



Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel Ceiling



Reading Test

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Teacher's Notes

Lesson Contents	
1.	Instructions
2.	Text 1 without reference words underlined.
3.	Text 2 with reference words underlined.
4.	Reading test questions.
5.	Reading test answer key.

Instructions

Option 1 [Medium] *** ** [B2/C1]

1. Distribute **text 1 (without reference words underlined)** a week before the test. Students read, check vocabulary and meanings.
2. Test day. Distribute **text 2 (with reference words underlined)** and the **questions** (no dictionaries or notes allowed).
3. Set **ONE** hour to read the text and answer the questions.
4. Take in and correct or go through answers in class (pass mark is 70%).

Option 2 [More challenging] **** * [C1]

1. Test day. Distribute **text 2 (with reference words underlined)** & the **questions** (no dictionaries allowed).
2. Set **ONE** hour to read the text and answer the questions.
3. Take in and correct or go through answers in class (pass mark is 70%).

Extension Task

1. Students take a set of notes and write a *summary (add 60 minutes to the test or complete as a standalone task).

⇒ Note: the summary lesson also contains additional critical thinking questions as an extension task.

Link for Additional Material

Summary writing	www.academic-englishuk.com/summary
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Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (Text 1)

By A. Watson (2025)

The Sistine Chapel ceiling is one of the greatest achievements of Renaissance art. Commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508, it was painted by Michelangelo Buonarroti over four years and completed in 1512. Although Michelangelo regarded himself primarily as a sculptor, he accepted the commission under pressure, and the result transformed the history of Western painting. The ceiling covers more than 500 square metres and contains hundreds of figures. It continues to astonish visitors with its combination of scale, complexity and visual power (Forcellino, 2022).

Michelangelo's relationship with Pope Julius II was often tense, and his reluctance to take on the project reflected both personal and technical concerns. The fresco technique required applying paint to wet plaster, demanding speed and precision. In addition, the artist had to construct scaffolding and work for years while standing and painting overhead. In letters to his friends, he described the physical pain of bending backwards for long hours and the paint dripping into his eyes (Wallace, 2013). Despite these challenges, the project demonstrated his determination to master every obstacle.

At the heart of the ceiling are nine central panels illustrating stories from the Book of Genesis. These include the *Creation of the World*, the *Creation of Adam and Eve*, and scenes from the story of Noah. The most celebrated image is the *Creation of Adam*, in which God stretches out his hand to spark life into the reclining figure of Adam. This image has become one of the most reproduced and iconic works in art history. Recent scholars have even suggested that Michelangelo embedded imagery of the human brain within the design, symbolising the connection between divine creation and human cognition (Ashford and Tatem, 2024).

Surrounding the central panels are monumental figures of twelve prophets and sibyls. They represent both biblical prophecy and classical wisdom, suggesting that the search for truth is universal. The inclusion of the sibyls, female seers from the ancient world, reflects Renaissance humanism and the blending of Christian and classical traditions. In the triangular lunettes above the windows, Michelangelo painted the ancestors of Christ, linking the Old Testament with the New and embedding the ceiling in the broader narrative of salvation history (Müller, 2022).

The ceiling is celebrated for its artistic innovation. Michelangelo drew on his deep knowledge of classical sculpture, giving the figures muscular bodies and dynamic poses. The foreshortening and use of illusionistic architecture create a sense of depth that breaks open the flat surface of the ceiling. By combining complex narrative with dramatic physicality, Michelangelo departed from earlier Renaissance styles, setting new standards for artistic ambition. This work marked a turning point in the use of human anatomy to convey both spiritual and emotional intensity (Wallace, 2013).

When the ceiling was unveiled in 1512, it caused astonishment in Rome. Contemporary accounts describe crowds entering the chapel and marvelling at the scale and beauty of the work. Its impact on later artists was immense, influencing Raphael, the Mannerists and later the Baroque masters. The ceiling's reputation has also drawn medical and cultural

interpretations: one recent study argues that a female figure in *The Flood* scene may depict signs of breast cancer, showing how Michelangelo's realism extended to the representation of disease (Nerlich et al., 2024). The ceiling's reputation continued into modern times, though debates over conservation arose during the major restoration of the 1980s and 1990s.

Today the Sistine Chapel ceiling is considered one of the masterpieces of world culture. It combines theology, philosophy and artistry, embodying both the grandeur of the papacy and the ideals of Renaissance humanism. Designated as part of the Vatican's UNESCO World Heritage site, the chapel attracts millions of visitors every year. The ceiling's enduring power lies in its ability to merge biblical narrative with human creativity, making it not only a religious statement but also a timeless celebration of artistic genius (Forcellino, 2022).

