

READING CHALLENGE

The Race to the South Pole

Two explorers, one goal — only one came back alive

Level	B1 (Intermediate)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	True Stories
Duration	~20 minutes
Skill	Reading

At the very bottom of the world, there is a place where the temperature can drop to minus 60 degrees Celsius, where **blizzard** winds can blow at 200 kilometres per hour, and where the sun disappears completely for months at a time. This place is Antarctica — the coldest, driest, and most dangerous continent on Earth. In 1911, two men from different countries decided to race each other across this frozen wilderness to reach the South Pole. One of them planned carefully and succeeded brilliantly. The other made tragic mistakes and paid with his life. Their story is one of the greatest and most heartbreaking tales of exploration ever told.

Two Explorers with One Dream

The two men at the centre of this story could not have been more different. Roald Amundsen was a Norwegian explorer who had spent his entire life preparing for polar travel. As a young man, he had deliberately slept with his windows open during the freezing Norwegian winters to toughen his body. He had learned from the Inuit people of the Arctic how to use dog **sledge** teams and how to dress in animal furs to survive extreme cold. Every detail of his **expedition** plans was calculated with precision.

His **rival** was Captain Robert Falcon Scott of the British Royal Navy. Scott was brave, patriotic, and determined, but he was a naval officer, not a polar specialist. He believed in the British tradition of heroic struggle — that true glory came from suffering and fighting against nature with human strength alone. This belief would ultimately cost him everything.

Amundsen's Secret Plan

Amundsen had originally planned to be the first person to reach the North Pole. But in 1909, he received shocking news: the American explorer Robert Peary claimed to have already reached it. Amundsen's dream was shattered. So he made a bold and secret decision — he would go south instead. He told almost nobody, not even most of his own crew. His men thought they were sailing north to the Arctic. Only when their ship, the *Fram*, passed the coast of Africa did Amundsen reveal the truth. They were heading to Antarctica to race Scott to the South Pole.

When Scott received a telegram from Amundsen saying “Beg to inform you *Fram* proceeding Antarctic,” he was stunned. What had been a scientific **expedition** was now a race. The pressure was enormous. The pride of the British Empire was at stake.

Preparing for the Journey

Both teams arrived in Antarctica in January 1911 and set up their base camps. Amundsen chose the Bay of Whales on the Ross Ice Shelf, which was about 100 kilometres closer to the Pole than Scott's base at Cape Evans on Ross Island. This head start would prove to be very important.

During the Antarctic autumn and winter — from March to October — both teams prepared for the main journey. They laid **depot** camps along their planned routes, storing food, fuel, and **provisions** that they would collect on the way to and from the Pole. Amundsen placed his depots carefully, marking each one with tall black flags visible from a great distance. He stored far more food than he thought he would need. Scott, by contrast, placed fewer depots and stored less food, leaving almost no room for error.

The biggest difference between the two teams was their choice of transport. Amundsen relied entirely on dog **sledge** teams. He had 52 Greenland dogs — strong, fast, and perfectly adapted to polar conditions. Scott's plan was more complicated. He brought Siberian ponies, motor sledges, and dogs, but he planned to use man-hauling — pulling the heavy sledges by hand — for the final push to the Pole. The motor sledges broke down almost immediately. The ponies suffered terribly in the cold and had to be shot. In the end, Scott's men would drag their **sledge** loads themselves across hundreds of kilometres of ice.

The Race Begins

Amundsen set out for the Pole on 19 October 1911 with four companions, four sledges, and 52 dogs. The team moved fast — sometimes covering 30 kilometres per day across the flat ice shelf. The dogs were in excellent condition, and **morale** was high. Amundsen was a calm, efficient leader who kept his men focused and well-fed. They followed a direct route south, climbing up the enormous Axel Heiberg **glacier** to reach the Antarctic Plateau — a vast, flat, frozen desert at about 3,000 metres above sea level.

