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Introduction

The biggest, the worst, the oddest, the unsolved - facts are packed with possibility. More than the wildest inventions of fiction, factual information draws us, because no matter how unlikely and obscure, we know a fact is something that actually happened. Amazing facts broaden our horizons; they help us to understand the infinite variety and detail in the world; they alert us to what might be hiding around the very next corner.

As a Matter of Fact brings the fascination of unusual information into your classroom. Here are odd tidbits that students love to ponder, each presented in a one- to two-page, concise unit containing vocabulary, comprehension, creative writing and enrichment activities. Five thematic chapters provide something for every interest. 'People to Ponder' will introduce students to some unique personalities most of us do not meet in the course of everyday life: an island baby sitter, a human cannonball and a best-selling hermit. For the history nut, there is 'Ancient Daze'. Topics such as primitive beauty secrets or the inventions of the vending machine and the fire station pole point out amazing connections with cultures across the ages. 'Master Disasters' will appeal to thrill seekers with accounts of the San Francisco earthquake, the black plague and the crash of the Hindenburg. And, since nature never fails to fascinate, 'What in the World ... ?' and 'Animal Magnetism' supply little-known information about porcupines, manatees, deserts, green skeletons, ears, lightning, prairie dogs, meteorites, and much more. With units on 78 different topics, *As a Matter of Fact* provides high interest along with the guided practice needed to sharpen vital skills in reading and responding.

This book is designed to challenge your fast workers and your divergent thinkers. Pull units in at random, or pursue a specific theme. Build a weekly vocabulary program based on these pages. Use them to extend your existing curriculum, to demonstrate interdisciplinary connections, to increase cultural literacy. Because of the variety of activities included in each unit, these pages are ideal for independent and group work keyed to different learning styles. Encourage students to keep a folder of their favourite units, to research and create new ones based on facts that personally fascinate them.

Thanks to the magic of media, students today have the opportunity to view much of the world's infinite variety and detail. We are indeed becoming a culture of watchers rather than doers. In a small way, *As a Matter of Fact* swims against the tide. Its pages encourage students to go beyond viewing alone, to stake out ownership of these amazing facts by engaging their powers of logic and imagination. 'How does this fact relate to my life?' When students make information their own by asking questions such as this, they are well on their way to lifelong learning.

Peking to Paris Proof

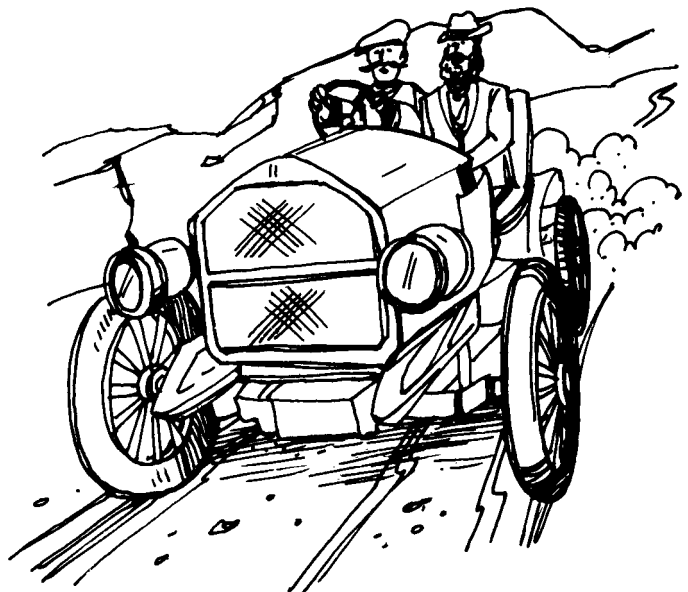
When inventors built the first petrol-powered automobiles, people regarded them as novelties, dangerous toys for rich thrill seekers. No one took seriously the suggestion that one day cars would replace horses as a reliable means of transportation. It took a 15 000-kilometre journey across two continents to convince the public of the automobile's future.

Although there were few motorists in Europe at the turn of the century, they yearned for a way to test their vehicles and newly acquired driving skills. So in 1901 the French newspaper *Le Matin* threw down a challenge: to race long distance, from Peking, China, all the way to Paris, France. Eager contestants plotted and planned for six years, but in the end only five cars entered the race. One was from the Netherlands; two were French-built, with engines equal to those of a modern-day motorboat; one was a six-horsepower three-wheeler; and the most powerful had a 40-horsepower engine. It was crewed by Italian Prince Scipione Borghese, an explorer and sportsman, along with his chauffeur and a reporter from Rome. Of all the car crews, Borghese made the most careful preparations. He measured mountain passes and shipped supplies ahead by camel to storage points along the route. To his car he added extra fuel tanks, heavy-duty tyres, and spare parts.

As a French army band played and firecrackers exploded, the five cars pulled out of Peking on 10 June 1907. Almost immediately, they encountered difficulties in the mountains between China and Mongolia. As coolies struggled with ropes to pull the cars up the peaks, camel trains strode smugly by. Next came the Gobi Desert, where engines boiled over daily in the intense heat. Here, the cars fared better, accomplishing in four days what usually took a caravan two weeks.

Studying their maps, the drivers looked forward to Russia, with the promise of well-travelled roads. But rains set in that washed out bridges and turned the country into a sea of mud. One of Borghese's metal wheels collapsed, threatening to end his quest, until a village carpenter, using only a hatchet, made a wooden replacement. Next, a mix-up with fuel shipments left Borghese stranded far from the nearest petrol. Oddly, a small shop beside the road had a large supply of benzine, a compound used in paint and dyes. With nothing to lose, Borghese dumped it into his tank and chugged off in a cloud of black smoke - all the way to his next supply point.

