READING PASSAGE · LEVEL 2 · ON-GRADE

EARTH: A PLANET JUST RIGHT FOR LIFE

A reading passage for middle-grade students (Ages 8–10)

Earth is the third planet from the Sun and the only world we know of where life exists. Our planet is special because of where it sits in the solar system — in a region scientists call the "habitable zone" or "Goldilocks zone." Here, Earth is not too hot and not too cold, but just right for liquid water to exist on the surface.

Earth has several features that protect life. Its atmosphere is made mostly of nitrogen and oxygen — the air we breathe — and it shields us from harmful rays from the Sun. Earth also has a strong magnetic field, generated deep inside the planet's spinning iron core. This invisible field deflects dangerous particles from space, like a planet-sized force shield.

Most of Earth's surface — about 71% — is covered in oceans. Below the waves and across the continents, the planet is constantly changing. Huge slabs of rock called tectonic plates slowly move, building mountains, opening valleys, and causing earthquakes and volcanoes.

A year on Earth is 365 days because that is how long Earth takes to orbit the Sun once. A day is 24 hours because Earth rotates on its axis once in that time. The axis is tilted by 23.5 degrees, which is why Earth has four seasons — different parts get more or less direct sunlight throughout the year.

Earth has just one natural satellite: our Moon.

★ WORDS TO KNOW 4 TERMS

habitable zone
The region around a star where temperatures allow liquid water on a planet's surface.

atmosphere
The layer of gases around a planet.

magnetic field
An invisible force around a planet that can deflect charged particles.

tectonic plate
A giant slab of Earth's outer rock that slowly moves over time.

★ COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS 5 QUESTIONS

1. What is the "Goldilocks zone" and why is Earth lucky to be in it?

2. Name two ways Earth's atmosphere helps protect life.

3. What creates Earth's magnetic field, and what does it do?

4. What are tectonic plates, and what do they cause to happen?

5. Why does Earth have four seasons?