
Cabeza de Vaca: How Did He Survive?

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Cabeza de Vaca (center) among the Native Americans. Painting by Frederic Remington.

Overview: On June 17, 1527, Cabeza de Vaca sailed from the Spanish mainland with 600 settlers to establish colonies on the northern shores of the Gulf of Mexico. The trip went badly, and within a year nearly all the men in the expedition were dead. This Mini-Q is about Cabeza's eight-year struggle to stay alive and his remarkable journey from Florida to the Texas coast and, eventually, to Mexico City.

The Documents:

Document A: Cabeza's Trek Across Texas and Mexico (map)

Document B: The Art of Survival (chart)

Document C: The Surgeon

Document D: "We came from where the sun rose..."

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Cabeza de Vaca

Directions: Below are three common dangers that faced Native Americans and European explorers in Mexico in the 16th and 17th centuries. With a partner or in a small group, discuss each situation and what you might have done to stay alive. When finished, answer the summary question.

Danger #1: Gulf Coast Mosquitoes

You are wandering, lost and alone, in swampy wetlands off San Antonio Bay on the Gulf of Mexico. With every step, the thick mud sucks on your bare feet. You have a piece of flint, some deer meat for food, and are wearing nothing but a small deerskin hide. The June sun is setting and swarms of mosquitoes cover your body, entering your nostrils and mouth with every breath. You are desperate. What do you do? Be specific.

Danger #2: Armed Strangers

You are trekking alone in the dry prickly-pear region of southeast Texas. The prickly-pear cactus fruit is the only food you have eaten in ten days. The pickings have been thin. As you are making your evening fire with your precious flint, a band of six hunters suddenly appears. They are carrying spears but no game. Like you, their ribs show clearly through their skin. They are speaking in an unknown language. They look at you sternly and motion for you to drop your flint and pile of precious fruit, and to walk away into the cold 40-degree night. What do you do?

Danger #3: River Crossing

You are one of two survivors of a Spanish expedition that has shipwrecked off the Gulf Coast of Texas. Together you decide to walk 400 miles down the coast to the closest Spanish outpost. One huge problem is that you must cross a deep river nearly 200 yards wide – and neither of you knows how to swim. You have seen signs of native people in the area (a fishnet here, a footprint there) and are terrified by shipboard tales of cannibalism. What do you do?

Summary question: Which of these situations scares you the most? Explain.

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Cabeza de Vaca: How Did He Survive?

In the spring of 1527, five Spanish ships left the port of Seville and set sail for the New World. The leader of the expedition was a **conquistador** named Panfilo de Narvaez, who had a dream to establish settlements along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Among the members of his party was Cabeza de Vaca, a 37-year-old military veteran who would serve as the expedition's treasurer. After wintering in Cuba, Narvaez set out for northeastern Mexico.

However, tricky currents in the Gulf of Mexico pushed the ships off course, and Narvaez, hopelessly confused, made accidental landfall near modern-day Tampa Bay, Florida. In a decision that would prove fateful, Narvaez ordered 300 men to leave the ships and march inland on a search for treasure. They would never see their ships again.

After two difficult months, Narvaez and his men arrived at Apalachee Bay with no treasure, no ships in sight, and little food. Narvaez knew only that he had to travel west to get to Mexico. He ordered that firearms be melted down to make tools to build five rafts, each large enough to carry 50 men. Every few days one of the remaining horses was killed and eaten. The goal was no longer **colonization** or riches; it was survival.

Carrying fresh water stored in hollowed-out horse legs, the expedition pushed off with Cabeza commanding one of the rafts. Several weeks into the journey, hunger and thirst began to take their toll; the men grew weak and suffered bouts of insanity. Somewhere near the Mississippi River, a strong wind blew the five rafts out to sea. After several desperate days, Cabeza's raft drifted back to shore.