Scott left his base camp on 1 November 1911, twelve days after Amundsen. His team was larger but much slower. The ponies sank into the soft snow and struggled in the freezing temperatures. The men took turns pulling the heavy sledges when the animals could go no further. The **terrain** was brutal — crevasses hidden beneath thin snow bridges, steep **glacier** climbs, and constant wind. Scott chose to go up the Beardmore **Glacier**, one of the largest glaciers in the world, a journey of terrible difficulty.

Amundsen's Triumph

On 14 December 1911, Roald Amundsen and his four companions — Olav Bjaaland, Helmer Hanssen, Sverre Hassel, and Oscar Wisting — became the first humans in history to stand at the South Pole. The moment was quiet and emotional. Amundsen later wrote that they celebrated by planting the Norwegian flag in the snow. They named the area Polheim — "Home of the Pole." The temperature was minus 23 degrees Celsius. They had been travelling for 57 days.

Amundsen left a tent, a letter for the King of Norway, and a note for Scott — just in case something happened to the Norwegian team on the return journey. He wanted proof that he had been there first. After spending three days at the Pole, taking careful measurements to confirm their exact position, the team turned north and headed home. The return journey

was fast and efficient. They arrived back at their base camp on 25 January 1912, having completed a round trip of about 2,600 kilometres in 99 days. All five men were in good health. Their **triumph** was complete.

Scott's Heartbreak

Scott and his final team of four men — Edward Wilson, Henry Bowers, Lawrence Oates, and Edgar Evans — reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, thirty-four days after Amundsen. The sight that greeted them was devastating. A Norwegian flag was already flying there, next to a small tent. Inside the tent, they found Amundsen's note. Scott wrote in his diary: "The worst has happened. All the daydreams must go." The disappointment was crushing. They had walked over 1,300 kilometres through **harsh** conditions — and they had lost.

But reaching the Pole was only half the journey. They still had to walk all the way back, and now they were exhausted, hungry, and deeply depressed. The **endurance** required for the return journey would prove to be beyond human limits.

The Terrible Return

The journey back was a nightmare. The men were pulling their sledges by hand across the Antarctic Plateau, fighting headwinds and falling temperatures. Their food was running low. They had to **navigate** precisely to find each **depot**, because missing one would mean death. The fuel in their depots had leaked — the extreme cold had caused the tin containers to crack, and much of the paraffin had evaporated. Without fuel, they could not melt snow for drinking water or cook their food.

Edgar Evans was the first to weaken seriously. He had cut his hand badly and was suffering from **frostbite** and what may have been concussion from a fall. On 17 February 1912, Evans collapsed and died near the bottom of the Beardmore **Glacier**. He was the strongest man in the group, and his death shocked the others deeply.

Captain Lawrence Oates was next. His feet were badly frostbitten and had turned black. Every step was agony. He knew he was slowing the group down and reducing their slim chance of survival. On the morning of 16 March — his 32nd birthday — Oates stood up and said to his companions: "I am just going outside and may be some time." He walked out of the tent into a raging **blizzard** and was never seen again. His **sacrifice** was an act of extraordinary courage, hoping that without him the others might move faster and survive.

The Final Camp

But it was not enough. Scott, Wilson, and Bowers struggled on for a few more days, but a terrible **blizzard** trapped them in their tent on about 20 March 1912. They were only 18 kilometres from a large **depot** that held food and fuel — close enough to see through clear weather, but impossible to reach in the storm. The **blizzard** lasted for nine days without

stopping. They had almost no food, no fuel, and temperatures outside reached minus 40 degrees Celsius.

Scott continued to write in his diary until the very end. His final entry, dated 29 March 1912, ended with the famous words: “It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more. For God’s sake look after our people.” A search party found the tent eight months later, in November 1912. Scott, Wilson, and Bowers were inside their sleeping bags. Scott’s diary and letters were recovered and sent back to England, where they caused an enormous wave of public grief.

