

## READING QUIZ

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Read the article again. Choose from the sentences (A–F) the one which fits each gap. There is one extra sentence.

**D**aniel Tammet is a linguistic and mathematical genius. He speaks eleven languages, performs complex mental arithmetic in seconds, and on 14 March, 2004 publicly recited pi from memory to 22,514 decimal places. It took him five hours and nine minutes. However, since childhood, despite his phenomenal mental abilities, Daniel has struggled to learn the personal skills that most of us take for granted: communication, empathy and the ability to see the big picture.

Daniel's skills and limitations are the result of Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. He is a high-functioning autistic savant who possesses similar abilities to those of the character played by Dustin Hoffman in the film *Rain Man*.<sup>1</sup> 'I'm lucky,' he says, 'because most others who have rare abilities are also seriously disabled.'

Life is easier for Daniel now that he is in his thirties, but growing up with autism was tough for him and his family. As a baby, he used to cry constantly and only repetitive motion would stop him.<sup>2</sup> As a result, he never played with other children, or indeed with toys. 'Numbers were my toys,' he says.

To him, numbers have colours, shapes, textures and personalities. He has described his visual image of 289 as particularly ugly, and 333 as particularly attractive. 3 is green, 5 sounds like a clap of thunder, and 37 is lumpy. This cross-connection between unrelated senses is known as synaesthesia and in Daniel's case it allows him to 'experience' numbers rather than calculate them. As he explains, 'When I multiply numbers together, I see two shapes. The image starts to change and evolve, and a third shape appears. That's the answer.' It was this unique ability that helped him to remember pi to so many decimal places, back in 2004.<sup>3</sup> 'To me it is as beautiful as the Mona Lisa,' he explains.

Daniel has many gifts often associated with autism. He can copy a picture so accurately that it could have been traced, and he planned his autobiography *Born on a Blue Day* without taking a single note. Nevertheless, he is more aware of the many things he can't do. He knows, for instance, that he is difficult to live with because he cannot understand what others are feeling. He admits that most of the time, he has to pretend to show emotions.<sup>4</sup> He reveals that when his cat died, he cried and understood grief for the first time.

In 2004, Daniel met Kim Peek, the savant on whom *Rain Man* was actually based. Unlike Daniel, Peek, who passed away in 2009, was unable to manage daily life independently.<sup>5</sup> 'We swapped facts and figures like others swap gossip,' says Tammet. With the help of his father, Peek travelled America spreading the message that difference is not necessarily a negative thing.



Like Peek, Daniel is putting his gifts to good use. He gives regular lectures, has written three successful books, and been the subject of numerous studies and documentaries. Much of his work involves helping scientists understand how the brain works. 'I used to long to be like other people,' he says. 'But they tell me that I have the same effect on them as Professor Stephen Hawking. That in the contradiction between ability and disability, they see humanity.'



### Glossary

**texture** (n) = the way a surface or material feels when you touch it

**lumpy** (adj) = covered with or containing small solid pieces, e.g. a lumpy mattress

**trace** (v) = copy a drawing by putting a very thin piece of paper over it and then drawing the lines you can see through the paper

**grief** (n) = extreme sadness caused by the death of someone you love

**long** (v) = want something very much, especially when it seems unlikely to happen

**contradiction** (n) = a difference between two statements, beliefs or ideas that means they cannot both be true

A Despite these limitations, he is slowly extending his emotional range. Select an option ▾

B At school, he struggled to read body language or make eye contact, finding it impossible to interpret how other people were feeling. Select an option ▾

C *Born on a Blue Day* was named a 'Best Book for Young Adults' in 2008 by the American Library Association. Select an option ▾

D Remarkably, though, he was able to read two pages of a book at once, one with each eye, and remember every single word. Select an option ▾

E There are only about 50 savants in the world (all men), but Tammet is unique in being able to describe how his mind works. Select an option ▾

F Tammet describes seeing the number as a landscape through which he travelled in his mind. Select an option ▾

**Read the text again. Are the statements true or false?**

- 1 The film *Rain Man* is partly based on Daniel's life story.  
 true  
 false
- 2 Unlike other savants, Daniel is able to explain his remarkable abilities.  
 true  
 false
- 3 At school, Daniel found reading difficult.  
 true  
 false
- 4 Daniel claims he can see, hear and feel numbers.  
 true  
 false
- 5 Daniel may not actually be experiencing the emotions he shows to other people.  
 true  
 false
- 6 Kim Peek and Daniel Tammet wrote a successful book together.  
 true  
 false
- 7 Daniel says that people sometimes confuse him with Professor Stephen Hawking.  
 true  
 false