

Reading Complex Text

Read the brochure “The La Brea Tar Pits” and the journal entry “Lessons from La Brea.” As you read, stop and answer each question. Use evidence from the brochure and the journal entry to support your answers.

The La Brea Tar Pits

Looking for an interesting trip for your next vacation? Look no further than the La Brea Tar Pits. Located in California, the La Brea Tar Pits are famous for their astonishing variety of plant and animal fossils. Fossils in the La Brea Tar Pits can be up to 40,000 years old. Over the last hundred years, scientists have uncovered over three million fossils at the La Brea Tar Pits. Many of these fossils are on display there. You can see the remains of a 10,000-pound Columbian mammoth, an 11-foot tall short-faced bear, and a saber-toothed cat, the official state fossil of California.

1 How do the details in the above paragraph support the author’s point that the La Brea Tar Pits would be an interesting place to visit?

Why are the La Brea Tar Pits home to so many fossils? Quite simply, all of the organisms found there have at one point gotten stuck there. The pits are full of a thick, oozing substance. Often called tar, this substance is actually natural asphalt. It comes from an underground reservoir, or pool, made of crude oil. The crude oil mixes with sand, stone, dirt, leaves, and other organic material to form something like quicksand.

The pits often appear as solid ground. However, particularly during warm days, the ground can turn soft and sticky. An animal wandering over one of the pits could get stuck. The trapped animal would often



attract predators, usually large animals that eat other animals. These predators could also become trapped. In addition, passing scavengers would frequent the tar pits. If they were unlucky, they could become trapped, too! All of the animals would then sink deeper into the pits. There, the pits would preserve and protect them from the normal processes of erosion.

Once the animals died, the softer parts of their bodies, such as skin, muscle, and fur, would decay. The bones and teeth, however, remained intact. These parts would absorb asphalt from the tar pits, which would strengthen them and keep them from decaying. Sediment washed into the pits by rain would help keep the fossils buried.

2 Why are so many large animal fossils found at La Brea? Provide one example from the section above to support your answer.

Fortunately for you, you don't have to unearth these fossils yourself. The Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits contains thousands of fossils. Come visit the La Brea Tar Pits! It's a great way to travel thousands of years into the past *without* a time machine.

Lessons from La Brea

Dear Journal,

Yesterday, our class went on a field trip to the Rancho La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. I have lived near Los Angeles my whole life. But I never knew that the La Brea Tar Pits existed until last week! It's strange to imagine mammoths and saber-toothed cats roaming where there are now highways and shopping centers. Visiting La Brea felt like stepping out of present-day life and into the Ice Age.

Before the field trip, we spent several days learning about the La Brea Tar Pits. It's amazing how many fossils have been found there! Our teacher explained that the tar is not actually the substance used to pave roads. It is really natural asphalt. We learned about how the tar pits formed. We also learned about how animals got stuck in the tar pits in the first place.

Our first stop on the field trip was the Page Museum. A tour guide led us around different displays of fossils recovered from the tar pits. The first thing I noticed about the fossils is that they were brown! I had thought that fossilized bones would be white. After all, the dinosaur bones I saw at the natural history museum were white. I learned, though, that there was a very good explanation for why the fossils from the La Brea Tar Pits were brown.

Our guide explained what had happened to the animals that had been trapped in the tar pits. After they died, their bodies would eventually break down. Only their bones and teeth would be left. According to our guide, if the bones had been left out in the hot Los Angeles sun, they would have broken down over time. They would have turned to dust. Instead, the natural asphalt in the tar pits helped preserve the bones, or keep them unchanged. How? Well, just like our skin, bones have tiny holes in them. These holes are called pores. Over thousands of years, the dark, sticky asphalt would seep into the pores in the animals' bones. This helped the bones become stronger. It made them more resistant to decay. It also explains why the bones turned brown!

3 Based on the information in "The La Brea Tar Pits" and "Lessons from La Brea," explain how fossils in the tar pits were preserved.

There wasn't enough time in the day to explore everything I wanted to at the La Brea Tar Pits. I definitely want to go back during the summer. Then, I can watch the scientists digging for fossils in one of the pits. Maybe, just maybe, they'll need a volunteer assistant.

Until next time, Journal!

Chris

4 How are the brochure and the journal entry similar in the information they provide? How are they different in the way the two authors present the information?