Historians now believe that Cabeza and his fellow **castaways** landed on modern-day Galveston Island, Texas. A second raft was blown ashore on the same island, which the men named Isle de Malhado, the Island of Bad Luck. The other three rafts were never seen again. In a matter of days, 250 men had dwindled to 80. Within months, the number would drop to 18. Within a year, it would be four. One of those four was Cabeza.

The island on which Cabeza landed in November 1528 was not deserted. It was populated by two Native American bands, each with about 400 people, each with its own language. Initially, the Indians acted as the survivors' caretakers. In time, however, they became slave masters. After two years of misery, Cabeza managed to escape, joining a mainland band called the **Charrucos**. The

Charrucos gave Cabeza the freedom to trade their goods among nearby Indian groups, exchanging shells for hides and **flint** for animal hearts.

Then, in the fall of 1532, Cabeza miraculously met up with three fellow survivors who had been enslaved by other Indian groups. After two years of waiting for the right moment, the three men were finally able to slip away from their Indian masters and walk to Mexico City. The journey would take 21 months and would require a special combination of skill, patience, and the goodwill of many Native Americans met along the way. Read the four documents that follow and answer the question asked by this Mini-Q, "How did Cabeza de Vaca survive?"



Cabeza de Vaca's ill-fated voyage

Background Essay Questions

1. In what year and from what country did the Narvaez expedition sail?
2. What was the purpose of the expedition?
3. After the expedition's ships were carried off course in the Gulf of Mexico, where did they land?
4. Where was Cabeza's raft blown ashore? How many years was Cabeza a slave of the Indians?
5. How many members of the expedition made it all the way to Mexico City?

6. Define these terms:

conquistador

colonization

castaways

Charrucos

flint

Timeline

c.10,000 BCE – First human settlement in Texas

800–1500 CE – Growth of Caddo Indian culture in eastern Texas

1300 – Apaches move into the Texas panhandle.

1492 – Accidental discovery of America by Christopher Columbus

1528 – Cabeza de Vaca washed ashore on Gulf Coast of Texas

1536 – Cabeza arrives in Mexico City.

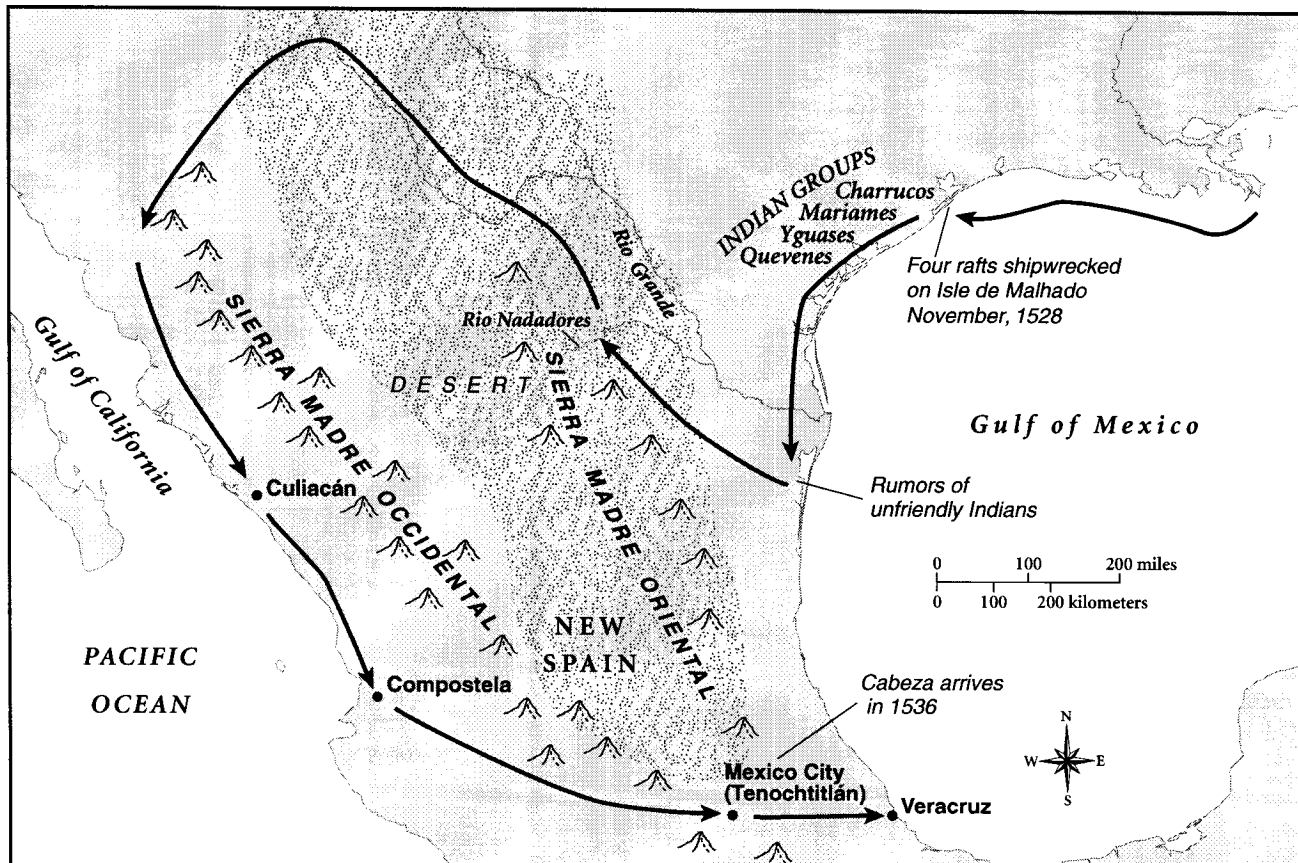
1541 – Coronado explores western Texas.

