Why Crowds Act

Three theories explain different parts of a shared action.

S.8.7 "Discuss theories that attempt to explain collective behavior."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the name of each theory. Number one detail in the passage that helps that theory explain what the riders do.

A Crowd at the Station

1 At a downtown train station, a stalled evening train leaves hundreds of riders on the platform. A few begin chanting, "We need buses!" Soon more riders join, and the group walks toward the service desk. Why do strangers act together so quickly? Contagion theory proposes that feelings and actions spread through a crowd as people respond to one another. The rising chant may pull in riders who had planned to wait quietly. This theory helps explain the speed of the shift, but it cannot show whether everyone joined for the same reason.

2 Convergence theory offers a different starting point. It argues that people with similar concerns or goals gather and act together, rather than simply taking on a crowd's mood. At the station, many riders already fear missing work shifts or child care pickups. Some have checked bus routes on their phones before anyone chants. Their shared need for another way home helps explain why the call for buses catches on. Still, convergence alone does not fully explain why riders choose a chant and a walk to the desk instead of separate complaints.

3 Emergent norm theory focuses on how people develop a shared rule for action when the usual routine breaks down. At the station, a rider suggests that everyone ask for buses together, and others repeat the plan. When riders follow the first group to the service desk, that plan becomes a guide for what to do next. This theory explains how an uncertain crowd can coordinate without a leader giving orders. It does not mean every rider agrees: some stay on the platform. Together, the three theories highlight different parts of the same event, not three proven accounts of every crowd.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does contagion theory explain why more riders join the chant? What can it not tell us about those riders?

2. How does convergence theory explain the call for buses differently from contagion theory? Use a detail from the passage.

3. How does emergent norm theory explain the walk to the service desk? Identify the detail that shows a shared plan forming.

4. Which two theories together explain why riders want buses and how they decide to ask for them? Explain what each theory adds.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

At a neighborhood meeting, residents learn their park may close. Several came hoping to keep it open; when one suggests a joint letter, others begin gathering signatures. In three or four sentences, use two theories from the passage to explain different parts of this group's behavior, citing a detail for each, and state one limit of either theory.

Why Crowds Act

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the name of each theory. Number one detail in the passage that helps that theory explain what the riders do. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does contagion theory explain why more riders join the chant? What can it not tell us about those riders?	**The chant spreads as riders respond to one another. The theory cannot tell whether everyone joined for the same reason.**
2	How does convergence theory explain the call for buses differently from contagion theory? Use a detail from the passage.	**Convergence points to concerns riders already shared, such as missing work or child care pickups, rather than a chant spreading through the crowd.**
3	How does emergent norm theory explain the walk to the service desk? Identify the detail that shows a shared plan forming.	**A rider suggests asking for buses together, and others repeat the plan and follow the first group to the desk.**
4	Which two theories together explain why riders want buses and how they decide to ask for them? Explain what each theory adds.	**Convergence explains their shared need for another way home. Emergent norm theory explains how asking together at the desk becomes their plan.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Convergence theory explains why residents who already wanted to keep the park open came to the meeting. Their shared goal existed before anyone proposed an action. Emergent norm theory explains how signing a joint letter became the group's way to respond after one resident suggested it. This theory does not show whether every person at the meeting agreed to sign.

Accept any two theories if the student connects each to a different, relevant detail in the park scenario. The stated limit should identify something the chosen theory cannot establish from the given details.