

## Blind to Failure

Magazine Article by Karl Taro Greenfeld

# When is **STRENGTH** more than muscle?



Virginia Standards  
of Learning

**9.3a** Use structural analysis of roots, affixes, synonyms, antonyms, and cognates to understand complex words. **9.5d** Identify characteristics of expository, technical, and persuasive texts. **9.5f** Evaluate clarity and accuracy of information. **9.5h** Draw conclusions and make inferences on explicit and implied information using textual support as evidence.

It's easy to think of people who are strong in body. Many famous athletes have tremendous physical strength. But some people are extremely strong in mind and spirit as well. In "Blind to Failure," you'll meet one such individual, Erik Weihenmayer, who was the first blind mountaineer to reach the top of Mount Everest. In scaling the world's highest peak, Weihenmayer became an inspiring portrait of bravery and determination.

**QUICKWRITE** Think of different types of strength—physical, emotional, spiritual, and so forth. Think of people who exemplify each type of strength and put them in categories in a chart like the one shown. Do any of the people belong in more than one category?

Physical Strength	Emotional Strength	Spiritual Strength
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•



## ● TEXT ANALYSIS: CHARACTER STUDY

Some nonfiction writers provide insight into the personalities of individuals by writing **character studies**. A character study usually includes factual information about its subject’s appearance, speech, and actions, but the details the writer chooses to include can also suggest his or her personal ideas about the subject. As you read “Blind to Failure,” note how the author unfolds his analysis about Erik Weihenmayer:

- actions that have made him newsworthy or famous and his own comments about those actions
- descriptions of his physical traits and facial expressions
- examples of others’ reactions to his accomplishments

## ● READING SKILL: INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS

Magazine articles like “Blind to Failure” often include **graphic aids**—charts, graphs, and maps—that present important information in visual form. This article features a **diagram**, a drawing in which lines, symbols, and words are used to help the reader picture a process, an event, or the way something works. As you read “Blind to Failure,” turn back and forth between the text and the diagram to better understand the difficulties of the climb and to follow the climbers’ progress. Use a chart to record the information you learn from the diagram.

Camp or Location	Elevation	Related Events/Details of Climb	Other Information
Base Camp	17,600 feet	Below Khumbu Icefall	

**Review:** Connect, Draw Conclusions

## ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Which of these words do you already know? In your *Reader/Writer Notebook*, write a sentence for each of the words. Then check your understanding after you’ve read the selection.

<b>WORD LIST</b>	acclimatization	crevasse	insurmountable
	aplomb	demeanor	paramount
	arduous	inevitability	transcend
	banal		

## Karl Taro Greenfeld

born 1965

### Striking Stories

Karl Taro Greenfeld was born in Kobe, Japan, and grew up in Los Angeles, California. As a journalist, he has made his home in Hong Kong, China, investigating everything from entertainment fads to economic disasters. In June of 2001, Greenfeld set out for Nepal to interview members of the Everest expedition that included Erik Weihenmayer, the climber you will read about.

### BACKGROUND TO THE ARTICLE

#### Reaching for the Peak

At 29,035 feet, Mount Everest is the highest peak on earth. To reach the summit, mountaineers establish a series of camps at intervals up the mountain and then make numerous trips between them, carrying supplies from the base camp to the highest camp. When the highest camp is well stocked and the weather is favorable, the climbers make a push for the summit.

#### The Perils of Everest

Climbing Mount Everest is incredibly dangerous, even for the most experienced climbers. Extreme cold makes frostbite common. Sunshine reflected off the snow can cause temporary blindness and fatal falls. Climbers often suffer dizziness and confusion due to lack of oxygen. The region above 26,000 feet is called the Death Zone. At that altitude, blood thickens, the heart speeds up, and the brain can swell, with serious injury or death a possible result. Ninety percent of climbers attempting to scale Mount Everest fail to reach the summit.

