

Ready, Set, Scan: Yellowstone!

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As part of Freedom 250 and the celebration of America's 250th birthday, *Forum* is excited to present activities connected to national park imagery, starting with this issue's cover painting, *Excelsior Geyser, Yellowstone Park* (1873) by Thomas Moran. Yellowstone, known for Old Faithful and more than 10,000 hydrothermal features (White 2016), spans over two million acres, is home to bison, grizzly and black bears, elk, and wolves, and has over 1,000 miles of trails woven throughout (Yellowstone Association 2014). All of this makes it one of the most visited national parks in the United States. In the following activity, students race in small groups to find specific information from an authentic Yellowstone article, practicing scanning skills to improve reading fluency.

Since Yellowstone became the first U.S. national park in 1872, the National Parks System has expanded to include national monuments, seashores, historic sites, and more. This system now stretches “from Alaska to the Virginia Islands, from Maine to American Samoa” (National Geographic 2016, 7) and includes 63 national scenic parks, such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon. These “crown jewels” were originally established for scenic preservation but now play a broader role in environmental protection and public benefit; as one park ranger noted, “If you breathe air, you are benefiting from national parks” (Dapcevich 2025, 73).

LEVEL: Lower intermediate and above; middle school to university (but the activity can be adapted for elementary students).

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 45-60 minutes.

GOALS: To develop students’ reading fluency through skimming and scanning; to practice reading comprehension under time pressure in a collaborative, competitive format; to develop vocabulary related to natural features and animals; to integrate reading skill development with content learning; to integrate physical movement with language learning to increase engagement and retention.

OVERVIEW

Scanning is an essential reading strategy that helps learners quickly locate key information without reading every word. However, many English language learners read texts word-by-word or line-by-line, which slows comprehension and limits reading efficiency. The following activity uses a kinesthetic relay-race format to develop students’ scanning skills. Unlike traditional seated

reading comprehension, this competitive group activity requires students to move around the classroom, promoting physical engagement that can enhance focus and memory.

Students will work in teams where each member is responsible for finding the answer to one specific question by running to posted articles, scanning for relevant information, and returning to record the answer before the next teammate goes. The competitive element motivates students to read efficiently rather than slowly and carefully, helping them practice the rapid information-location skills needed for standardized tests, academic research, and real-world tasks like reading schedules, menus, or instructions. By focusing on Yellowstone National Park, the activity connects to *Forum's* America250 theme while building content knowledge about natural features, wildlife, and even conservation. The collaborative structure ensures all students participate actively, and the movement component makes reading practice energizing rather than passive.

MATERIALS: The image of Thomas Moran's painting *Excelsior Geyser, Yellowstone Park* (or any image of Yellowstone); one article about Yellowstone National Park, which should be printed (one per group/posting location, plus a master copy for teacher); one set of comprehension questions (8-12 questions) per group; timer; tape to post articles around the room; small prize for winning team (optional).

PREPARATION

Select or create an article about Yellowstone National Park appropriate for your students' reading level (see Figure 1). The article should be 200-400 words and contain clear, factual information on topics such as

geothermal features, wildlife, history, geography, or visitor information. Authentic sources include: National Park Service: www.nps.gov/yell; Yellowstone Forever: www.yellowstone.org; National Geographic Education: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/yellowstone/>; or you can create your own simplified text.

Next, plan your groups (3-4 students per group works best) and decide how you will divide your class. You should print one copy of the article per group (for example, 4 groups = 4 copies, 6 groups = 6 copies). Before students arrive, post the article copies around the room at a height students can easily read while standing. Space them out so groups won't cluster in one area.

Create 8-12 scanning questions based on the article (see Figure 2). Questions should require students to locate specific information, e.g., "*What year was Yellowstone established?*" or "*How many species of plants grow in the park?*" Number the questions clearly (Question 1, Question 2, etc.). Print one set of questions per group and prepare a master answer key for yourself.

