

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

B1 Reading Challenge

The Voyager Golden Record

A message from Earth to the stars — and the story of how we chose what to say

Level	B1 (Intermediate)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	True Stories
Duration	~20 minutes
Vocabulary	15 words
Quiz	5 questions

Article

In the summer of 1977, two **spacecraft** left our planet on a journey that would never end. They were called Voyager 1 and Voyager 2, and their main job was to visit the giant planets Jupiter and Saturn and send photographs back to Earth. But they carried something else — something that had nothing to do with science and everything to do with hope. Attached to the side of each **spacecraft** was a golden record: a phonograph disc, like an old-fashioned vinyl album, covered in a thin layer of gold. On it were sounds, music, and images carefully chosen to represent life on Earth. The Golden Record was a message in a bottle, thrown not into the sea but into the endless ocean of space. If an alien **civilisation** ever found it — in a thousand years, a million years, or a billion — they would know that we once existed.

A Wild Idea Becomes Real

The idea for the Golden Record came from Carl Sagan, an American astronomer who believed that science should be shared with everyone, not just experts. Sagan was already famous for appearing on television and explaining the universe in language that ordinary people could understand. In 1977, NASA asked him to create a message that could travel with the Voyager **spacecraft**. Sagan loved the idea. He quickly formed a small **committee** to help him decide what should go on the record. The team included Ann Druyan, a young writer who later became Sagan's wife, the artist Jon Lomberg, and several scientists and musicians. They had less than six weeks to **assemble** a portrait of the entire world — every culture, every sound, every emotion — and fit it onto a single disc. It was one of the most exciting and stressful creative projects in history.

Choosing the Sounds of Earth

The team started with the sounds of our planet. They wanted to show what Earth actually sounded like, from the smallest details to the biggest events. The final selection included the sound of rain falling, thunder rumbling, birds singing, and waves crashing on a beach. There were also sounds of human life: a baby crying for the first time, footsteps, laughter, and the roar of a rocket launch. One of the most beautiful recordings was the song of a humpback whale — a long, haunting call that travels through the deep ocean. Ann Druyan later said that she wanted any listener, no matter how alien, to feel the richness and variety of life on our planet. The sounds were **diverse** on purpose: the quiet drip of rain next to the thunder of a volcano, the gentle breathing of a sleeping child next to the noise of a busy city.

Music from Every Corner of the World

Choosing the music was perhaps the hardest part. The **committee** wanted to represent the whole world, not just Western culture. The final list of 27 musical tracks was remarkably **diverse**. It included Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2, performed by a full orchestra, and Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13 — both masterpieces of European classical music. But next to them were a Navajo night chant from Native America, panpipes from the Solomon Islands, a raga from India, a percussion piece from Senegal, and a Georgian choir singing a

centuries-old song called "Tchakrulo." Chuck Berry's rock-and-roll classic "Johnny B. Goode" also made the list, representing the energy and joy of modern popular music. Some people joked that the aliens would think humans spent all their time dancing. But the point was serious: music is one of the few human creations that can express emotion without words. Even a being with no ears might recognise the patterns and rhythms as something meaningful.

Greetings in 55 Languages

The record also included spoken **greetings** in 55 different languages, from ancient Akkadian — a language that has been dead for thousands of years — to modern Mandarin Chinese, spoken by over a billion people today. Each greeting was short and simple. The English greeting said, "Hello from the children of planet Earth." The Turkish greeting wished peace. The Zulu speaker said, "We greet you, great ones." Some messages were formal; others were warm and personal. Together, they formed a chorus of human voices reaching out across the darkness. The **committee** wanted to show that Earth is not a single culture but a planet of extraordinary variety — thousands of languages, thousands of ways of seeing the world, but all sharing the same small rocky home.

115 Images of Our World

The Golden Record also contained 115 photographs and diagrams, encoded as audio signals that could be converted back into pictures. The team had to **compile** these images very carefully, because they wanted to tell the story of Earth in just over a hundred frames. The first images were scientific: the solar system, the structure of DNA, the chemistry of our atmosphere. Then came images of nature — mountains, oceans, forests, deserts, and a photograph of a sunset. After that, the pictures showed human life: a woman breastfeeding a baby, children studying at a school in Africa, a man fishing from a boat, athletes running in the Olympic Games, and the Great Wall of China seen from above. There were pictures of cities, of farms, of people eating dinner together. One famous image showed a woman in a supermarket — a scene so ordinary that it was almost funny, but it captured something real about daily life in 1977. The **committee** also included a photograph of the violinist playing the music on the record, connecting the sound to the human being who created it.

