

Level: advanced

Pre-reading discussion

1. Some people who are unhappy living in large modern cities dream of living a simpler life out in the countryside. To what extent do you share their dreams?
2. Let's imagine you move to a little cottage in the countryside. You decide to breed sheep. You already have a female sheep and a neighbour surprises you by giving you two male sheep for nothing. What do you think are the chances of the two male sheep ignoring the female and falling in love with each other? Could it happen?

Reading

Here we have an entertaining passage about sheep. The point of the exercise is first of all to practise doing the kind of reading comprehension questions that you often come across in exams. Read the passage silently to yourself and then attempt the seven comprehension questions that follow.

A farmer who buys a ram may have to pay as much as \$500. For that kind of money he will expect to obtain a sheep with an appetite for sex. However, farmers know that when they make this expensive purchase there is always a risk involved – a risk that when the ram is finally released in the farmer's field it ignores the hundreds of ewes and only has eyes for the other rams. If the sheep turns out to be gay, it's money down the drain for the farmer.

Partly because of the cost to farmers, the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Idaho decided to start a research programme into the sexual preference of rams. To begin with, randomly chosen specimens were taken into an arena and given four choices: two ewes in heat and two rams. "The four stimulus animals are restrained in stanchions so that they can only be approached from the rear." For 30 minutes, the unrestrained ram does as he pleases while the scientists count how many times he sniffs and mounts each of the four animals.

According to the results, 8% of rams have no hesitation in rejecting the ewes and mating with other rams. In addition to the unhesitatingly homosexual rams, there is another 20% who swing both ways.

Once they had calculated the size of the "problem" the researchers turned their attention to trying to account for it. After reviewing other people's research and conducting their own, this is the conclusion they drew: "Studies have failed to identify any compelling social factors that can predict or explain the variations in sexual partner preferences of rams. However, a number of studies have reported differences in brain structure and function between male-oriented and female-oriented rams, suggesting that sexual partner preferences are neurologically determined. Recently, we identified a sexually dimorphic nucleus (oSDN) in the sheep hypothalamus. The oSDN is larger in female-oriented rams than in male-oriented rams and similar in size in male-oriented rams and ewes."

Armed with a few hypotheses about the determinants of sexual preference the researchers were in a position to design experiments to try to manipulate the sexual inclination of the rams. Charles Roselli designed an experiment "to determine whether male-oriented preference behaviour can be artificially produced in genetic male sheep by depriving male lamb fetuses of estrogen." In the end this line of research proved to be fruitless, so the scientists turned their attention to developing a test to identify young rams whose preference for males would make them useless for breeding purposes.

An organisation called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has been vociferous in objecting to this line of research. According to PETA it is natural for a certain percentage of animals to exhibit a same-sex preference and our ethical obligation should be to respect that. They are outraged that scientists may be developing ways to eradicate animal homosexuality.

Questions

1. What are rams?
2. What are ewes?
3. Just using the context in the passage, what do you think the word "stanchion" refers to?
4. In the first experiment mentioned in the passage
 - a. Steps were taken to make sure the female sheep were as sexually attractive as possible.
 - b. Each of the sheep in the stanchions were stimulated.
 - c. Each of the rams were given four chances to mate with a ewe.
 - d. The scientists only recorded the attempts of the rams to mate with the stimulus animals.

5. What percentage of rams find other rams sexually attractive?
 - a. 8%
 - b. 12%
 - c. 20%
 - d. 28%
6. Which of the following is **not** true?
 - a. Differences in upbringing cannot explain why some rams become homosexual.
 - b. Scientists were not able to use oestrogen to manipulate the future sexual orientation of lamb foetuses.
 - c. The sexually dimorphic nucleus of male-oriented rams is unusually small.
 - d. Scientists believe there is no neurological basis for sexual partner preferences in rams.
7. According to PETA
 - a. animals should not be used in research.
 - b. scientists should use a certain percentage of animals as exhibits.
 - c. scientists should show more respect for natural phenomena.
 - d. scientists should respect the outrage of members of PETA.

Language extra

A. Use the words in bold to transform the following sentences. Do not change the form of the word. You should find the word in the passage if you need to remind yourself how to use it.

1. The stanchions stop the sheep from moving. **restrain**
The stanchions
2. When I'm on holiday I can do whatever I want. **please**
When I'm on holiday I can
3. I immediately rejected the girl. **hesitation**
I had
4. The scientists concluded that there were no social factors. **drew**
The scientists there were no social factors.
5. Not all rams behave in the same way. **variation**
There is of rams.
6. Nigel's mum was not affectionate towards him. **deprived**
Nigel maternal affection.
7. The anatomy of the brain plays a role in determining sexual preference.
determinants
The anatomy of the brain sexual preference.
8. The research didn't come up with any positive results. **fruitless**
The research
9. PETA has objected loudly to this line of research. **vociferous**
PETA objecting to this line of research.
10. We should make sure that there is no sexual discrimination. **eradicate**
We should sexual discrimination.

B. Use the passage and a good monolingual dictionary to make sure you know how to use these words and phrases, then use your vivid imaginations to come up with your own interesting example sentences. Write them down in your notebooks before sharing them with the rest of the class.

turn out
down the drain
random
rear
sniff
swing
conduct
compelling
manipulate
inclination
breed
outraged