1543 – Oil oozing up from ground used by Spanish sailors to caulk ships

Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

Cabeza's Trek Across Texas and Mexico



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Document Analysis

1. In what year did Cabeza's raft wash ashore in east Texas?
2. Cabeza escaped from his Indian captors in 1534. About how long did it take him to walk from the east Texas coast to Mexico City?
3. About how many miles was this walk?
4. What details from the map indicate that this is a tough landscape to survive?

Document B

Source: Compiled from *The Relación of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1542*, the explorer's personal account of his long adventure.

The Art of Survival		
Date	Problem	Cabeza's Response
Oct. 1528	Thirst	With other raft survivors adrift in the gulf of Mexico, Cabeza drank water stored in hollowed-out horse-leg containers.
1529 – 1532	Periodic hunger	As a slave, Cabeza ate what was available, including berries, mollusks, rats, roots, lizards, snakes, and spiders.
1530 – 1532	Distrust	Cabeza befriended his captors and was therefore allowed to serve as a trader among Indian bands living within 150 miles of the Gulf Coast.
1530 – 1535	Communication	Cabeza learned four Indian languages, including Charuccos, plus sign language.
1534	Cold / Despair	Lost and completely naked, Cabeza happened on a smoldering tree that had been struck by lightning. He lit a branch in the dying flames and kept the torch burning as he walked. Each night he huddled in a hole that he'd dug and "around that pit placed four fires like the points of a cross."

