

Becoming a 'Star Sailor'

The Greek word for astronaut means 'star sailor.' Images of great men like John Glenn orbiting the Earth and Neil Armstrong landing on the moon make the prospect of becoming an astronaut exciting. Beware, however, that the process begins early. Most astronauts develop a desire for space exploration sometime during elementary or middle school. This desire helps direct their paths toward courses in science, math and engineering in high school and in college. There are a large number of applicants for the NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space program. Good grades and high test scores are a must for becoming an astronaut.

Once chosen, preparation for becoming an astronaut requires many challenges. For example, they learn how to jump from an airplane on both land and sea to prepare for emergencies that may occur as they depart and re-enter the earth's atmosphere. They must also learn how to move about in a weightless environment. On earth, gravity helps us breathe, move our muscles, and helps the blood flow through our veins and arteries. In space, the weightless conditions change all this. Body fluids and blood tend to flow toward the person's head. To correct this, special belts must be worn until the astronaut's body adjusts to being in space. Daily exercise, to counteract the effects of the weightless environment, must be done to strengthen muscles. Astronauts must endure a great deal of training before they can go into space.

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Flesch-Kincaid: 9.5	Dale Chall: 9-10	240 words
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Sources:

Bray, B., Jaap, J. and Meyer, P. (1995). *So you want to be an astronaut*. Retrieved July 2, 2004. Website: <http://liftoff.msfc.nasa.gov/academy/astronauts/wannabe.html>
 Stott, C. (2000). *Space Exploration*. London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd.

The Secrets of Spying

Spying is big business and requires secret methods of obtaining information. A common method still in use today is that of bugs and wiretaps. Bugs, named because of their size, can be set in telephones and clothing to monitor conversations. They can also be placed in computers to monitor use and even strategically placed in one's surroundings. For example, while President Clinton vacationed at Martha's Vineyard several years ago, the Secret Service placed listening devices (bugs) in the woods surrounding his vacation home. These sensitive transmitters were able to detect even whispers and helped protect the President.

Secret codes and information are developed and passed in many ways. One woman, during World War I, had a secret message written in invisible ink on her back. Unfortunately for her, the message was discovered, and she was executed. During World War II, the Allies dressed an already-dead French civilian as a soldier and planted him with fake papers detailing an Allied attack in Greece. The Germans bought the plan and moved most of their troops. They left the actual target city defenseless.

The advantages of spying can bring money and power to businesses and governments. For example, car companies and the clothing industry go to great lengths to keep their new lines a secret. Large auto shows reveal sleek prototypes of future vehicles. The garment industry also tries to minimize copy-cat designs until after their new clothing lines are presented in New York and Paris. Being the first with a new design usually brings both prestige and a lot of money.

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Source: Platt, R. (1999). *Spy*. London: Dorling Kindersley, Ltd.

Pyramids and their Purposes

The great pyramids have always been a source of intrigue for scientists and historians. Usually constructed of high-quality limestone, many of these structures are still standing today. Constructing a pyramid in a step fashion that represented the sun's rays was done so that the king could ascend the pyramid and join other gods. Ancient Egyptians considered their pharaoh to be a living god.

The most popular of all the pyramids, the Great Pyramid of Giza, was built more than 4,500 years ago. This pyramid, originally encased in glittering white limestone, was built for King Khufu and his family. The four sides are almost perfectly aligned with true north, south, east and west. The immensity of this structure made it the tallest building in the world until the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1887. It is also the last visible evidence from the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Architects of the pyramids composed secret passages and false doors in order to keep thieves and grave robbers from stealing the body of their dead king, although every pyramid has been violated and robbed. The center of the pyramid typically contained the sarcophagus, or casket, of the dead pharaoh, and the pyramid was built around it. Chambers and anterooms, sometimes with walls containing stories of their pharaoh, were constructed around the sarcophagus. Scientists also discovered ventilation and escape shafts that allowed the workers to come and go, as well as shafts that lead nowhere to cause confusion for thieves. Although the movies often portray those who built the pyramids as slaves, typically they were farmers who were working their way to heaven. They assumed their pharaoh would look after them after they died.

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Flesch-Kincaid: 11.7	Dale Chall: 11-12	283 words
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The World of Espionage

For many people, the word 'spy' brings to mind images of James Bond; however, spying or espionage has been going on since the dawn of mankind. Nations searching for more land or power often sent spies to other countries to check out the number and placement of soldiers. Businesses wanting to obtain the upper hand over their rivals have tried to gain access to their competitors' secrets with informers.

Centuries ago spies, masquerading as merchants, moved from one region to another and brought news overheard on ships. Minstrels usually traveled from one castle to another under the pretense of entertaining the king. However, by eavesdropping to gain secrets, they related confidential information to the king or ruler of another country or region. Some spies disguised themselves as servants and chauffeurs, working for wealthy entrepreneurs or political leaders. By embedding themselves within the family unit, spies were more likely to discover secrets while participating in the daily routine of the families they served. This information could be used to bring about the decline of a business or country, while it often brought substantial monetary rewards to the spy.

One interesting and intriguing part of the spy business concerns the use of gadgets cleverly designed as everyday objects. For example, an ordinary pen may conceal a listening device, and cleverly placed in a pocket or purse, the pen acts as a microphone to transmit information. Other common items include cameras the size of a fist and pocketknives that reveal picklocks. A common hair brush might contain a saw capable of cutting through prison bars. These are just some of the equipment and accessories used in the world of espionage.

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