References

- Ashford, J.W. and Tatem, S.B. (2024) 'Michelangelo's images on the chapel ceiling depicting Creation describe the course of vertebrate brain development', *Neurocase*. doi:10.1080/13554794.2020.1813477.
- Forcellino, A. (2022) *The Sistine Chapel: History of a Masterpiece*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Müller, J. (2022) 'An exceeding marvel and altogether astonishing: Reflections on Michelangelo's design of the Sistine Chapel', *Theological Studies Journal*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368352552_An_exceeding_marvel (Accessed: 28 August 2025).
- Nerlich, A.G., Löhrs, U. and Baur, A. (2024) 'Depictions of disease in art: Identifying breast cancer in the Sistine Chapel's "Flood" scene', *The Breast*, 74, pp. 158–163. doi:10.1016/j.breast.2024.04.008.
- Wallace, W.E. (2013) *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and His Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (Text 2)

By A. Watson (2025)

1. The Sistine Chapel ceiling is one of the greatest achievements of Renaissance art. Commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1508, it was painted by Michelangelo Buonarroti over four years and completed in 1512. Although Michelangelo regarded himself primarily as a sculptor, he accepted the commission under pressure, and the result transformed the history of Western painting. The ceiling covers more than 500 square metres and contains hundreds of figures. It continues to astonish visitors with its combination of scale, complexity and visual power (Forcellino, 2022).
2. Michelangelo's relationship with Pope Julius II was often tense, and his reluctance to take on the project reflected both personal and technical concerns. The fresco technique required applying paint to wet plaster, demanding speed and precision. In addition, the artist had to construct scaffolding and work for years while standing and painting overhead. In letters to his friends, he described the physical pain of bending backwards for long hours and the paint dripping into his eyes (Wallace, 2013). Despite these challenges, the project demonstrated his determination to master every obstacle.
3. At the heart of the ceiling are nine central panels illustrating stories from the Book of Genesis. These include the *Creation of the World*, the *Creation of Adam and Eve*, and scenes from the story of Noah. The most celebrated image is the *Creation of Adam*, in which God stretches out his hand to spark life into the reclining figure of Adam. This image has become one of the most reproduced and iconic works in art history. Recent scholars have even suggested that Michelangelo embedded imagery of the human brain within the design, symbolising the connection between divine creation and human cognition (Ashford and Tatem, 2024).
4. Surrounding the central panels are monumental figures of twelve prophets and sibyls. They represent both biblical prophecy and classical wisdom, suggesting that the search for truth is universal. The inclusion of the sibyls, female seers from the ancient world, reflects Renaissance humanism and the blending of Christian and classical traditions. In the triangular lunettes above the windows, Michelangelo painted the ancestors of Christ, linking the Old Testament with the New and embedding the ceiling in the broader narrative of salvation history (Müller, 2022).
5. The ceiling is celebrated for its artistic innovation. Michelangelo drew on his deep knowledge of classical sculpture, giving the figures muscular bodies and dynamic poses. The foreshortening and use of illusionistic architecture create a sense of depth that breaks open the flat surface of the ceiling. By combining complex narrative with dramatic physicality, Michelangelo departed from earlier Renaissance styles, setting new standards for artistic ambition. This work marked a turning point in the use of human anatomy to convey both spiritual and emotional intensity (Wallace, 2013).
6. When the ceiling was unveiled in 1512, it caused astonishment in Rome. Contemporary accounts describe crowds entering the chapel and marvelling at the scale and beauty of the work. Its impact on later artists was immense, influencing Raphael, the Mannerists and later

the Baroque masters. The ceiling's reputation has also drawn medical and cultural interpretations: one recent study argues that a female figure in *The Flood* scene may depict signs of breast cancer, showing how Michelangelo's realism extended to the representation of disease (Nerlich et al., 2024). The ceiling's reputation continued into modern times, though debates over conservation arose during the major restoration of the 1980s and 1990s.

7. Today the Sistine Chapel ceiling is considered one of the masterpieces of world culture. It combines theology, philosophy and artistry, embodying both the grandeur of the papacy and the ideals of Renaissance humanism. Designated as part of the Vatican's UNESCO World Heritage site, the chapel attracts millions of visitors every year. The ceiling's enduring power lies in its ability to merge biblical narrative with human creativity, making it not only a religious statement but also a timeless celebration of artistic genius (Forcellino, 2022).