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Document Analysis

1. Give one example each of how Cabeza dealt with thirst and hunger.

2. How can the ability to speak a language save your life?

3. Besides providing warmth, how might Cabeza's four fires have helped him stay alive?

4. What is the main idea of this document? How does it explain why Cabeza survived?

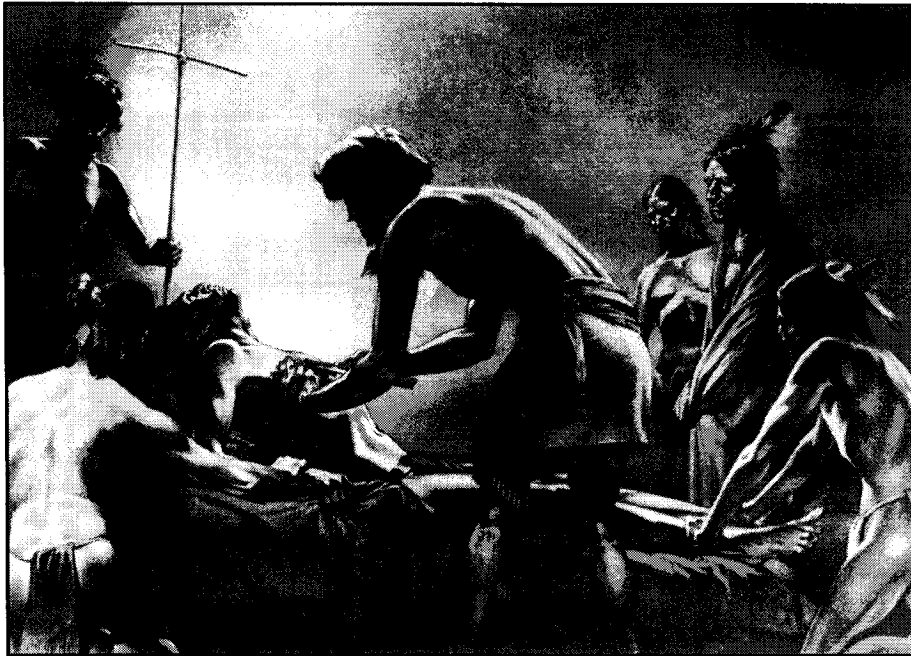
Document C

Source: *The Relación of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1542.*

Note: In this excerpt from his narrative, Cabeza describes an operation he performed in 1535 on a Native American living near the Rio Nadadores. It is believed to be the first documented surgery done in North America.

Here they brought me a man, and they told me that a long time ago he had been wounded through the right shoulder with an arrow, and the point of the arrow rested over his heart.... With a knife that I had, I opened his chest to that place.... I inserted the knife point, and with great difficulty, at last I pulled it out. It was very long and, with a deer bone, ... I gave him two stitches. And two days later, I removed the two stitches from the Indian and he was healed. And this cure gave us a very great reputation among them throughout the whole land.

Source: Painting by Thomas Lea, courtesy of Moody Medical Library, University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.



Document Analysis

1. What was wrong with the man who was brought to Cabeza? What tool did Cabeza use to perform the operation?
2. What details in the painting are supported by Cabeza's account of the operation?
3. How does this document help answer the question, "How did Cabeza de Vaca survive?"

Document D

Source: *The Relación of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1542.*

Note: After nearly seven years of captivity and almost two years spent walking west and south, Cabeza made first contact with “shocked” Spaniards near the Gulf of California. He was with his three fellow survivors and a following of hundreds of Indians. These Spaniards were on a slave-catching expedition and were spreading great fear among the Indian groups along the Pacific coast. In this passage, Cabeza refers to these soldiers as “the Christians.”

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...(W)e suffered many annoyances and great disputes with (the Spaniards), because they wanted to enslave the Indians we brought with us.... The Christians (told the Indians) that we had been lost for a long time, and that we were people of ill fortune and no worth, and that they were the lords of the land whom the Indians were to serve and obey.... The Indians were ... not at all convinced.... Some talked ... among themselves, saying that the Christians were lying, because we came from where the sun rose, and (the Spaniards) from where it set; and that we cured the sick, and that (the Spaniards) killed those who were well; and that we came naked and barefoot, and they went about dressed and on horses and with lances; and that we did not covet anything but rather, everything (the Indians) gave us we later returned..., and that (the Spaniards) had no other objective but to steal everything they found and did not give anything to anyone.

