that, because bananas are cheaper at Store X than Store Y, other products such as milk and bread are also cheaper. The problem becomes worse for growers and their employees, however, when other stores also lower their banana prices. Now, bananas are selling for less than they are worth.
- 8 This is great news for shoppers who want to save money, but it is terrible for workers in countries like Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. These workers rely on the fruits of their labor. Lowering the cost of bananas threatens the livelihoods of thousands of plantation workers.

The Future of Bananas

- 9 Meanwhile, shoppers have begun to learn that some companies take advantage of their workers. These shoppers have put their dollars to work. Many grocery stores now have a “fair trade” section. In this section, shoppers can buy products that are not produced by companies that treat workers unfairly. Fair-trade products promise that fair prices are paid to workers in developing countries.
- 10 What will happen to the banana? Dan Koeppel, in a book about bananas, compares the Cavendish banana to a “fast-food hamburger.” Like bananas, hamburgers are easy to produce and do not cost much to buy. But can the countries that grow bananas keep growing bananas at this rate? And what will happen if and when workers demand fair wages? The answers to these questions are unknown. What is certain is that there is a deadly disease making bananas sick. The Panama disease is a threat to bananas everywhere. This disease is hard to kill. Right now, growers cannot kill the disease with pesticides or other chemicals they use on the crops. The disease, which began in Southeast Asia, is now spreading to crops in Africa. Soon, experts fear the disease will find its way to crops in the Caribbean. If experts do not find a way to control the disease, the banana that so many people know and love may become extinct.