The Cover: Instructions for Aliens

One of the cleverest parts of the Golden Record was its cover. The team knew that any aliens who found it would need instructions. How do you play a phonograph record if you have never seen one before? The answer was an **inscription** on the aluminium cover: a series of scientific diagrams that explain, step by step, how to build a record player, how fast to spin the disc, and how to **decode** the images. The cover also shows a **diagram** of a hydrogen atom — the simplest and most common element in the universe — which the aliens could use as a reference point to understand our measurements. Most remarkably, the cover includes a map. Using the positions of 14 pulsars — rapidly spinning stars that send out regular radio signals — the map shows exactly where our solar system is located in the Milky Way. If

anyone finds the record, they could **decode** the map and know where we live. Carl Sagan described the cover as "an **interstellar** return address."

Carl Sagan and His Team

Carl Sagan was the perfect person to lead this project. He was a **distinguished** scientist — a professor at Cornell University who had worked on several NASA missions — but he was also a dreamer. He believed that humanity should think of itself as part of a much larger universe, and the Golden Record was his chance to prove it. Ann Druyan, who helped select the music, later told a remarkable story. During the recording sessions, she had her brain waves recorded and placed on the disc. At that exact moment, she and Sagan had just fallen in love. She always said that somewhere in the data on the Golden Record, there is the sound of a woman falling in love — encoded forever in the grooves of a **plated** disc now billions of kilometres from home. The record became, in a way, a very personal love letter as well as a scientific document.

Where Is It Now?

After the Voyager **spacecraft** visited Jupiter and Saturn — and later Uranus and Neptune — they kept flying outward, getting faster and faster. In August 2012, Voyager 1 crossed a boundary called the heliopause and became the first human-made object to enter **interstellar** space — the vast emptiness between the stars. It is now more than 24 billion kilometres from Earth, travelling at about 61,000 kilometres per hour. Even at that incredible speed, it will take Voyager 1 roughly 40,000 years to come close to another star — a red dwarf called Gliese 445 in the constellation Camelopardalis. Voyager 2 is not far behind, and both **spacecraft** still send faint radio signals back to Earth, although their power is slowly fading. Scientists believe they will stop transmitting by around 2025 to 2030. After that, the Voyagers will become silent ambassadors, drifting through the darkness for millions — perhaps billions — of years, carrying their golden messages with them.

A Profound Message

Will anyone ever find the Voyager Golden Record? Probably not. Space is unimaginably large, and the chances of an alien **spacecraft** meeting ours are almost zero. But that was never really the point. The Golden Record was not just a message to aliens — it was a message to ourselves. By choosing what to put on it, we were forced to ask: What does it mean to be human? What is most important about our world? What would we want someone — or something — to know about us? The answers the **committee** gave were **profound**: the sound of a mother's heartbeat, the music of Bach, the laughter of children, the crash of ocean waves, the greeting of a stranger in a language you have never heard. Carl Sagan once said that the record was "a present from a small, distant world." It remains the most beautiful thing humanity has ever thrown into the sky — not a weapon, not a flag, but a song. And somewhere out there, right now, it is still playing.

Vocabulary

Word	Definition
spacecraft	a vehicle designed to travel in outer space
civilisation	an organised society with its own culture, laws, and way of life
committee	a small group of people chosen to make decisions or plan something
assemble	to collect and put together different parts or pieces
greetings	friendly words or messages said when you meet someone or welcome them
diverse	including many different types, kinds, or people
inscription	words or symbols written or cut into a surface
compile	to collect information from different sources and put it together in one place
diagram	a simple drawing that explains how something works or shows its structure
distinguished	well-known and respected because of great achievements
interstellar	existing or happening between the stars
plated	covered with a thin layer of metal, especially gold or silver
ambassador	a person or thing that represents a group, country, or idea to others
decode	to discover the meaning of something that is written in code or is hard to understand
profound	very deep, strong, or meaningful

Comprehension Quiz

1. Why did NASA attach a Golden Record to the Voyager spacecraft?

- A) To test if gold could survive in space
- B) To send a message about Earth to any alien life that might find it
- C) To store important scientific data for future NASA missions
- D) To play music for the astronauts on board

2. Who led the committee that decided what to put on the Golden Record?

- A) Neil Armstrong
- B) Stephen Hawking
- C) Carl Sagan
- D) Albert Einstein

3. How many languages were used for the spoken greetings on the record?

- A) 25
- B) 40
- C) 55
- D) 100

4. What important milestone did Voyager 1 reach in August 2012?

- A) It landed on Mars
- B) It sent back the first photo of an alien planet
- C) It became the first human-made object to enter interstellar space
- D) It ran out of power and stopped transmitting

5. What is engraved on the cover of the Golden Record?

- A) A photograph of Earth from space
- B) The names of every country on Earth
- C) Diagrams showing how to play the record and Earth's location
- D) A written letter from the President of the United States

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	1. Why did NASA attach a Golden Record to the Voyager spacecraft?
2	C	2. Who led the committee that decided what to put on the Golden Record?
3	C	3. How many languages were used for the spoken greetings on the record?
4	C	4. What important milestone did Voyager 1 reach in August 2012?
5	C	5. What is engraved on the cover of the Golden Record?