Author Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML9-269



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

# Blind to Failure

KARL TARO GREENFELD

When he saw Erik Weihenmayer arrive that afternoon, Pasquale Scaturro<sup>1</sup> began to have misgivings about the expedition he was leading. Here they were on the first floor of Mount Everest, and Erik—the reason for the whole trip—was stumbling into Camp 1 bloody, sick, and dehydrated. “He was literally green,” says fellow climber and teammate Michael O’Donnell. “He looked like George Foreman<sup>2</sup> had beaten him for two hours.” The beating had actually been administered by Erik’s climbing partner, Luis Benitez.<sup>3</sup> Erik had slipped into a **crevasse**, and as Benitez reached down to catch him, his climbing pole raked Erik across the nose and chin. Wounds heal slowly at that altitude  
10 because of the thin air.

As Erik passed out in his tent, the rest of the team gathered in a worried huddle. “I was thinking maybe this is not a good idea,” says Scaturro. “Two years of planning, a documentary movie, and this blind guy barely makes it to Camp 1?”

This blind guy. Erik Weihenmayer, thirty-three, wasn’t just another yuppie trekker who’d lost a few rounds to the mountain. Blind since he was thirteen, the victim of a rare hereditary disease of the retina, he began attacking mountains in his early twenties. **A**

20 But he had been having the same doubts as the rest of the team. On that arduous climb to camp through the Khumbu Icefall,<sup>4</sup> Erik wondered for the first time if his attempt to become the first sightless person to summit Mount Everest was a colossal mistake, an act of Daedalian hubris<sup>5</sup> for which he would be punished. There are so many ways to die on that mountain, spanning

## Analyze Visuals ▶

Examine the photograph of Weihenmayer. Identify three character **traits** you would attribute to him solely on the basis of this picture.

**crevasse** (krĭ-vās´) *n.* a deep crack or split in a glacier

## **A** CHARACTER STUDY

Think about the endeavor Weihenmayer undertook and his fellow climbers’ descriptions of the expedition to this point. What **inferences** can you make about someone who would attempt such a feat?

1. **Erik Weihenmayer** (wĭ’ən-mā’ər) . . . **Pasquale Scaturro** (päs-kwä’lä skä-tōō’rō).

2. **George Foreman**: a former heavyweight boxing champion.

3. **Luis Benitez** (lōō-ēs’ bĕ-nĕ’tĕs).

4. **Khumbu** (kōōm’bōō) **Icefall**: a stretch of glacier beginning at about 18,000 feet and extending to the area of Camp 1 at 20,000 feet.

5. **Daedalian hubris** (dĭ-dā’lē-ən hyōō’brĭs): excessive pride like that of Daedalus, a master craftsman in Greek mythology. When Daedalus fashioned wings for himself and his son from feathers and wax, his son flew too near the sun, the wax in his wings melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned.



the spectacular (fall through an ice shelf into a crevasse, get waylaid by an avalanche, develop cerebral edema<sup>6</sup> from lack of oxygen and have your brain literally swell out of your skull) and the **banal** (become disoriented because of oxygen deprivation and decide you'll take a little nap, right here, in the snow, which becomes a forever nap).

**banal** (bə-nāl') *adj.*  
commonplace; trite

Erik, as he stumbled through the icefall, was so far out of his comfort zone that he began to speculate on which of those fates might await him. For a moment he flashed on all those clichés about what blind people are supposed to do—become piano tuners or pencil salesmen—and thought maybe they were stereotypes for good reason. Blind people certainly shouldn't be out here, wandering through an ever changing ice field, measuring the distance over a 1,000-foot-deep crevasse with climbing poles and then leaping, literally, over and into the unknown.

The blind thrive on patterns: stairs are all the same height, city blocks roughly the same length, curbs approximately the same depth. They learn to identify the patterns in their environment much more than the sighted population do, and to rely on them to plot their way through the world.

But in the Khumbu Icefall, the trail through the Himalayan glacier is patternless, a diabolically cruel obstacle course for a blind person. It changes every year as the river of ice shifts, but it's always made up of treacherously crumbly stretches of ice, ladders roped together over wide crevasses, slightly narrower crevasses that must be jumped, huge seracs,<sup>7</sup> avalanches, and—most frustrating for a blind person, who naturally seeks to identify patterns in his terrain—a totally random icescape.

