

IELTS PRACTICE TASK

Charles-Marie de la Condamine

The man who helped measure the shape of the world

Although ordinary people may have thought so, few scientists had ever really believed that the world was flat. And certainly, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, they agreed without exception that it was round. There was still some minor disagreement, however, about exactly what being 'round' meant in this context. Some said the planet was a perfect sphere, like a ball. Others thought it might be generally round, but with some irregularities. The English scientist Sir Isaac Newton argued that the Earth bulged outwards around the equator. On the other hand, the French astronomer royal, Jacques Cassini, believed that the planet was stretched out at the north and south poles, making it shaped more like an egg. The debate was partly just a reflection of the way England and France competed about many things at the time, but it was also a serious question that affected how maps and sailing charts were drawn, and therefore the safety of sailors at sea. So in 1734 the French Academy of Sciences decided to measure the Earth's shape. An expedition under Pierre de Maupertius would travel close to the North Pole, and another under Charles-Marie de la Condamine would travel to the equator. Both expeditions would survey the shape of the Earth's surface and then compare findings. After a long voyage, Condamine reached Peru in South America, where the scientific experiments began. His team climbed high into the mountains to take measurements using surveying equipment and then descended to the desert plains to continue their work. Finally, after four years' work – more than twice the time the leader had intended – the survey work was complete. As part of their research, they had built small pyramids made of rock as permanent features from which to take certain measurements, and their remains can still be seen today as monuments to the expedition. When Condamine's team returned to France, the Earth was found to be slightly wider between the poles than when measured through its centre at the equator. Condamine and Maupertius were now counted as among the most eminent scientists in Europe.

TASK TYPE 1 Identifying Information (True/False/Not Given)

Questions 1–6

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the Reading Passage?

You should write

TRUE *if the statement agrees with the information*

FALSE *if the statement contradicts the information*

NOT GIVEN *if there is no information on this*

- 1 At the start of the eighteenth century, scientists knew the Earth was round.
- 2 Sir Isaac Newton had done scientific experiments at the equator.
- 3 The debate between Newton and Cassini was important for sailors.
- 4 Maupertius and Condamine had worked together in the past.
- 5 Condamine finished his research sooner than he had expected.
- 6 Condamine left behind no physical evidence of his expedition to South America.