

Quiz B: RI.7.3

Read the passage. Then answer the question.

“Clowning Around with Bill Irwin”

- 1 Clowns have been entertaining the masses for centuries. Just about everyone enjoys a good laugh. One individual in particular known for his ability to make people laugh is clown and comedian Bill Irwin, a talented actor who has won awards for stage and screen. He portrayed the original Mr. Noodle in “Elmo’s World,” a segment of Sesame Street. Mr. Noodle was one of Elmo’s friends, and he was funny because he always seemed to misinterpret Elmo’s directions in a hilarious manner. For example, if Elmo asked Mr. Noodle to put on a glove, he might try it on his foot, his head, or his ear. He might even just tuck it into the belt of his pants. To get Elmo’s young audience really going, he might pretend to eat the glove or use it as a race car.
- 2 Irwin already had some clowning and acting under his belt when he took the role of Mr. Noodle. Irwin attended Oberlin College and earned a degree in Theater Arts. After that, he attended clown college—yes, there really is such a thing!—where he learned the art of visual humor. Irwin considers himself an actor first and a clown second, but he is best known for some of his roles as a clown. In fact, some people call him one of the greatest clowns of the modern age. He is well-respected in the entertainment industry for reviving the vaudevillian style (think tap dancing on stage and singing silly songs) at a time when it seemed no longer relevant. Now in his sixties, Irwin finds physical comedy more difficult than he used to, so he concentrates his efforts in theater and film roles.
- 3 Mr. Noodle is not the only clown personality Irwin has created. He began his clown career as a member of the Pickle Family Circus. There he learned a lot from founders Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snyder. They were incredible jugglers and made the most of space and audiences, the way many street performers do. He practiced to get better and funnier, and eventually, he did.
- 4 During his early solo performances, he played the clown Bagatelles on stage in a one-man show called “The Regard of Flight.” As a clown, he danced, juggled, pulled faces, fell, donned ridiculous wigs, mimed, and wiggled with emotion, but he rarely spoke. If you notice, Mr. Noodle never speaks. This is consistent with the great clowns of the silent film era—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd—who relied on physical humor to tell jokes and make people laugh like hyenas. Traditionally, clowns, unlike Ronald McDonald, hold to an informal code of silence and convey their emotions and messages through gestures and physical actions. It takes a lot of practice and work to be funny without saying a word, and Bill Irwin is a master.
- 5 Even though Irwin has expressed that he wants to settle down and act, in 2013, he starred in a show on Broadway called “Old Hats.” It featured his old friend David Shiner and a younger singer/comedienne named Nellie McKay. He made sure it included some updated tricks and gags. For example, Irwin used iPads and iPhones to make fun of modern society’s fascination with recording every little, silly minute in our lives. He and Shiner also made sure to yuk it up with physical humor including hat tricks, songs and dance, and, of course, trick falls.