In the icefall there is no system, no repetition, no rhyme or reason to the lay of the frozen land. On the other hand, “it is so specific in terms of where you can step,” Erik recalls. “Sometimes you're walking along and then boom, a crevasse is right there, and three more steps and another one, and then a snow bridge. And vertical up, then a ladder and then a jumbly section.” It took Erik thirteen hours to make it from Base Camp through the icefall to Camp 1, at 20,000 feet. Scaturro had allotted seven.

A typical assault on Everest requires each climber to do as many as ten traverses through the icefall, both for **acclimatization** purposes and to help carry the immense amount of equipment required for an ascent. After Erik's accident, the rest of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) team discussed letting him stay up in Camp 1, equipped with videotapes and food, while the rest of the team and the Sherpas<sup>8</sup> did his carries for him. No way, said Erik. No way was he going to do this climb without being a fully integrated and useful member of the team. “I wasn't going to be carried to the top and spiked like a football,” he says. The next day he forced himself to head back down through the icefall. He would eventually make ten passes through the Khumbu, cutting his time to five hours. **B**

**acclimatization**  
(ə-klī'mə-tī-zā'shən)  
*n.* the act of getting accustomed to a new climate or environment

**B CHARACTER STUDY**

Reread lines 55–64. What do you learn about Weihenmayer from his reaction to his teammates' idea?

6. **cerebral edema** (sēr'ə-brəl ȳ-dē'mə).

7. **seracs** (sə-rāks'): large, pointed masses of ice isolated by intersecting crevasses.

8. **Sherpas**: a Himalayan people who live around the Nepal-Tibet border and often assist climbers of Everest.

## MOUNT EVEREST: THE ROUTE TO THE SUMMIT C



### C INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS

What information about Camp 1 do you learn from this **diagram**? Record the information in your chart.

Sometimes, when Erik is giving a motivational speech for one of his corporate clients . . . a fat, balding, middle-aged middle manager will approach him and say, “Even I wouldn’t do that stuff.” Erik calls it the Even I Syndrome. And he has to resist an impulse to say, “You’re fat, out of shape, and you smoke. Why would you even think of doing any of this stuff? Just because you can see?” Erik is not impatient or smug, but he tires of people assuming that sight will trump all other attributes and senses combined.

By all accounts, Erik is gifted with strong lungs, a refined sense of balance, a disproportionately powerful upper body, rubbery legs, and flexible ankles. His conditioning is exemplary and his heart rate low. He is stockier than most mountaineers, who tend toward lanky, long muscles. But he possesses an

abundance of the one indispensable characteristic of a great mountaineer: mental toughness, the ability to withstand tremendous amounts of cold, discomfort, physical pain, boredom, bad food, insomnia, and tedious conversation when you're snowed into a pup tent for a week on a three-foot-wide ice shelf at 20,000 feet. (That happened to Erik on Alaska's Denali.<sup>9</sup>) On Everest, toughness is perhaps the most important trait a climber can have. "Erik is mentally one of the strongest guys you will ever meet," says fellow climber Chris Morris.

Everybody gets sick on Everest. It's called the Khumbu Krud, brought on by a combination of high altitude, dirty food, fetid water, intestinal parasites, and an utterly alien ecosystem. On Erik's team, at any given moment, half the climbers were running fevers, the others were nauseated, and they all suffered from one form or another of dysentery, an awkward ailment when there's a driving snowstorm and it's thirty below outside the tent. . . .

Scaling Everest requires the enthusiasm and boosterism of a physical-education teacher combined with the survival instinct of a Green Beret.<sup>10</sup> You have to want that summit. And if you whine . . . your teammates might discard you before you get there. Erik, beneath his beard and quiet **demeanor**, was both booster and killer. "He was the heart and soul of our team," says Eric Alexander. "The guy's spirit won't let you quit." **D**

**E**rik walks through these Kathmandu<sup>11</sup> streets with remarkable ease, his red-tipped cane searching out ahead of him, measuring distance, pitch, and angle. You give him little hints as he goes—"There's a doorway. Okay, now a right—no, left, sorry"—and he follows, his stride confident but easily arrested when he bumps into an old lady selling shawls, and then into the wheel of a scooter. The physical confidence that he projects has to do with having an athlete's awareness of how his body moves through space. Plenty of sighted people walk through life with less poise and grace than Erik, unsure of their steps, second-guessing every move. And certainly most of the blind don't maneuver with Erik's **aplomb**. As he takes a seat in a crowded restaurant, ordering pizza, spaghetti, ice cream . . . —you work up an appetite climbing Everest—he smiles and nods as other diners ask, "Hey, aren't you the blind guy . . . ?"