References

- Ashford, J.W. and Tatem, S.B. (2024) 'Michelangelo's images on the chapel ceiling depicting Creation describe the course of vertebrate brain development', *Neurocase*. doi:10.1080/13554794.2020.1813477.
- Forcellino, A. (2022) *The Sistine Chapel: History of a Masterpiece*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
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- Wallace, W.E. (2013) *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and His Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Comprehension Questions

1. Headings: Choose **ONE** subheading for each paragraph (P). One title is NOT needed.

P1.	A	A reluctant commission and physical strain
P2.	B	Prophets, sibyls, and a universal message
P3.	C	From astonishment to reinterpretation and debate
P4.	D	A cultural icon of world heritage
P5.	E	A ceiling that redefined Renaissance art
P6.	F	Innovation in style and anatomy
P7.	G	Central biblical stories in paint
	H	The Pope's legacy

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2. Multiple Choice: Choose **ONE** answer for each paragraph (P).

P1.	What does the phrase "it continues to astonish visitors" suggest about the ceiling?	a.	People struggle to understand its meaning.
		b.	It still impresses viewers today.
		c.	The chapel is smaller than expected.
		d.	Visitors prefer Michelangelo's sculptures.
P2.	What difficulty did Michelangelo describe in his letters?	a.	Running out of pigments.
		b.	Paint trickling into his eyes.
		c.	Falling scaffolding.
		d.	Cold conditions in the chapel.
P3.	Which central panel has become the most iconic image?	a.	Creation of the World
		b.	Creation of Eve
		c.	Story of Noah
		d.	The birth of Adam
P4.	What does the inclusion of sibyls alongside prophets suggest?	a.	A link between ancient and biblical traditions.
		b.	That Michelangelo preferred female figures.
		c.	The ceiling is mainly about mythology.
		d.	That sibyls were more important than prophets.
P5.	How did Michelangelo make the ceiling appear three-dimensional?	a.	By using bright gold and silver.
		b.	By painting shadowed mosaics.
		c.	By using perspective tricks and painted structures.
		d.	By adding extra layers of plaster.
P6.	Which later artists were influenced by the ceiling?	a.	High Renaissance, then Mannerist and Baroque.
		b.	Gothic artists working in cathedrals across Europe.
		c.	Impressionist painters in 19th-century France.
		d.	Abstract artists of the 20th century.
P7.	Why is the Sistine Chapel ceiling considered a world masterpiece today?	a.	It focuses only on papal power.
		b.	It unites faith with creativity.
		c.	It is the largest ceiling painting in Europe.
		d.	It contains no signs of restoration.

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That is the end of page 1.

3. True / False: Choose **ONE** answer for each paragraph (P).

		T / F
P1.	Michelangelo accepted the ceiling commission because he preferred painting to sculpture.	
P2.	Fresco painting meant working quickly because colours were added onto damp plaster.	
P3.	Scholars suggest Michelangelo may have hidden an image of the brain in the ceiling design.	
P4.	Michelangelo placed the ancestors of Christ in the central panels of the ceiling.	
P5.	The figures combine powerful anatomy with dramatic stances.	
P6.	A recent study claimed that one figure in <i>The Flood</i> scene might reveal signs of brain cancer.	
P7.	The ceiling is part of a protected cultural site in the Vatican.	

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3. Reference Words: Choose what the underlined word in each paragraph (P) refers to.

	Word	Connection
P1.	He	
P2.	These challenges	
P3.	These	
P4.	They	
P5.	This	
P6.	One	
P7.	Both	

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4. Key language: Search for the word in the paragraph (P) that means:

	Explanation	Word
P1.	The act of ordering someone to create something.	
P2.	A strong unwillingness to do something.	
P3.	Widely recognised as a symbol.	
P4.	A blending together of different traditions.	
P5.	A technique to show something as smaller or nearer.	
P6.	The careful work of repairing or cleaning an artwork.	
P7.	A cultural site recognised by an international organisation.	

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That is the end of page 2.

5. Citations: Match the source with the point they make about Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel.

	Source		Point
i.	Ashford & Tatem (2024)	a.	The ceiling connects biblical stories with classical wisdom, especially through the prophets and sibyls.
ii.	Forcellino (2022)	b.	Michelangelo may have portrayed illness in <i>The Flood</i> scene, showing unusual attention to the body.
iii.	Müller (2022)	c.	The <i>Creation of Adam</i> might also symbolise the structure of the brain, linking God to human intellect.
iv.	Nerlich et al. (2024)	d.	Visitors are still struck by the ceiling's enormous size and detail; it is also preserved as part of a global heritage site.
v.	Wallace (2013)	e.	Letters reveal how exhausting the work was for Michelangelo, describing physical discomfort.

i.		ii.		iii.		iv.		v.	
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Overall Total: ___ / 40

That is the end of the reading test.