Document Analysis

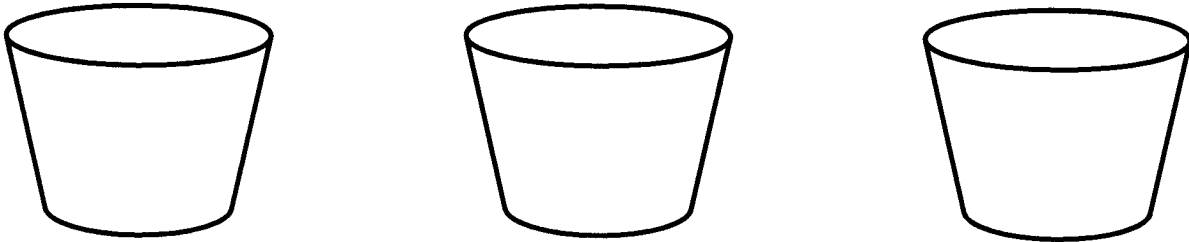
1. Who were the Christians that Cabeza met near the Gulf of California?
2. What were the Spaniards doing when Cabeza met up with them?
3. How did the Spaniards describe Cabeza and his three friends to the Indians?
4. According to Cabeza, how did the Indians regard him and his friends compared to the Spaniards?
5. How does this document help answer the question, “How did Cabeza de Vaca survive?”

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

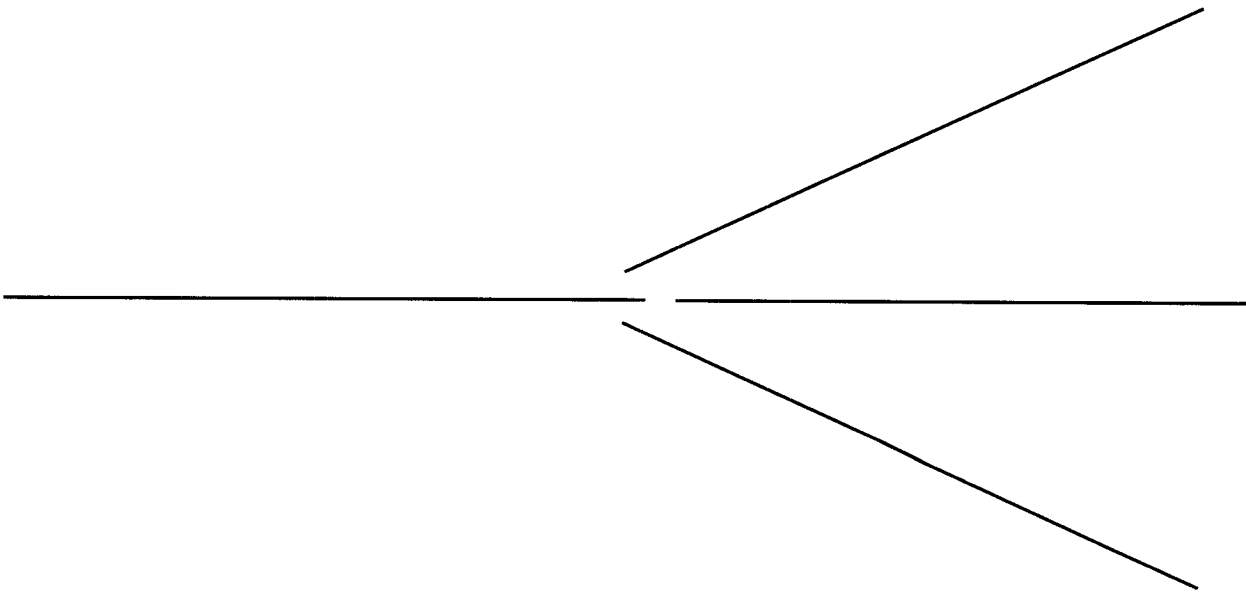
Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write bucket labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. It is OK to put a document in more than one bucket. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.

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Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



Step Six: From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

IMPORTANT

For students new to DBQs, young students, and students needing extra writing support, see the Guided Essay form in the Teacher's Toolkit.

Working Title Cabeza de Vaca: How Did He Survive?

Paragraph #1

Grabber: Have you ever been so hungry that even an insect looked good?

Background: Cabeza was born in Spain. Joined an expedition. Got stranded in east Texas.

Stating the question with key terms defined: How did Cabeza and his friends stay alive for eight years in the wilderness?