With his Germanic, sculpted features and light brown hair, Erik looks a bit like a shaggy, youthful Kirk Douglas. He is a celebrity now: strangers ask for his autograph, reporters call constantly, restaurants give him free meals. But is his celebrity the circus-freak variety—of a type with the Dogboy and the two-headed snake?

At its worst, Erik fears, it is. Casual observers don't understand what an achievement his Everest climb was, or they assume that if a blind guy can do it, anyone can. And indeed, improved gear has made Everest, at least in some

**demeanor** (dĭ-mē'nər)  
*n.* a way of behaving;  
manner

#### **D** CHARACTER STUDY

Think about how your perception of Weihenmayer would be different if his teammates' descriptions of him were omitted. Why did the writer include these personal opinions in the article?

**aplomb** (ə-plŏm') *n.* poise;  
self-assurance

9. **Denali** (də-nā'lē): the highest peak in North America, also known as Mount McKinley.

10. **Green Beret**: a member of the U.S. Army Special Forces.

11. **Kathmandu** (kăt'măn-dōō'): the capital of Nepal.

people's minds, a bit smaller. In the climbing season there's a conga line<sup>12</sup> to the top, or so it seems, and the trail is a junkyard of discarded oxygen tanks and other debris. But Everest eats the unready and the unlucky. Almost 90 percent of Everest climbers fail to reach the summit. Many—at least 165 since  
120 1953—never come home at all, their bodies lying uncollected where they fell. Four died in May. “People think because I’m blind, I don’t have as much to be afraid of, like if I can’t see a 2,000-foot drop-off I won’t be scared,” Erik says. “That’s insane. Look, death is death, if I can see or not.”

Everest expeditions break down into two types: those like Erik’s, which are sponsored and united by a common goal, and those like the one described by Jon Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*,<sup>13</sup> in which gangs of climbers pay \$65,000 each for the opportunity to stand on top of the world. But as conditions become more **arduous**, these commercial teams start squabbling, blaming weaker members for slowing them down and sometimes even refusing to help  
130 teammates in distress.

Many pros wouldn’t go near Erik’s team, fearing they might have to haul the blind guy down. “Everyone was saying Erik was gonna have an epic,” says Charley Mace, a member of the film crew. (“Epic” is Everest slang for disaster.) Another climber planned to stay close, boasting that he would “get the first picture of the dead blind guy.”

For Erik, who knew almost as soon as he could speak that he would lose his vision in his early teens, excelling as an athlete was the result of accepting his disability rather than denying it. Growing up with two brothers in Hong Kong and then Weston, Connecticut, he was always an athletic kid, a tough gamer  
140 who developed a bump-and-grind one-on-one basketball game that allowed him to work his way close to the hoop. He was, his father Ed says, “a pretty normal kid. While bike riding, he might have run into a few more parked cars than other kids, but we didn’t dwell on his going blind.”

His blindness was a medical **inevitability**, like a court date with a hanging judge.<sup>14</sup> “I saw blindness like this disease,” he explains. “Like AIDS or something that was going to consume me.” Think about that—being a kid, ten, eleven years old, and knowing that at some point in the near future your world is going to go dark. Certainly it builds character—that mental toughness his fellow climbers marvel at—but in a child, the natural psychological defense  
150 would be denial. **E**

When he lost his vision, Erik at first refused to use a cane or learn Braille, insisting he could somehow muddle on as normal. “I was so afraid I would seem like a freak,” he recalls. But after a few embarrassing stumbles—he couldn’t even find the school rest rooms anymore—he admitted he needed help. For Erik, the key was acceptance—not to fight his disability but to learn to work within it; not to **transcend** it but to understand fully what he was

**arduous** (är’jōō-əs) *adj.*  
requiring much effort;  
difficult

**inevitability**  
(īn-ĕv’ī-tə-bīl’ī-tē)  
*n.* something that is  
certain to happen

**E CONNECT**

Reread lines 136–150. Do you agree that denial would be the natural response to a situation like Weihenmayer’s? Explain.

