

**SECTION A: Reading**

**You should spend about 40 minutes on this section.  
Read the following passage carefully and then answer the questions which  
follow on page 4.**

*Michael Palin is flying to the North Pole to make a television programme.*

**Flying to the North Pole**



It's 3.45 on a Saturday afternoon and I'm seventeen miles from the North Pole. Somewhere, a long way away, people are doing sensible things like watching cricket or digging gardens or pushing prams or visiting their mothers-in-law. 5

I'm squeezed tight into a small, noisy aeroplane descending through stale grey cloud towards an enormous expanse of cracked and drifting ice. With me are the film crew and our two pilots, Russ and Dan. We are the only human beings within 500 miles. Outside my window one of our two propeller-driven engines slowly eats away at a fuel supply which must last us another six hours at least. In little more than ten minutes our pilot will have to fashion a landing strip out of nothing more than a piece of ice — strong enough to withstand an impact of 12,500 lbs at eighty 10 15 20 25

miles an hour. Below the ice the sea is 14,000 feet deep.

I'm sure I'm not the only one of us looking down on this desolate wilderness who hasn't wished, for an impure moment, that the North Pole, rather than being in the middle of an ocean, was solid, well marked and even supplied with a hut and a coffee machine. But the cracked and fissured ice-pack offers no comfortable reassurance — no glimmer of any reward to the traveller who has made his way to the top of the world. 30

At two minutes past four our Twin Otter plane is finally over the North Pole. All there is to see is ice and the nearer we get to it the more evident it is that the ice is not in good shape. Russ, a self-contained man about whom I know nothing other than that my life is in his hands, leans forward from the controls, scanning the conditions below and frowning. 35

Technology cannot help him now. The decision as to how, when and ultimately whether to drop the plane onto the ice is for his judgement alone.



He clearly doesn't like what he sees and, by my watch, we have circled the roof of the world for nearly thirty minutes before a change in engine note indicates that he is at last throttling back in preparation for a landing. We drop low, Russ staring hard at the ice as ridge walls taller than I'd expected rush up to meet us. I brace myself for impact, but it never comes. At the last minute Russ thrusts the overhead throttle control forward and pulls us up banking steeply away. He checks the fuel gauge and asks Dan, the young co-pilot, to connect up one of the drums for in-flight refuelling. The Pole remains 100 feet below us, tantalisingly elusive, probably in the middle of a black pool of melted water. Russ takes advantage of some marginally increased sunlight to attempt a second landing. Once again hearts rise towards mouths as the engines slow and a blur of ice and snow and pitch-black sea rises towards us, but once again Russ snatches the plane from the ice at the last moment and we soar away, relieved and cheated.

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I make a mental note never to complain about a landing ever again. Russ circles and banks the plane for another fifteen minutes, patiently examining the floating ice for yet another attempt.

This time there is no pull-out. Six hours after leaving Eureka Base, Canada, the wheels and skis of the Twin Otter find the ground, bounce, hit, bounce, hit, swerve, slide and finally grip the slithery hummocked surface. We are down and safe.

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Home seems impossibly far away as we step out onto a rough base of ice and snow. It looks secure but water flows only a few yards away and the fact that Russ will not risk switching off the aircraft engines in case the ice should split reminds us that this is a lethal landscape. Finding the highest point in the vicinity — a pile of fractured ice-blocks, soaring to three and a half feet — I plant our 'North Pole' and we take our photos. The air is still, and a watery sun filters through grey-edged cloud giving the place a forlorn and lonely aspect. The temperature is minus twenty-five Centigrade. This is considered warm.

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After an hour's filming, we defer to Russ's polite impatience and return to the aircraft. Concerned about fuel, he takes off quickly and unceremoniously, as if the North Pole were just another bus stop.

Straight away there are problems. There is only enough fuel left to reach the nearest airstrip, a Danish base in Greenland. Even this is 480 miles away, and beyond radio range at the moment. We have no option but to fly in hope.

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1. What facilities does the writer wish were available at the North Pole?

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(Total 1 mark)

Q1

2. Describe **in your own words** the character of Russ, the pilot.

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(Total 3 marks)

Q2





3. Give **two** examples of the writer's use of humour in a serious situation. Explain why a reader might find each of these amusing.

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**(Total 4 marks)**

Q3