Once the drivers reached Europe, the difficulties eased. In fact, Borghese picked up so much speed, he was stopped in a Belgian town for exceeding the thirteen-kilometre-an-hour limit! Sixty-one days after leaving Peking, on 10 August, Borghese's crew limped into Paris. Only two other contestants finished, both arriving 20 days later. But their accomplishment proved to the world that the automobile could stand up to the most rigorous of driving conditions. The car was here to stay!



Peking to Paris Proof



A. The solution to each clue below is a number from the reading selection.

1. Horsepower of Borghese's car: _____
2. Continents crossed: _____
3. Years spent preparing for race: _____
4. Kilometres from Peking to Paris: _____
5. Days in which Borghese completed race: _____
6. Kilometres per hour in Belgian town: _____
7. Date the race was first proposed: _____
8. Number of contestants: _____
9. Days in which French drivers completed race: _____
10. Number in Borghese's crew: _____
11. Days required for camels to cross Gobi Desert: _____
12. Days in which automobiles crossed desert: _____

B. Reason and write. Use the back of this sheet.

1. What did this race most likely do for the newspaper that sponsored it?
2. Explain the effect this race may have had on a person considering the purchase of an automobile in 1907.

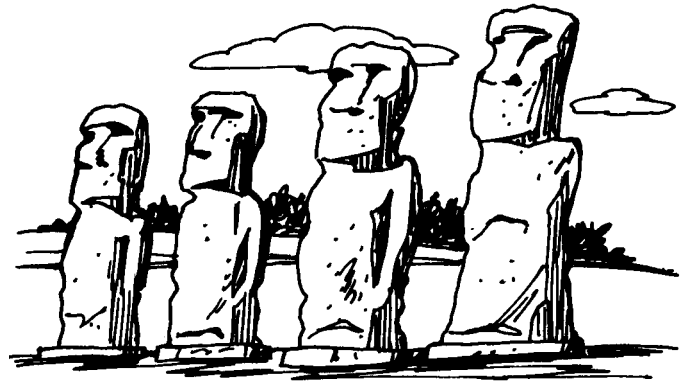
C. What happened first? Number the statements from 1 to 10 in chronological order.

- _____ 1. Borghese breaks the speed limit.
- _____ 2. Borghese fills up with benzine.
- _____ 3. *Le Matin* proposes an auto race.
- _____ 4. Engines boil over.
- _____ 5. Only Borghese and two others finish.
- _____ 6. Coolies pull the cars up the mountain peaks.
- _____ 7. A few adventurers learn to drive.
- _____ 8. Only Borghese and four others enter.
- _____ 9. The crowd celebrates with firecrackers.
- _____ 10. Many drivers consider taking up the challenge.

D. Create your own trail game of this auto race. On a large sheet of paper, draw a path of at least 50 game spaces. Use information from the selection to create at least 5 bonus spaces and 10 penalty spaces along the trail. (You will need to create additional details of your own.) Provide dice for rolling to determine the number of spaces to move. Next, write the rules and supply game markers. Finally, test your game with a partner to see who reaches Paris first!

Island Mystery

In the scope of world history, the return of 15 captives to their homeland seems like a detail too small to record. But for tiny Easter Island in the South Pacific, the event brought about a disaster of major proportions. The island, only 122 square kilometres in size, is famous for the enormous stone statues, known as *moai*, which were erected by early inhabitants. Six hundred large, angular heads guard the island, each of them measuring about 6 metres high and weighing over 80 tonnes. The statues were designed to sit on raised stone platforms covered with mysterious picture-writing. No one knows how the heads were made or why.



In 1862 Peru, some 3200 kilometres to the east of Easter Island, needed slaves to work in its cotton and sugar cane plantations. Traders captured most of the islanders, about 1400 in all, and sold them to wealthy planters. Working in altitudes and climates to which they were unaccustomed, the Easter Island slaves began dying at alarming rates. A year later, only 100 were still alive, and some kind soul decided to return them to their native shores. On the voyage back, 85 died of smallpox. The remaining 15 disembarked and promptly spread the deadly disease through the small number of their kinsmen still living on Easter Island. A handful survived, but none of them remembered to pass the meaning of the stone statues on to their children. Today islanders and scientists alike struggle to interpret the strange symbol-writing left behind in the hope that someday it will give up the secret of the moai.

- A. Loss of knowledge, whenever and wherever it occurs, is a terrible tragedy. Put yourself in the Easter Islanders' shoes; imagine a crisis that wipes out all knowledge of books and reading. What would it be like to be surrounded by books and not understand what they were for? Write a story describing your feelings.
- B. What happened first? Number the events in order from 1 to 7.
- _____ 1. Returning islanders spread smallpox.
 - _____ 2. Slaves captured and taken to Peru.
 - _____ 3. Knowledge of moai dies.
 - _____ 4. Surviving slaves sent home.
 - _____ 5. Moai erected on platforms covered with symbol-writing.
 - _____ 6. Population nearly wiped out.
 - _____ 7. Islanders made poor slaves.
- C. Check a reference to see how the Easter Island heads look. Then choose one of the fictitious headlines below to illustrate on drawing paper.
- 1. Astronaut Announces: "Matching Moai on Moon!"
 - 2. Easter Island Giant's Chessboard
 - 3. Camper Cracks Code of Quiet Heads
 - 4. Island Heads Squash Hopes for Healthy Tourist Season