**transcend** (trăn-sĕnd’)  
*v.* to pass beyond the  
limits of

12. **conga line:** The conga is a Latin American dance in which the dancers form a long, winding line.

13. **Into Thin Air:** a best-selling book about the 1996 climbing season at Mount Everest, during which eight climbers died.

14. **hanging judge:** a judge who always hands out very harsh sentences.



capable of achieving within it; not to pretend he had sight but to build systems that allowed him to excel without it. “It’s tragic—I know blind people who like to pass themselves off as being able to see,” Erik says.

160 “What’s the point of that?”

He would never play basketball or catch a football again. But then he discovered wrestling. “I realized I could take sighted people and slam them into the mat,” he says. Grappling was a sport where feel and touch mattered more than sight: if he could sense where his opponent had his weight or how to shift his own body to gain better leverage, he could excel using his natural upper-body strength. As a high school senior he went all the way to the National Junior Freestyle Wrestling Championship in Iowa.

Wrestling gave him the confidence to reenter the teenage social fray.

170 He began dating when he was seventeen; his first girlfriend was a sighted woman three years older than he. Erik jokes that he is not shy about using his blindness to pick up women. “They really go for the guide dog,” he explains. “You go into a bar, put the guide dog out there, and the girls just come up to you.” He and his friends devised a secret handshake to let Erik know if the girl he was talking to was attractive. “Just because you’re blind doesn’t make you any more selfless or deep or anything. You’re just like most guys, but you look for different things,” Erik says. . . . And the voice becomes **paramount**. “My wife has the most beautiful voice in the world,” Erik says. Married in 1997, he and his wife Ellie have a one-year-old daughter, Emma. **F**

180 Erik first went hiking with his father when he was thirteen, trying to tap his way into the wild with a white cane and quickly becoming frustrated stubbing his toes on rocks and roots and bumping into branches and trunks. But when he tried rock climbing, at sixteen while at a camp for the disabled in New Hampshire, he was hooked. Like wrestling, it was a sport in which being blind didn’t have to work against him. He took to it quickly, and through climbing gradually found his way to formal mountaineering.

190 Watching Erik scramble up a rock face is a little like watching a spider make its way up a wall. His hands are like antennae, gathering information as they flick outward, surveying the rock for cracks, grooves, bowls, nubbins, knobs, edges, and ledges, converting all of it into a road map etched into his mind. “It’s like instead of wrestling with a person, I am moving and working with a rock,” he explains. “It’s a beautiful process of solving a puzzle.” He is an accomplished rock climber, rated 5.10 (5.14 being the highest), and has led teams up sections of Yosemite’s notorious El Capitan.<sup>15</sup> On ice, where one wrong strike with an ice ax can bring down an avalanche, Erik has learned to listen to the ice as he pings it gently with his ax. If it clinks, he avoids it. If it makes a thunk like a spoon hitting butter, he knows it’s solid ice.

**paramount**  
(pär’ə-mount’) *adj.* of  
highest importance

**F CHARACTER STUDY**

Reread lines 168–178, and think about Weihenmayer’s **traits**. How do his own words affect your opinion of him?

15. **Yosemite’s** (yō-sēm’ī-tēz) **notorious El Capitan**: a 3,604-foot granite peak with a sheer cliff face, in Yosemite National Park, California.

