



Reading Comprehension Worksheet

Grade 11

Name: _____

Date: _____

Why Silence Is Not Always Neutral

When something goes wrong in front of a group of people, and no individual person acted alone to cause it, we tend to distribute blame so thinly that it seems to disappear entirely. A team that watches a colleague get treated unfairly in a meeting and says nothing. A classroom that lets a rumor spread unchecked. A neighborhood that notices a pattern of neglect next door and assumes someone else will intervene. In each case, no single bystander caused the harm. And yet I want to argue that their silence was not neutral. It was a choice, and one worth examining honestly.

I recognize the strongest objection to this claim immediately: it is deeply unfair to hold a bystander to the same moral standard as the person who actually caused the harm. Someone who watches a friend get bullied is not equivalent to the bully. Piling guilt onto witnesses who never chose the situation they found themselves in risks a kind of moral overreach, one that punishes people for failing to be heroic rather than focusing accountability where it actually belongs.

This objection has real force, and I do not think bystanders should be treated as equivalent to wrongdoers. But equivalence is not actually the claim I am making. My argument is narrower: silence is a choice with consequences, not an absence of action, even when it is an understandable choice made under real social pressure.

Psychologists have documented what is sometimes called the bystander effect, the well-established finding that individuals are less likely to intervene when more people are present, each assuming someone else will act. Recognizing this effect does not excuse silence. It explains why silence happens so predictably, which makes it something we can actually address rather than simply accept as unavoidable human nature.

None of this means every bystander must intervene dramatically or at personal risk.

Sometimes the most meaningful response to witnessed harm is quiet: a private conversation afterward, a report filed anonymously, a small act of support offered later, out of the spotlight. What I am arguing against is not caution, but the comfortable myth that staying silent is somehow the neutral option, that not choosing is not itself a choice. Once we recognize silence as an active decision rather than a passive default, we can start asking a more honest question: not simply whether we did something wrong, but whether we did enough right.

Circle the Correct Answer

1. What is the author's central claim?

- a) Bystanders are just as guilty as the person who caused the harm
- b) Silence in the face of witnessed harm is a choice with consequences, not a neutral non-action
- c) People should never intervene in situations involving others

2. What counterargument does the author acknowledge?

- a) That it is unfair to hold bystanders to the same moral standard as the person who caused the harm
- b) That bystanders should always be punished legally
- c) That witnessed harm never actually causes real damage

3. How does the author respond to that counterargument?

- a) By fully agreeing and abandoning the original claim
- b) By clarifying that the claim is narrower than equivalence: silence still carries consequences even if it is not equal to the original wrongdoing
- c) By ignoring the counterargument entirely

4. What does the author say about the "bystander effect"?

- a) It excuses silence completely and removes any responsibility
- b) It explains why silence happens predictably, which makes it something that can be addressed rather than simply accepted
- c) It has been scientifically disproven

True or False

5. The author argues that bystanders are morally equivalent to the person who caused the harm. _____

6. The author acknowledges a specific, strong counterargument to their claim. _____

7. The author says every instance of witnessed harm requires a dramatic, public intervention. _____

Fill in the Blank

8. The author says silence is a choice with _____, not an absence of action.
9. The author argues against the comfortable myth that staying silent is somehow the _____ option.

Think and Explain

- 10. This essay uses a concession and rebuttal structure: acknowledging a counterargument honestly before responding to it. Identify where the concession happens and where the rebuttal begins, and explain why this structure might make the argument more persuasive than ignoring the counterargument entirely.**

- 11. Evaluate the author's use of the bystander effect as evidence. Is citing a psychological phenomenon an effective way to support this argument? Explain your reasoning, considering both its strengths and its limitations as evidence.**
