

Deceptions

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS



AT THIS
VERY
MOMENT
SPACE
SHIPS

FROM THE
BEYOND
MAY BE
ON THEIR
WAY TO
DESTROY
OUR
PLANET!

On October 30, 1938, radio

listeners in New York and New Jersey tuned in to some lively dance music coming from the Park Plaza Hotel. But a little after 8:00 p.m., the music suddenly stopped. An announcer broke in with an urgent news bulletin: a meteor had just crashed near Grovers Mill, New Jersey. The station then returned to its dance music.

² A few moments later, the announcer interrupted the show again. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed a message that came in from Grovers Mill by telephone. Just a moment...." He paused, then delivered the chilling news. "At least 40 people, including six state troopers, lie dead in a field east of the village of Grovers Mill, their bodies burned and distorted beyond all recognition."

³ The announcer went on to say the flaming object that had crashed in Grovers Mill wasn't a meteor at all. It seemed to be some kind of mysterious metal cylinder. The radio station then switched to a reporter at the scene to describe what was happening: "Good heavens, something's wriggling out of the shadow like a grey snake," the reporter

A poster from the film version of The War of the Worlds

stammered. "Now it's another one and another. They look like tentacles to me. There, I can see the thing's body. It's large as a bear and it glistens like black leather. But that face...it's indescribable."

4 What listeners were hearing was a CBS *Mercury Theatre on the Air* radio play called *The War of the Worlds*. The drama was based on an 1898 book by H. G. Wells with the same title. A 23-year-old theatrical star named Orson Welles directed and starred in the radio show. He thought that on this night before Halloween, a scary show would help spice up people's holiday. And indeed, the show was great entertainment for all those who had tuned in from the beginning. They knew it was make-believe because they had been told it was. As the program started, a standard announcement told listeners that they were about to hear a radio play. Unfortunately, on this evening many listeners tuned in late.

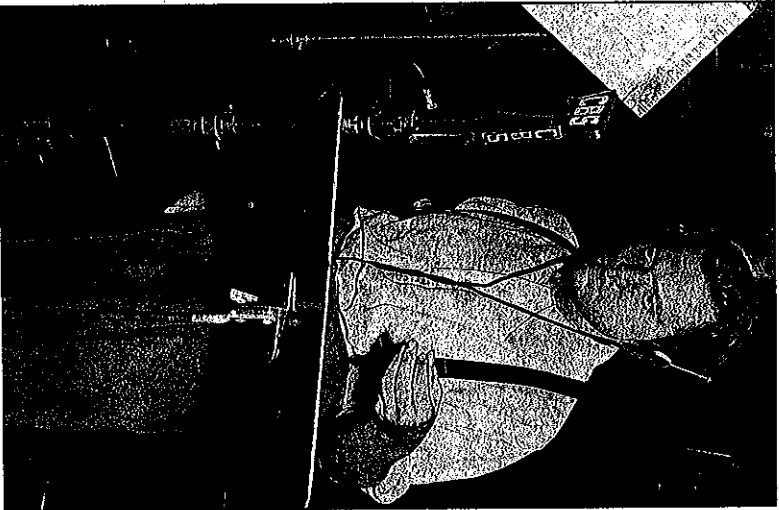
5 Hearing the authentic-sounding "news bulletins," many late listeners assumed the information was true. And as they listened in sheer horror, things in New Jersey got worse, much worse. The slimy creatures oozing out of the shadows were Martians, and they were using a strange and deadly smoke to destroy everything in their path.

6 The radio announcer described the scene as the invaders began to wipe out New York City. "Smoke comes out...black smoke, drifting over the city. People in the streets see it now. They're running towards the East River...thousands of them, dropping like rats. People trying to run away from it, but it's no use. They're falling like flies. Now the smoke's crossing Sixth Avenue...Fifth Avenue...one hundred yards away...it's fifty feet..."

7 Then there was silence, only silence. After a few moments, listeners heard the desperate voice of a ham radio operator searching the airwaves for signs of life. Said the voice, "Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone?"

8 By this point in the broadcast, thousands of panic-stricken people had left their radios and were running through the streets shouting, "The world is coming to an end! The world is coming to an end! Prepare to die!" Terrorized listeners in Newark, New Jersey, put wet towels over their faces to protect themselves from the poisonous smoke that they believed was heading their way. One hospital treated 15 people for shock and hysteria. Thousands of other people tried to flee the city in their cars, causing huge traffic jams. Adding to the chaos were unconfirmed reports that people were dying in the panic.

9 Even before the broadcast was over, CBS was flooded with calls from people wanting to know if the program was real. Others called the police and newspapers, asking what they could do to protect themselves. The *New York Times* alone received 875 calls.



Orson Welles during the radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, 1938

¹⁰ Orson Welles could tell that there was trouble brewing. He heard about the frenzied calls flooding the switchboard at CBS. So at the end of the broadcast, he attempted to put listeners at ease. "This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character to assure you that *The War of the Worlds* has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be. The Mercury Theatre's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying 'Boo!'"

¹¹ But Welles's words did no good. The people still listening already knew that it was just a scary story. Those who thought it was real didn't stick around long enough to hear the end of the program. They were running wild through the streets.

¹² By the next morning, everyone knew the truth. Newspaper headlines on October 31 caught the flavor of the hysteria. The *New York Daily News*, for example, wrote, "FAKE RADIO 'WAR' STIRS TERROR THROUGH U.S.," while the *New York Times* headlined, "RADIO LISTENERS IN PANIC, TAKING WAR DRAMA AS FACT."

¹³ Many people who had been deceived by the program directed their outrage at CBS and especially at Orson Welles. They had been made to look like fools and they

didn't like it. A few even brought lawsuits against CBS, although no one won any damage claims. Despite the widespread panic created by *The War of the Worlds*, no one had died. No one had even been seriously injured.