Despite being an accomplished mountaineer—summitting Denali, Kilimanjaro in Africa, and Aconcagua<sup>16</sup> in Argentina, among other peaks, and, in the words of his friends, “running up 14ers” (14,000-foot peaks)—Erik viewed Everest as

200 **insurmountable** until he ran into Scaturro at a sportswear trade show in Salt Lake City, Utah. Scaturro, who had already summited Everest, had heard of the blind climber, and when they met the two struck an easy rapport. A geophysicist who often put together energy-company expeditions to remote areas in search of petroleum, Scaturro began wondering if he could put together a team that could help Erik get to the summit of Everest.

“Dude,” Scaturro asked, “have you ever climbed Everest?”

“No.”

“Dude, you wanna?”

210 **C**limbing with Erik isn’t that different from climbing with a sighted mountaineer. You wear a bell on your pack, and he follows the sound, scuttling along using his custom-made climbing poles to feel his way along the trail. His climbing partners shout out helpful descriptions: “Death fall two feet to your right!” “Emergency helicopter-evacuation pad to your left!” He is fast, often running up the back of less experienced climbers. His partners all have scars from being jabbed by Erik’s climbing poles when they slowed down.

For the Everest climb, Scaturro and Erik assembled a team that combined veteran Everest climbers and trusted friends of Erik’s. Scaturro wrote up a Braille proposal for the Everest attempt and submitted it to Marc Maurer, president of

220 the National Federation of the Blind. Maurer immediately pledged \$250,000 to sponsor the climb. . . . For Erik, who already had numerous gear and clothing sponsors, this was the greatest challenge of his life. If he failed, he would be letting down not just himself but all the blind, confirming that certain activities remained the preserve of the sighted.

He argued to anyone who would listen that he was an experienced mountaineer and that if he failed, it would be because of his heart or lungs or brain rather than his eyes. He wasn’t afraid of physical danger—he had made dozens

230 of skydives and scaled some of the most dangerous cliff faces in the world—but he was frightened of how the world would perceive him. “But I knew that if I went and failed, that would feel better than if I didn’t go at all,” Erik says. “It could be like [the wrestling] Junior Nationals all over again. I went out to Iowa, and I got killed. But I needed to go to understand what my limits were.”

**insurmountable**  
(ɪnˈsər-mounˈtə-bəl) *adj.*  
impossible to overcome

### ▼ Analyze Visuals

How does this photograph, which shows Weihenmayer and his teammates clambering over one of Everest’s many crevasses, contribute to your understanding of Weihenmayer?



16. **Kilimanjaro** (kɪlˈə-mən-järˈo) . . . **Aconcagua** (äkˈən-käˈgwə): the highest peaks in Africa and South America, respectively.

Oxygen deprivation does strange things to the human body. Heart rates go haywire, brain function decreases, blood thickens, intestines shut down. Bad ideas inexplicably pop into your head, especially above 25,000 feet, where, as Krakauer famously wrote in *Into Thin Air*, climbers have the “mind of a reptile.” **G**

At that altitude, Erik could rely on no one but himself. His teammates would have to guide him, to keep ringing the bell and making sure Erik stayed on the trail, but they would be primarily concerned about their own survival in some of the worst conditions on earth. Ironically, Erik had some advantages as they closed in on the peak. For one thing, at that altitude all the climbers wore goggles and oxygen masks, restricting their vision so severely that they could not see their own feet—a condition Erik was used to. Also, the final push for the summit began in the early evening, so most of the climb was in pitch darkness; the only illumination was from miner’s lamps.

When Erik and the team began the final ascent from Camp 4—the camp he describes as Dante’s Inferno with ice and wind<sup>17</sup>—they had been on the mountain for two months, climbing up and down and then up from Base Camp to Camps 1, 2, and 3, getting used to the altitude and socking away enough equipment—especially oxygen canisters—to make a summit push. They had tried for the summit once but had turned back because of weather. At 29,000 feet, the Everest peak is in the jet stream, which means that winds can exceed one hundred miles per hour and that what looks from sea level like a cottony wisp of cloud is actually a killer storm at the summit. Bad weather played a fatal role in the 1996 climbing season documented in *Into Thin Air*.

