

Nonfiction Reading Test

Mad Hatters

Directions: Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow. Refer to the text to check your answers when appropriate.

A hatter is a person who makes hats. Hatters are also known as milliners. People have been wearing hats for a long time. So, *millinery* is an old profession. We can trace the use of the word back to the 1600s.



Perhaps the most famous real-life milliner is Coco Chanel. She founded the Chanel brand after World War I. Her brand is still popular today. But the most famous milliner of all may be the Hatter from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The Hatter first appears in Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel in "Chapter Seven – A Mad Tea-Party". The Hatter claims to Alice that it is always six o'clock and so it is always tea-time. He speaks in riddles to which he does not know the answer. And he changes his seat at the table at random. This character is known as "the Mad Hatter," and even the Cheshire Cat calls him mad.

In Carroll's time, many hatters suffered from mental illness. In fact, the phrase "as mad as a hatter" was in print in 1829. This was several decades before Carroll's character appeared. It is now understood that this madness was due to mercury exposure.

Mercury was once a secret ingredient in hatting. Hatters would steam and press animal fur. Then they would add a compound made from mercury to stabilize the fur. They called this process felting. It made for some nice hats. It also gave hatters mercury poisoning.

Erethism, also known as "mad hatter disease," is a mental disorder. It is due to having too much contact with mercury. Those who

suffer from it shake beyond their control. Their personalities may change. They may lose their memories. Or they may hallucinate. It is a damaging condition.

Speaking of madness, the small city of Danbury, Connecticut, was once known as "Hat City." During the 1800s and 1900s, as many as 75% of American-made hats came from Danbury. And a lot of workers from this city got mercury poisoning. There were so many cases that the condition was known as the "Danbury shakes." The madness of it all is that people knew the cause.

Although the hazards of mercury had long been known, it wasn't studied until the 1860s. Yet by 1869 science proved the health hazards that mercury posed to hat makers. And in 1874 and 1888 people created new, safer methods of felting using acid. But the American hat industry continued to use mercury for another 60 years. Isn't that maddening?

The use of mercury in hatting finally ended during World War II. It wasn't because people discovered that it was hazardous to workers. (They already knew that.) It was because mercury was needed to create detonators for the war effort. Connecticut banned the use of mercury in hat-making in 1941. To this day the banks of the Still River in Danbury still test high for levels of mercury waste.

1. Based on the context in the first paragraph, what does the word *millinery* mean?
 - a. Wearing hats
 - b. Modeling hats
 - c. Buying hats
 - d. Making hats

2. Which best explains why the author discusses Coco Chanel in the second paragraph?
 - a. To convince readers that Chanel No. 5 is the best perfume
 - b. To inform readers about famous hatters
 - c. To introduce Coco Chanel, the main character of the story
 - d. To compare and contrast Coco Chanel with other famous hatters

3. Which of the following is **FALSE**?
 - a. The Hatter in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is known for his bizarre behavior.
 - b. The phrase "as mad as a hatter" was well-known before Lewis wrote his text.
 - c. Hatters often suffered from mental problems in Carroll's time.
 - d. Lewis Carroll was the first to print the expression "as mad as a hatter."

4. What causes erethism?
 - a. Too much time inhaling steam
 - b. Too much exposure to mercury
 - c. Too much exposure to animal fur
 - d. Too much time working in a factory

5. Which is **NOT** a symptom of "mad hatter disease"?
 - a. Inability to move one's legs
 - b. Memory loss
 - c. Hallucinations
 - d. Shaking uncontrollably

6. To what did the phrase "the Danbury shakes" refer?
 - a. Delicious milk-based desserts
 - b. An obsession with fashion
 - c. Mercury poisoning
 - d. A trendy new dance

7. Which **conclusion** about American hat manufacturers can be supported by text?
 - a. They were deeply concerned about the health of their workers.
 - b. They were unaware of the harms of mercury.
 - c. They did not care about the effects of harmful working conditions.
 - d. They worked rapidly to address problems in the workspace.

8. Why did American hat manufacturers stop using mercury in the felting process?
 - a. Mercury was needed to create weapons for the war.
 - b. A new, safer process for felting had recently been discovered.
 - c. They suddenly learned that mercury harmed the workers.
 - d. Lewis Carroll exposed the harms of mercury in his book.

Did early American hat makers care about the health of their workers? How do you know?

Why did American hat makers stop using mercury and what does that suggest about their priorities?