Why Amundsen Won and Scott Lost

For decades, people debated what went wrong. Was it bad luck? Bad planning? Or bad decisions? Modern historians and polar experts have studied both expeditions in great detail, and the answer is now quite clear. Amundsen won because he prepared better. He used dogs, which were faster and more efficient than man-hauling. He placed more depots with more food. He chose a shorter route. He started from a closer base camp. He had more experience with polar travel. And he kept his plans simple and focused on one goal: reach the Pole and come back alive.

Scott made several critical mistakes. He relied on ponies and motor sledges that failed. He chose man-hauling, which burns enormous amounts of energy and requires huge quantities of food. His depots were placed too far apart and did not contain enough fuel. He took five men to the Pole instead of four, which meant the **provisions** had to be shared more thinly. And he was partly unlucky — the weather on his return journey was unusually cold, even by Antarctic standards.

Legacy

Today, both Amundsen and Scott are remembered as heroes, but for very different reasons. Amundsen is admired for his brilliant planning, his respect for indigenous knowledge, and his incredible skill as an explorer. Scott is remembered for his courage, his loyalty to his men, and the heartbreaking dignity of his final days. Captain Oates’s last words — “I am just going outside and may be some time” — have become one of the most famous sentences in the English language, a symbol of quiet bravery and selfless **sacrifice**.

The race to the South Pole teaches us that preparation and knowledge are more important than bravery alone. Courage without planning can lead to disaster. But it also teaches us something about the human spirit. Even when everything went wrong, Scott and his men never gave up. They kept walking, kept writing, and kept hoping — right to the very end. Their story, more than a century later, still has the power to move us deeply.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
expedition	a long, organised journey with a specific purpose, especially to explore unknown places
rival	a person or team competing against another for the same goal
glacier	a huge, slow-moving mass of ice formed from compressed snow
provisions	supplies of food and other necessary items for a journey
blizzard	a severe snowstorm with strong winds and very low visibility
frostbite	injury to body parts caused by extreme cold, especially fingers, toes, and nose
endurance	the ability to keep going through pain, difficulty, or exhaustion over a long time
terrain	the physical features and surface of an area of land
depot	a storage place where supplies are kept along a route for later use
sledge	a vehicle on runners used to travel over snow, often pulled by dogs or people
navigate	to find the correct direction and route to a destination
morale	the level of confidence, enthusiasm, and discipline in a group
sacrifice	giving up something valuable, sometimes even one's life, for a cause or for others
harsh	extremely severe, difficult, or unpleasant, especially weather or conditions
triumph	a great victory or achievement, especially after difficulty

Comprehension Quiz

1. Why did Amundsen secretly change his destination from the North Pole to the South Pole?

- A) He was afraid of polar bears in the Arctic
- B) The British government asked him to go south instead
- C) He learned that Peary had already claimed the North Pole
- D) His ship was not strong enough for Arctic ice

2. What was the key difference between Amundsen's and Scott's choice of transport?

- A) Amundsen used dogs while Scott relied mainly on ponies and man-hauling
- B) Scott used aeroplanes while Amundsen used horses
- C) Amundsen used motor vehicles while Scott walked
- D) Both teams used exactly the same methods

3. When did Amundsen's team reach the South Pole?

- A) 17 January 1912
- B) 14 December 1911
- C) 1 November 1911
- D) 29 March 1912

4. What did Scott's team find when they finally arrived at the South Pole?

- A) Nothing — the pole was unmarked
- B) An American flag planted by another expedition
- C) A Norwegian flag and a tent left by Amundsen
- D) A message saying Amundsen had turned back

5. How did Captain Oates die?

- A) He fell into a crevasse on a glacier
- B) He was attacked by a wild animal
- C) He walked out of the tent into a blizzard, sacrificing himself for his teammates
- D) He drowned when the ice broke beneath him

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	C	1. Why did Amundsen secretly change his destination from the North Pole to the South Pole?
2	A	2. What was the key difference between Amundsen's and Scott's choice of transport?
3	B	3. When did Amundsen's team reach the South Pole?
4	C	4. What did Scott's team find when they finally arrived at the South Pole?
5	C	5. How did Captain Oates die?