On May 24, with only seven days left in the climbing season, most of the NFB expedition members knew this was their last shot at the peak. That’s why when Erik and Chris Morris reached the Balcony,<sup>18</sup> the beginning of the Southeast Ridge, at 27,500 feet, after a hard slog up the South Face,<sup>19</sup> they were terribly disappointed when the sky lit up with lightning, driving snow, and fierce winds. “We thought we were done,” Erik says. “We would have been spanked if we made a push in those conditions.” A few teammates gambled and went for it, and Jeff Evans and Brad Bull heroically pulled out fixed guidelines that had been frozen in the ice. By the time Base Camp radioed that the storm was passing, Erik and the entire team were coated in two inches of snow. Inspired by the possibility of a break in the weather, the team pushed on up the exposed Southeast Ridge, an additional 1,200 vertical feet to the South Summit.<sup>20</sup> At that point the climbers looked like astronauts walking on some kind of Arctic moon. They moved slowly because of fatigue from their huge, puffy down suits, backpacks with oxygen canisters and regulators, and goggles.

**G INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS**

Turn back to the **diagram** on page 273. In which camp or camps would the climbers have been subject to oxygen deprivation if they had run out of supplemental oxygen?

**H INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS**

As you read about the group’s push for the summit, use the **diagram** on page 273 to follow the climbers’ progress after they left Camp 4. How can you **infer** the locations of unlabeled features, such as the Balcony and the Southeast Ridge?

17. **Camp 4 . . . ice and wind:** Camp 4, at 26,000 feet, is compared to the hell described in the *Inferno*, the first part of Dante Alighieri’s long poem *The Divine Comedy*.

18. **Balcony:** a natural platform where climbers often stop to rest.

19. **South Face:** the whole side of Everest on which Erik’s group climbed to get to the summit.

20. **South Summit:** a peak several hundred feet below the true summit of Everest.



9.3a

### Language Coach

**Antonyms** An **antonym** is a word that means the opposite of another word. Reread lines 276–278. Which word in this sentence is an antonym for *horizontal*, which means “parallel to the horizon”?

With a 10,000-foot vertical fall into Tibet on one side and a 7,000-foot fall into Nepal on the other, the South Summit, at 28,750 feet, is where many climbers finally turn back. The 656-foot-long knife-edge ridge leading to the Hillary Step<sup>21</sup> consists of ice, snow, and fragmented shale, and the only way to  
280 cross it is to take baby steps and anchor your way with an ice ax. “You can feel the rock chip off,” says Erik. “And you can hear it falling down into the void.”

The weather was finally clearing as they reached the Hillary Step, the 39-foot rock face that is the last major obstacle before the true summit. Erik clambered up the cliff, belly-flopping over the top. “I celebrated with the dry heavens,” he jokes. And then it was forty-five minutes of walking up a sharply angled snow slope to the summit.

“Look around, dude,” Evans told the blind man when they were standing on top of the world. “Just take a second and look around.”

It could be called the most successful Everest expedition ever, and not just  
290 because of Erik’s participation. A record nineteen climbers from the NFB team summited, including the oldest man ever to climb Everest—sixty-four-year-old Sherman Bull—and the second father-and-son team ever to do so—Bull and his son Brad.

What Erik achieved is hard for a sighted person to comprehend. What do we compare it with? How do we relate to it? Do we put on a blindfold and go hiking? That’s silly, Erik maintains, because when a sighted person loses his vision, he is terrified and disoriented. And Erik is clearly neither of those things. Perhaps the point is really that there is no way to put what Erik has done in perspective because no one has ever done anything like it. It is a unique achievement, one  
300 that in the truest sense pushed the limits of what man is capable of. Maurer of the NFB compares Erik to Helen Keller. “Erik can be a contemporary symbol for blindness,” he explains. “Helen Keller lived one hundred years ago. She should not be our most potent symbol for blindness today.” 1

Erik, sitting in the Kathmandu international airport, waiting for the flight out of Nepal that will eventually return him to Golden, Colorado, is surrounded by his teammates and the expedition’s seventy-five pieces of luggage. Success has made the group jubilant. This airport lounge has become the mountaineering equivalent of a winning Super Bowl locker room. . . .