Comprehension Questions **KEY**

1. Headings: Choose **ONE** subheading for each paragraph (P). One title is NOT needed.

P1.	E	A	A reluctant commission and physical strain
P2.	A	B	Prophets, sibyls, and a universal message
P3.	G	C	From astonishment to reinterpretation and debate
P4.	B	D	A cultural icon of world heritage
P5.	F	E	A ceiling that redefined Renaissance art
P6.	C	F	Innovation in style and anatomy
P7.	D	G	Central biblical stories in paint
		H	The Pope's legacy

___ / 7

2. Multiple Choice: Choose **ONE** answer for each paragraph (P).

P1.	What does the phrase "it continues to astonish visitors" suggest about the ceiling?	a.	People struggle to understand its meaning.
		b.	It still impresses viewers today.
		c.	The chapel is smaller than expected.
		d.	Visitors prefer Michelangelo's sculptures.
P2.	What difficulty did Michelangelo describe in his letters?	a.	Running out of pigments.
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		b.	That Michelangelo preferred female figures.
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		b.	By painting shadowed mosaics.
		c.	By using perspective tricks and painted structures.
		d.	By adding extra layers of plaster.
P6.	Which later artists were influenced by the ceiling?	a.	High Renaissance, then Mannerist and Baroque.
		b.	Gothic artists working in cathedrals across Europe.
		c.	Impressionist painters in 19th-century France.
		d.	Abstract artists of the 20th century.
P7.	Why is the Sistine Chapel ceiling considered a world masterpiece today?	a.	It focuses only on papal power.
		b.	It unites faith with creativity.
		c.	It is the largest ceiling painting in Europe.
		d.	It contains no signs of restoration.

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That is the end of page 1.

3. True / False: Choose **ONE** answer for each paragraph (P).

		T / F
P1.	Michelangelo accepted the ceiling commission because he preferred painting to sculpture. <i>[he regarded himself primarily as a sculptor and accepted under pressure]</i>	F
P2.	Fresco painting meant working quickly because colours were added onto damp plaster. <i>[applying paint to wet plaster, demanding speed and precision]</i>	T
P3.	Scholars suggest Michelangelo may have hidden an image of the brain in the ceiling design. <i>[embedded imagery of the human brain within the design]</i>	T
P4.	Michelangelo placed the ancestors of Christ in the central panels of the ceiling. <i>[they were in the triangular lunettes above the windows]</i>	F
P5.	The figures combine powerful anatomy with dramatic stances. <i>[giving the figures muscular bodies and dynamic poses]</i>	T
P6.	A recent study claimed that one figure in <i>The Flood</i> scene might reveal signs of brain cancer. <i>[may depict signs of breast cancer]</i>	F
P7.	The ceiling is part of a protected cultural site in the Vatican. <i>[Designated as part of the Vatican's UNESCO World Heritage site]</i>	T

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3. Reference Words: Choose what the underlined word in each paragraph (P) refers to.

	Word	Connection
P1.	He	<i>Michelangelo</i>
P2.	These challenges	<i>the physical pain of bending backwards for long hours and the paint dripping into his eyes</i>
P3.	These	<i>nine central panels illustrating stories from the book of Genesis</i>
P4.	They	<i>twelve prophets and sibyls</i>
P5.	This	<i>the artistic innovation of the ceiling as a whole</i>
P6.	One	<i>Recent study</i>
P7.	Both	<i>the grandeur of the papacy and the ideals of Renaissance humanism.</i>

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4. Key language: Search for the word in the paragraph (P) that means:

	Explanation	Word
P1.	The act of ordering someone to create something.	<i>Commissioned</i>
P2.	A strong unwillingness to do something.	<i>Reluctance</i>
P3.	Widely recognised as a symbol.	<i>Iconic / most celebrated</i>
P4.	A blending together of different traditions.	<i>Humanism</i>
P5.	A technique to show something as smaller or nearer.	<i>Foreshortening</i>
P6.	The careful work of repairing or cleaning an artwork.	<i>Restoration / conservation</i>
P7.	A cultural site recognised by an international organisation.	<i>UNESCO World Heritage</i>

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5. Citations: Match the source with the point they make about Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel.

	Source		Point
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iii.	Müller (2022)	c.	The <i>Creation of Adam</i> might also symbolise the structure of the brain, linking God to human intellect.
iv.	Nerlich et al. (2024)	d.	Visitors are still struck by the ceiling's enormous size and detail; it is also preserved as part of a global heritage site.
v.	Wallace (2013)	e.	Letters reveal how exhausting the work was for Michelangelo, describing physical discomfort.

i.	<i>c</i>	ii.	<i>d</i>	iii.	<i>a</i>	iv.	<i>b</i>	v.	<i>e</i>
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Overall Total: ___ / 40

That is the end of the reading test.