Research Paper

The following is a rough draft of a research paper about the historical background of folk songs about John Henry. The draft contains errors in development and organization. Some of the questions refer to numbered sentences within the text. Read the paper and answer questions through 1–10.

The Steely Story of John Henry

(1) Children know the words “Once upon a time.” (2) To children, they promise an entertaining tale. (3) To folklorists such as Jane Yolen, they offer a glimpse into history and the oral tradition: “Folktales . . . carry with them the thumbprints of history” (Yolen 5). (4) The oral tradition is still alive today in folk songs. (5) Some stories change as they are sung over and over. (6) One story kept alive in folk songs is the tale of John Henry. (7) This story of one man’s battle against a machine is based in fact, but several versions of the song have developed over time. (8) Singers have kept to the facts.

(9) The basic story of John Henry remains the same in all versions of the song. (10) John Henry is always a large, powerful man. (11) He is admired for his speed and his skill with a heavy hammer. (12) John Henry agrees to compete with a steam-powered drill. (13) When he participates in the fierce competition, he beats the machine and then dies (“John Henry” 543). (14) All versions of the story stress John Henry’s strength, courage, and determination. (15) In all versions, he is a hero.

(16) The songs about John Henry are based in fact. (17) Experts agree that a man named John Henry was born into slavery in Virginia or North Carolina around 1850. (18) After the Civil War, the freed John Henry was hired by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad as a steel driver, a worker who made holes in rock by using a heavy hammer to drive steel drills or spikes into the rock. (19) The railroad was to run through Big Bend Mountain in West Virginia and was such a huge project that it took a thousand men three years to complete. (20) While driving steel through Big Bend, John Henry was challenged by the owner of a pneumatic drill, a new invention at that time. (21) Some believe that John Henry died of exhaustion or from a stroke after the contest (Hempel). (22) By the time the songs were first recorded in 1909, several versions had developed. (23) Each has a different focus that reveals something about the people who enjoyed it. (24) In one, Henry’s heroism comes
from being an African American who dared to test his strength against a machine run by a white man (Hempel).

(25) Zora Neale Hurston, a collector of African American folktales, disagrees, however, about the song’s ties to the African American tradition. (26) She claims that the song was primarily a work song with little connection to African American tradition. (27) In fact, the version Hurston includes in her book Mules and Men does not even mention that John Henry was African American or that the steam drill operator was white.

(28) The story of John Henry appears to have its deepest ties to the tradition of workers. (29) The versions of the song within this tradition emphasize John Henry’s feat as a man who beats a machine that threatened the jobs of railroad workers. (30) The song was sung by workers of all types who prided the story of the determined man and the clear rhythms of the song. (31) “[T]he song also reflects many faces, many lives. (32) Some consider it a protest anthem, an attempt by the laborers to denounce—without facing John Henry—The Steel Driving Man punishment or dismissal by their superiors—the wretched conditions under which John Henry worked” (Hempel). (33) Workers felt the song spoke for them.

(34) Clearly all the versions of the story of John Henry have their place in U.S. history and culture. (35) Today, the story is often taught in literature classes and appears quaint to young readers who will never have to pick up a steel-driving hammer. (36) However, for more than one hundred years, different versions of the story of John Henry have inspired workers from many backgrounds. (37) Perhaps today’s students should take another look at John Henry and be inspired, too.

Works Cited


1. How should sentence 1 be written to create interest?
   A) Anyone who has been a child knows the thrill of the words “Once upon a time.”
   B) “Once upon a time” are words any child knows.
   C) All children are familiar with folktales and the opening “Once upon a time.”
   D) Folktales and folk songs are part of the oral tradition.

2. Which sentence should be added after sentence 7 to indicate a main point to be discussed?
   A) Songs can definitely change over time.
   B) There are many songs that tell the stories of our country’s history.
   C) Most versions place the song in the tradition of workers’ songs.
   D) Singing songs is one way to keep the American folk song tradition alive.

3. What is the BEST revision of sentence 8 as a thesis statement?
   A) Singers have kept to the facts, and so the song has never really changed.
   B) Singers have kept to the facts, which their audiences must have always appreciated.
   C) Singers have kept to the facts but have often changed the details to inspire their listeners.
   D) Leave as is.

4. What detail should be added after sentence 9?
   A) In some versions of the story, John Henry named his famous hammer after his wife, Lucy.
   B) In one version, John Henry has a wife and a baby boy.
   C) One version starts with John Henry as a baby.
   D) John Henry is always a worker building railroads after the Civil War.

5. Which sentence in paragraph 3 should begin a new paragraph?
   A) 19
   B) 21
   C) 22
   D) 24
6. What is the correct way to credit the book cited in sentence 27?
   A) (“Mules and Men” 257–259)
   B) (257–259)
   C) (Hurston 257–259)
   D) (Hurston)

7. What phrase or clause, if any, should be added to the beginning of sentence 31 to show the source of the quotation?
   A) I think that the author was right for saying,
   B) Almost all U.S. folk song experts believe that
   C) According to John Henry—The Steel Driving Man,
   D) Leave as is.

8. Which sentence should be added after sentence 34 to summarize the main points?
   A) The oral tradition lives on in folk songs in all cultures and all countries.
   B) Singers have used different versions of this factually based story to inspire different audiences.
   C) Folk songs are enjoyed for their melodies as well as for the stories they relate.
   D) Some versions of “John Henry” tell of the struggles of African American working people.

9. Which sentence, if added at the end of the paper, would provide the BEST final insight?
   A) Maybe they will think twice next time they hear the story of John Henry!
   B) Maybe students should consider the meaning behind their favorite songs.
   C) Maybe students should join a folk song club and start collecting songs that are meaningful to them.
   D) You need not be a steel driver to learn from John Henry’s example.

10. The title of the last source (a book) in the Works Cited list should be written—
    A) “Favorite Folktales from Around the World”
    B) Favorite Folktales, from Around the World
    C) Favorite Folktales From Around The World
    D) Favorite Folktales from Around the World