In between posing for photos and signing other passengers’ boarding passes,  
310 Erik talks about how eager he is to get back home. He says summiting Everest was great, probably the greatest experience of his life. But then he thinks about a moment a few months ago, before Everest, when he was walking down the street in Colorado with daughter Emma in a front pack. They were on their way to buy some banana bread for his wife, and Emma was pulling on his hand, her little fingers curled around his index finger. That was a summit, too, he says. There are summits everywhere. You just have to know where to look. ☺

21. **Hillary Step:** a spur named for Sir Edmund Hillary, who, with the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, was the first successful climber of Everest.

### 1 DRAW CONCLUSIONS

What value might Maurer’s idea have?

## Comprehension

- Recall** What was Erik Weihenmayer’s goal, and why did he take on that challenge?
- Recall** Did Weihenmayer reach his goal? Explain your response.
- Summarize** What were Weihenmayer’s advantages and disadvantages in comparison with the sighted members of his expedition?



Virginia Standards of Learning

**9.5d** Identify characteristics of expository, technical, and persuasive texts. **9.5f** Evaluate clarity and accuracy of information. **9.5h** Draw conclusions and make inferences on explicit and implied information using textual support as evidence.

## Text Analysis

- Analyze a Character Study** In this character study, the writer describes events—and develops and shares his own ideas—that reveal Weihenmayer’s outstanding traits. List three of those traits in a chart. For each, cite examples from the text.

<i>Outstanding Traits</i>	<i>Examples from Text</i>
1.	
2.	
3.	

- Draw Conclusions** Think about the **conflicts** that Weihenmayer faced in “Blind to Failure.” Which do you view as the main conflict—his internal struggle with his disability or his external struggle with the mountain? Support your conclusion with thorough evidence from the text.
- Analyze Cause and Effect** How might Weihenmayer’s presence have contributed to the great success of the expedition, with 19 climbers reaching the summit? Cite strong evidence from the selection.
- Evaluate Graphic Aids** Review the chart you made as you read. How did the **diagram** help you understand this article? What other kinds of information, if any, would it have been useful to include in the graphic aid?

## Text Criticism

- Different Perspectives** Helen Keller once proclaimed, “No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new doorway for the human spirit.” What might Keller say about Weihenmayer if she were alive today? Explain your answer.

### When is **STRENGTH** more than muscle?

How did Weihenmayer’s feat reveal both internal and external strength?

## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Identify the words in each pair as synonyms or antonyms.

1. acclimatization/adaptation
2. demeanor/appearance
3. inevitability/certainty
4. banal/unusual
5. paramount/insignificant
6. arduous/simple
7. transcend/exceed
8. insurmountable/impossible
9. aplomb/awkwardness
10. crevasse/summit

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• complex • device • evaluate • interact • perspective

Climbing Mount Everest is difficult and **complex**. Write a paragraph explaining how being blind made the climb even more complex for Erik Weihenmayer. Identify at least three conditions that make the climb more complex, and use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: SPECIALIZED VOCABULARY

Sports like mountaineering, as well as many occupations, have their own **specialized vocabularies**. A specialized vocabulary often includes words (like *crevasse*) that are used primarily within the particular field, as well as familiar words (like *face*) that are used with special meanings in the field. When familiar words have special meanings, it is often possible to figure out those meanings from the context. Otherwise, check a dictionary, looking for labels, such as *Mountaineering*, that may precede definitions giving special meanings of words.

**PRACTICE** Write the mountaineering term that matches each definition. If you need to, check a dictionary.

ascenders chimney crampons face saddle

1. devices attached to a rope to help one climb it
2. spiked iron plates on shoes to prevent slipping on ice
3. the sloping side of a mountain
4. a wide vertical crack into which the body of a climber can fit
5. a flat ridge connecting two higher elevations

#### WORD LIST

acclimatization  
aplomb  
arduous  
banal  
crevasse  
demeanor  
inevitability  
insurmountable  
paramount  
transcend



Virginia Standards  
of Learning

9.3f Extend general and specialized vocabulary through speaking, reading, and writing.

Interactive  
Vocabulary



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML9-281