Name _____ Date _____

Hyperbole, Paradox and Understatement in an Essay

Directions: Read the personal essay about four seasons in a high school marching band. Some questions ask you to identify a figure of speech; others ask what a particular figure means in context or what it contributes to the essay's meaning and tone.

Four Seasons in a Wool Uniform

I joined the marching band as a freshman because a friend promised that it would be fun, and she somehow neglected to mention band camp. Before that summer, I had never marched a single step or memorized a single halftime formation. During two weeks of rehearsals that August, Mr. Haddad, our director, told us to lift our knees about a million times. The punishing heat did not disappear when September arrived, either; it simply followed us into the football season. At our first home game, the thermometer on the press box registered ninety-seven degrees, and two trumpet players had to retreat to the shade between songs. Wool in that heat is a little warm. Our wool uniforms weigh more than the bus that carries us to games.

Sound was the next lesson, and the tuba section, which sat directly behind me, could be heard in the next county. The band room has not been quiet since 1987. Even so, Mr. Haddad's favorite saying is that the loudest band on the field is the one that knows how to play softly. A band that performs everything at full volume has nothing left for the moments that demand real power, so we devoted entire rehearsals to a single quiet phrase.

Marching, meanwhile, presented an entirely different kind of puzzle. To march in a straight line, you have to stop staring at the line. Inexperienced marchers keep their eyes on the yard markers and drift anyway, while veterans keep their heads up and check the shoulder of the player beside them. It took me most of a season to trust that advice, and several embarrassing collisions with the clarinet section to learn it.

My sophomore year opened with the Harvest Day parade, which began when our bus broke down on the highway two miles from the starting line. The drum major's baton snapped in half during the opening song, and it rained steadily from the first note to the last. Three of us lost our hats to the wind before we reached the reviewing stand. It was not our finest morning.

The harder we tried to play perfectly that fall, the worse we sounded. By my senior year, we had finally learned to relax and listen to one another instead of anxiously counting every individual mistake. When the band won first place at the state festival after eleven years without a trophy, Mr. Haddad told us we had done "a decent job," then turned toward the bleachers so we would not see him grinning.

I still cannot completely explain why I returned for four consecutive seasons of heat, rain and aching knees. I only know that I would sign up again tomorrow.

1. According to the writer, during two weeks of August rehearsals the director told the band to lift their knees "about a million times." Which figure of speech does this phrase illustrate?

A. Understatement: describing something as far less serious or impressive than it really is

B. Simile: a comparison between two unlike things that uses the word like or as

C. Paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or against common sense yet holds a truth

D. Hyperbole: deliberate exaggeration too extreme for anyone to believe it literally

2. In the second paragraph, what does the writer mean by claiming that the tuba section "could be heard in the next county"?

A. The band performed in a neighboring county that season.

B. The tubas were too quiet to hear from the writer's seat.

C. The tuba section played extraordinarily loudly.

D. Residents of nearby towns complained to the school.

3. Describing the band's struggles, the writer reports, "The harder we tried to play perfectly that fall, the worse we sounded." Which figure of speech is this sentence built on?

A. Paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or against common sense yet holds a truth

B. Hyperbole: deliberate exaggeration too extreme for anyone to believe it literally

C. Understatement: describing something as far less serious or impressive than it really is

D. Simile: a comparison between two unlike things that uses the word like or as

4. The director's favorite saying is that "the loudest band on the field is the one that knows how to play softly." What truth does this apparently contradictory saying express?

A. Loud passages sound strongest when set against quiet ones.

B. Volume matters more than playing the correct notes accurately.

C. A band should play quietly for most of every performance.

D. The quietest band on the field usually wins the competition.

5. After a broken-down bus, a snapped baton and a parade in steady rain, the writer concludes, "It was not our finest morning." Which figure of speech is at work in this sentence?

A. Paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or against common sense yet holds a truth

B. Hyperbole: deliberate exaggeration too extreme for anyone to believe it literally

C. Understatement: describing something as far less serious or impressive than it really is

D. Simile: a comparison between two unlike things that uses the word like or as

6. After eleven years without a trophy, the band wins first place at the state festival, and the director tells them they did "a decent job." What does this understatement suggest about him?

A. He is surprised that the judges noticed the band at all.

B. He believes the band could have performed considerably better.

C. He is proud but keeps his praise dry and restrained.

D. He is too exhausted after the festival to celebrate.

7. Which two sentences from the band essay use exaggeration so extreme that no reader could possibly take it literally?

☐ A. "My sophomore year opened with the Harvest Day parade, which began when our bus broke down on the highway two miles from the starting line."

☐ B. "Three of us lost our hats to the wind before we reached the reviewing stand."

☐ C. "Wool in that heat is a little warm."

☐ D. "Our wool uniforms weigh more than the bus that carries us to games."

☐ E. "The band room has not been quiet since 1987."

8. The writer observes, "To march in a straight line, you have to stop staring at the line." What does this paradox actually mean in the context of the essay?

A. The yard markers on the field were painted noticeably crooked.

B. Marchers should look down at the field in order to stay straight.

C. Speed matters more than straight lines during a parade performance.

D. Marchers keep a line straight by watching the players beside them.

9. The writer says, "Wool in that heat is a little warm." What in the essay shows that this is an understatement and not a plain description?

A. The sentence before it describes ninety-seven degrees and players retreating to the shade.

B. The writer later says that the wool uniforms felt surprisingly comfortable even on the hottest days.

C. The writer admits to missing that first game and hearing about the weather from friends.

D. The essay explains that wool keeps marchers cool, so they rarely notice the temperature.

10. Taken together, how do the essay's hyperboles about knees, tubas and uniforms shape its overall tone?

A. They make the practices sound dangerous, so the essay reads as a warning to newcomers.

B. They make the director seem cruel, so the writer sounds resentful and disappointed.

C. They make the season sound effortless, so the band's eventual trophy seems unearned.

D. They turn hard work into comedy, so the writer sounds amused, not bitter.