¹⁴ Still, the power of Welles's program could not be denied. The CBS broadcast of the original *The War of the Worlds* has been preserved. And it continues to make for spooky listening on a Halloween night. John Houseman, who worked with Welles on that 1938 program, later said, "To this day, it is impossible to sit in a room and hear the... broadcast, without feeling in the back of your neck some light draft left over from the great wind of terror that swept the nation." 🐼

If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words per Minute table on page 195 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 96.

Reading Time Lesson 21

Minutes

Seconds

A Finding the Main Idea

One statement below expresses the main idea of the article. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other statement explains only part of the article; it is too narrow. Label the statements using the following key:

M—Main Idea B—Too Broad N—Too Narrow

1. Public reaction to Orson Welles's radio play, *The War of the Worlds*, proves the power of the media to control people's emotions.
2. The panic caused by a 1938 radio play was so great that thousands of people tried to flee New York, causing huge traffic jams.
3. In 1938, when Orson Welles broadcast a terrifying radio play about a Martian invasion, people in New York and New Jersey panicked.

_____ Score 15 points for a correct M answer.

_____ Score 5 points for each correct B or N answer.

_____ Total Score: Finding the Main Idea

B Recalling Facts

How well do you remember the facts in the article? Put an X in the box next to the answer that correctly completes each statement about the article.

1. The first "news report" from Grover's Mill announced that a
 - a. meteor had fallen.
 - b. spaceship had landed.
 - c. war had begun.
2. Orson Welles aired his radio play for the first time on
 - a. July 4th.
 - b. Christmas Eve.
 - c. the night before Halloween.
3. Announcers described the Martian invaders' efforts to wipe out
 - a. Boston, Massachusetts.
 - b. New York City.
 - c. Newark, New Jersey.
4. Listeners wrapped towels around their faces to protect themselves against
 - a. the light the spaceship was emitting.
 - b. poisonous smoke.
 - c. a nuclear blast.
5. Orson Welles wrote and performed the play in order to
 - a. entertain his listeners.
 - b. panic his listeners.
 - c. anger his listeners.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

_____ Total Score: Recalling Facts

C Making Inferences

When you combine your own experience and information from a text to draw a conclusion that is not directly stated in that text, you are making an inference. Below are five statements that may or may not be inferences based on information in the article. Label the statements using the following key:

C—Correct Inference F—Faulty Inference

- _____ 1. The *Mercury Theatre on the Air* was a popular program that drew thousands of listeners each week.
- _____ 2. When people are confused and frightened, they often call the newspaper for information.
- _____ 3. In 1938, most people in the New York–New Jersey region were familiar with H.G. Wells's book *The War of the Worlds*.
- _____ 4. If you want to be sure that radio listeners hear your message, you should announce it at the beginning of the program.
- _____ 5. Almost everyone demands proof before he or she is willing to believe an unlikely story.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

_____ **Total Score: Making Inferences**

D Using Words Precisely

Each numbered sentence below contains an underlined word or phrase from the article. Following the sentence are three definitions. One definition is closest to the meaning of the underlined word. One definition is opposite or nearly opposite. Label those two definitions using the following key. Do not label the remaining definition.

C—Closest O—Opposite or Nearly Opposite

1. An announcer broke in with an urgent news bulletin: a meteor had just crashed near Grovers Mill, New Jersey.
 - _____ a. calling for immediate attention
 - _____ b. late-breaking
 - _____ c. possibly interesting
2. "At least 40 people...lie dead...their bodies burned and distorted beyond all recognition."
 - _____ a. returned to original shape
 - _____ b. twisted out of normal condition
 - _____ c. flattened
3. "But that face...it's indescribable."
 - _____ a. easy to explain in words
 - _____ b. horrible
 - _____ c. not able to be described
4. One hospital treated 15 people for shock and hysteria.
 - _____ a. high blood pressure
 - _____ b. overwhelming fear and panic
 - _____ c. peacefulness

5. He heard about the frenzied calls flooding the switchboard at CBS.

- _____ a. showing wild emotions
 _____ b. calm and controlled
 _____ c. numerous

_____ Score 3 points for each correct C answer.

_____ Score 2 points for each correct O answer.

_____ Total Score: Using Words Precisely

Enter the four total scores in the spaces below, and add them together to find your Reading Comprehension Score. Then record your score on the graph on page 197.

Score	Question Type	Lesson 21
_____	Finding the Main Idea	
_____	Recalling Facts	
_____	Making Inferences	
_____	Using Words Precisely	
_____	Reading Comprehension Score	

Author's Approach

Put an X in the box next to the correct answer.

- What is the author's purpose in writing "The War of the Worlds"?

a. To persuade entertainers never to broadcast frightening stories on the radio

b. To emphasize the similarities between New York and New Jersey

c. To inform the reader about a fascinating, true incident
- Which of the following statements from the article best describes the reaction of listeners who tuned in from the beginning of the broadcast?

a. "They had been made to look like fools and they didn't like it."

b. "By this point in the broadcast, thousand of panic-stricken people had left their radios and were running through the streets...."

c. "They knew it was make-believe because they had been told it was."
- From the statements below, choose those that you believe the author would agree with.

a. Orson Welles was surprised by the public's reaction to his play.

b. People are relatively easy to frighten.

c. People should be ready with emergency plans in case of a real attack from Mars.
- What does the author imply by saying "The New York Times alone received 875 calls"?

a. Other newspapers and organizations probably got calls, too.

b. The New York Times is the only newspaper that listeners contacted.

c. The New York Times received more calls than anyone else.

_____ Number of correct answers

Record your personal assessment of your work on the Critical Thinking Chart on page 198.