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Warm-Up with Moran's Painting (5 minutes)

Display Thomas Moran's *Excelsior Geyser, Yellowstone Park* (1873) or any picture of Yellowstone that you like. Ask students what they see and what they know about Yellowstone. Briefly introduce or review key vocabulary that will appear in the article, such as geyser, wildlife, national park, eruption. Explain that today they will read an article about Yellowstone National Park.

Step 2: Introduce Scanning (5 minutes)

Before beginning the competition, briefly review the difference between skimming and scanning. Explain that skimming means reading quickly to get the main idea or general sense of a text, while scanning means moving your eyes rapidly over text to find specific information, like looking for a name in a phone book or a date in an article. Demonstrate scanning by showing students a sample sentence or paragraph and asking them to find one specific piece of information (a number, name, or word) without reading everything.

Emphasize that for this activity, they will use scanning. They do not need to read or understand every word; they need to only find the answer to their specific question as quickly as possible. This explicit instruction helps students understand the strategy they're practicing.

Step 3: Explain the Activity Rules (5 minutes)

Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students and assign each group a number or name. (You could use features of Yellowstone such as "Team Bison" or "Team Geyser.") Give each group one set of questions. Explain the competition format clearly: Each student is assigned a question (Student 1 answers Question 1, Student 2 answers Question 2, etc.). They will have 15 minutes to answer the questions. On the signal, the first student runs to any posted article, scans for the answer, remembers it, and returns to the group. The student then writes or dictates the answer on the question sheet. Once the answer is recorded, the next student may go.

Clarify logistics: Students cannot take the question sheet with them. They must return to their group to record answers, which encourages active memory and prevents students from simply copying. Students may return to the article multiple times if they forget the answer or need to check. Multiple students from one group cannot go at once; the competition is relay format, so one at a time. Students can help each other by discussing and verifying answers as a team. The first team to correctly answer all questions wins. Emphasize that speed matters, but accuracy counts too, so they should scan carefully. Ask students if they have any questions to ensure everyone understands before starting.

Step 4: Run the Competition (15-20 minutes)

Say "On your mark. Get set. Go!" Monitor the activity as it unfolds, circulating to ensure students are following rules, using English to communicate within groups, and are actually scanning rather than reading the entire article slowly. Watch for students who struggle to find information and offer hints if needed, such as "*Look for a number*" or "*Check the second paragraph.*" If crowding occurs around certain article postings, redirect students to use other posted copies. Keep energy high by calling out updates ("*You have three minutes!*" or "*Team Bison is halfway done!*"). When a group believes they have finished all questions, quickly check their answers against your answer key. If all answers are correct, declare them the winner. If some answers are incorrect, tell them which question numbers are wrong and send them back to scan again. Continue until one group completes all questions correctly or until your time limit is reached.

After the competition ends, bring all students back to their seats for review.

Step 5: Review and Discussion (5-10 minutes)

Go through each question and answer as a whole class, asking groups to share what they found and checking for understanding. Ask students: *Which questions were easiest to find? Which were hardest? Why?* This reflection helps students recognize what makes information easy or difficult to locate (clear numbers vs. paraphrased ideas, prominent placement vs. buried details). Discuss any vocabulary or content questions students have about Yellowstone from the article. Ask students how scanning was different from their normal reading: *Did it feel strange not to read every word? Did the competition pressure help or hurt their concentration?* This metacognitive discussion reinforces the reading strategy and helps students understand when to use scanning in future reading tasks.

Step 6: Optional Extension: Content Discussion or Writing Follow-up (5 minutes)

Content Discussion: If time allows, engage students in a brief discussion about what they learned from the article. Ask: *What surprised you about Yellowstone? Would you like to visit? What would you want to see?* This shifts from reading skills practice to content engagement, reinforcing that reading serves a purpose beyond finding answers: it builds knowledge and sparks curiosity.