Thesis and road map: Cabeza survived for three main reasons: wilderness skills, healing powers, and good relations with the Indians.

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one: One reason Cabeza survived was wilderness skills.

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Could eat almost anything (Doc B). Knew he needed to dig holes at night (Doc B).

Spoke several languages (Doc B).

Argument: connecting evidence to the thesis

Eating anything gave him energy; holes and fire provided warmth; language meant friends.

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two: A second reason Cabeza survived was his ability to heal.

Evidence: Removing an arrowhead from a man's chest (Doc C).

Argument: Power to heal amazed the Indians. They escorted him and his friends. Gave them protection and food. Helped them stay alive.

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three: A third reason Cabeza survived was his respect for the Indians.

Evidence: *Relación* comparing Indian opinion of Spanish slavers with Cabeza (Doc D).

Argument: Good relations make good friends, who will help you survive.

Paragraph #5

Conclusion: Restatement of main idea along with possible insight or wrinkle

Cabeza survived for three main reasons – his wilderness skills, his ability to heal, and his respect for the Indians. Certainly he had luck, but mostly, he had brains and a big heart.

From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title

Paragraph #1

Grabber

Background

Stating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and road map

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument: connecting evidence to the thesis

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5

Conclusion: Restatement of main idea along with possible insight or wrinkle

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Mini-Q Sample Essay: Higher Proficiency Cabeza de Vaca: How Did He Survive?

The odds were not good. There was Cabeza de Vaca, washed up on the beach of east Texas with no food, no clothes, winter coming on, and Mexico City a thousand miles away. Cabeza was one of the few survivors of a Spanish expedition to the unexplored region of Florida. Soon the number of men still alive would be only four. The question was, how would Cabeza and his three fellow survivors escape their slave condition and get to Mexico City alive? It took a combination of luck and good decisions, but there were three main reasons they made it home: wilderness skills, healing powers, and good relations with the Native Americans.

Cabeza's ability to survive in the dry wilderness of east Texas and northern Mexico was remarkable. First, he was able to eat just about anything. At times he lived only off the fruit of the prickly-pear cactus (Doc B). At other times he ate rats, roots, and even spiders (Doc B). Second, Cabeza knew how to battle the cold by digging a hole and building fires all around (Doc B). He also was smart about languages. Between him and his friends, they spoke six languages and were also able to sign (Doc B). Put all these wilderness skills together and you can see he survived because he was able to deal with hunger and cold temperatures, and have little talks with nervous Indians so they wouldn't kill him.

Besides wilderness skills, Cabeza and his friends survived because they were healers. The Indians must have suffered from many diseases and injuries. Cabeza tried to help. At one point in northern Mexico, a man was brought to him with an arrow point in his chest. Cabeza used his knife to cut out the point, and he used a deer bone to stitch up the wound (Doc C). The man survived and Cabeza and his friends became something like rock stars. Indian people began to escort the men as they continued their long journey home. The power of healing helped Cabeza survive because they were regarded as gods. They were given food and helped along the way. Without the power to heal, the men might have been left alone, unprotected.

A final key to Cabeza's survival is that he and his friends really cared about the Indians. Cabeza saw the Indians as human beings just like himself. He was angry at the first Spaniards they met, who were on an expedition to catch and enslave Indians. The Indians stood up for Cabeza and appreciated that he gave away his possessions and did not steal, and that he went barefoot and needed little, just like them (Doc D). Cabeza's attitude toward Native Americans helped him survive because he was making friends, not enemies, all across northern Mexico. There is no better way to survive than to be surrounded by people who have your back.

Wilderness skills, healing powers, friendship towards the Native Americans – all these things helped Cabeza get to Mexico City alive. Certainly he also needed some luck along the way. For example, he could easily have been lost at sea on his raft or lost the flame from his torch on a cold desert night. But Cabeza was more than lucky. He had big-time skills and an even bigger heart.

Student Mini-Q Lined Paper

A series of horizontal lines for writing, spaced evenly down the page.

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