

Earworm

Most people have had songs stuck in their heads at some point. The scientific name for this is involuntary musical imagery (INMI), which simply means that the people do not choose to keep the songs in their heads. Experts have nicknamed this condition “earworm,” even though it is not an actual worm, and it does not take place in the ear. Rather, it takes place in the memory centers of the brain. It occurs when a catchy tune “sticks” in a person’s mind. What makes a song stick depends on the individual. Some people get stuck on their favorite songs, while others end up fixated on songs they find annoying.

Nobody knows exactly why a particular song gets caught in a person’s brain. It can be brought on after recently hearing a song, or it can be triggered by a memory. Although earworm can happen to anyone at any time, certain people are more likely than others to suffer from it. Most commonly, musicians experience it, but people who simply listen to music more frequently than others are also more prone to earworm.

No evidence has proven one effective cure, but anything that disturbs the brain can help. The best way to shift the brain is to occupy it with a new activity. For example, actively chewing gum might switch the brain’s focus from the repeating song to the moving jaw. Engaging in a task that requires concentration can remove the pesky earworm as well. However, if the task requires too much effort, it can actually prolong the earworm, because the mind tends to wander to escape the difficulty of the job at hand.

While earworm can be very annoying, there is no evidence that suggests it is actually harmful. In fact, some experts are studying earworm to see what they can learn about memory centers. After all, these songs repeat automatically with no effort. What if science could apply this information to learning? What if everyone could learn new things without having to try so hard? If scientists can figure out how to tap into this type of memory, learning might look different in the future.

Questions

1. What are two central ideas in the passage?
2. Why does the author most likely include the last paragraph?
3. What conclusion about earworm can the reader make after reading the second paragraph?
4. One possible subhead for the second paragraph is “Who Gets Earworm and Why.” Reread the third paragraph and create a subhead for it. Include details from the paragraph to support your choice.

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. involuntary
2. fixated
3. triggered
4. pesky
5. prolong

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "The scientific name for this is **involuntary** musical imagery"

- a. about the ear b. developed; enhanced c. uncontrolled; unintentional d. unusual; odd

2) "others end up **fixated** on songs they find annoying"

- a. focused or stuck b. humming or singing c. repairing; correcting d. deciding

3) "it can be **triggered** by a memory"

- a. rewritten b. started or caused c. rearranged d. stopped; ended

4) "Engaging in a task that requires concentration can remove the **pesky** earworm"

- a. funny; unusual b. harmful c. annoying or troublesome d. pleasing or melodious

5) "if the task requires too much effort, it can actually **prolong** the earworm"

- a. stop or halt b. reduce or shorten c. change or alter d. lengthen or drag out