Writing follow-up: After the competition, have students individually write 3-5 sentences summarizing what they learned about Yellowstone using information from the article and questions.

ADAPTATIONS

For lower-level students: Use a shorter, simpler article (150-200 words) with very direct questions that match exact wording in the text (e.g., “Yellowstone has ____ geysers” when the text says, “Yellowstone has 300 geysers”). Provide a vocabulary list with definitions before the activity. Allow students to work in pairs instead of individually running to the article.

For advanced students: Use a longer, more complex article (400-500 words) with inferential questions that require understanding context, not just locating words (e.g., “Why is Yellowstone important for conservation?” when the text discusses multiple related ideas). Include questions that require synthesis of information from different paragraphs.

VARIATIONS

Multi-article variation: The teacher would find and post four different articles. The question sheet would contain questions drawn from all four articles, so students must scan all the texts to find the answers to their questions, which encourages them to compare and synthesize information across sources. This variation works well for advanced students.

Theme-based articles: Teachers can select articles that connect to unit themes or student interests. For example, for older or more advanced students, an article about “stupid humans” (people who try to pet bison or ignore safety rules) can be both engaging and cautionary. Other theme-based articles could focus on wildlife conservation, ecosystems, etc.

Jigsaw variation: Give each group a different article about different Yellowstone

features (one about geysers, one about wildlife, one about history, one about conservation, etc.). After the competition, groups share what they learned with the class, becoming “experts” on their topic.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I have used this activity in both EFL and ESOL contexts with both high school and college-aged students. It is a fun, engaging supplement to reading lessons as the students move, laugh, and cheer each other on all while practicing scanning skills. The combination of physical activity, collaboration, and purposeful reading is both motivating and memorable.

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Yellowstone by the National Geographic Society

Yellowstone National Park is a 2,219,789-acre (898,317 hectares) wilderness area maintained by the National Park Service. It is located at the intersection of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, with the majority of its area in Wyoming. The park is popular for its abundant natural features, including calderas, geysers, hot springs, and wildlife. It was the country's first national park, and it remains the largest national park in the continental United States.

Yellowstone became a national park in 1872. It was established by Congress “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Since that time, millions of people have visited the park to take advantage of its hiking trails, scenic views, glimpses of popular sites such as the geyser called Old Faithful, and one of the largest hot springs in the United States, the Grand Prismatic Spring, which is known for its rainbow waters.

The geology of Yellowstone makes it unlike any other place on Earth. Magma under Earth's crust is close to the surface, making the region volcanically active. The park includes three calderas, formed from volcanic eruptions 2.1 million, 1.3 million, and 640,000 years ago, respectively. Many features of the park are a result of heat from the magma transforming Earth's surface.

Yellowstone also boasts a large variety of animal and plant species. More than 1,000 species of native plants grow in the park. Over 150 species of birds live in the park, along with reptiles, and fish in a number of distinct ecosystems. Notably, the park contains a dense mammal population, including herds of bison and elk, and large predators such as wolves, grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), and mountain lions (*Puma concolor*).



Figure 1. B1-level article about Yellowstone National Park (National Geographic Society 2024).

Question Sheet	
1.	When did Yellowstone become a national park? → 1872.
2.	How many acres is Yellowstone? → 2,219,789 acres.
3.	In which three states is Yellowstone located? → Idaho, Montana, Wyoming.
4.	What is the name of the famous geyser? → Old Faithful.
5.	What is the Grand Prismatic Spring known for? → Rainbow waters
6.	How many species of birds live in the park? → Over 150.
7.	How many native plant species grow in Yellowstone? → More than 1,000.
8.	Name two large predators that live in Yellowstone. → Wolves, grizzly bears, mountain lions.
9.	When was the most recent volcanic eruption that formed a caldera? → 640,000 years ago.
10.	What makes Yellowstone geologically special? → Magma close to surface / volcanically active.

Figure 2. Sample scanning questions for "Yellowstone" by the National Geographic Society.