Name: _____ Date: _____

How Soccer and the World Cup Work

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 949 words

Almost 89,000 people filled a stadium in Lusail, Qatar, for the 2022 World Cup final. Argentina played France. After extra time, no one had won. The game came down to kicks from a mark on the grass. Lionel Messi was one of the players. Many countries call this sport football. This book calls it soccer. One game can show how the whole sport works.

Each team puts eleven players on the field. One of them is the goalkeeper. Most players use their feet to kick the ball. The goalkeeper may also use his hands, but only inside a marked box near the goal. That box is the penalty area. No other player may play the ball with hands or arms, except to take a throw in.

The goal is a frame, eight yards wide and eight feet tall. A goal counts when the whole ball crosses the goal line. It must go between the posts and under the bar. The team with more goals wins. In this final, the first goal came from a penalty kick.

A penalty kick is a reward for a foul by a defender inside his own penalty area. The ball sits on a mark twelve yards from the goal. Only the kicker and the goalkeeper stay close. All the other players wait outside the box. Messi took the kick for Argentina. He sent the ball into the bottom left corner.

A foul is rough or unfair play, like tripping or pushing. The referee stops the game, and the other team gets a free kick. Sometimes the referee also shows a card. A yellow card is a warning. A red card sends the player off. He must leave the field, and his team plays with one fewer.

Soccer has one rule that puzzles new fans. It is called offside. It stops a player from waiting by the goal for a pass. Say a teammate passes the ball. The attacker is in an offside position if he is closer to the goal line than both the ball and the second to last defender. Often the last defender is the goalkeeper.

Standing in that spot is not a foul by itself. It is a foul only when the player joins the play, such as by taking the pass. There are three exceptions. A player cannot be offside on a throw in, a corner kick or a goal kick. He may stand there and take the ball.

A game has two halves of 45 minutes. In the final, Argentina led by two goals. Then, late in the game, France scored twice, only 97 seconds apart. After 90 minutes, the score was 2 to 2. A World Cup final cannot end in a tie. So the game kept going.

Extra time is two more periods of up to 15 minutes. Messi scored again in extra time, and Argentina led 3 to 2. Then France scored from a penalty kick. It was 3 to 3 when extra time ended, and one team still had to be the champion.

The last way to decide a game is a penalty shoot out. The teams take turns, and a coin toss decides who kicks first. Each kick is one player against the goalkeeper. Argentina scored four penalties. France scored two. Argentina won the shoot out, and the 2022 World Cup.

The World Cup is the biggest soccer tournament. National teams play in it, not clubs. The first one was in 1930, in Uruguay. Thirteen teams came. Uruguay beat Argentina in the final, 4 to 2. Since then, the World Cup has been played every four years. It paused only for World War II.

A country cannot just sign up. It has to qualify. That means winning matches, mostly against teams from its own part of the world. The host countries get in without it. For 2026, forty five teams qualified and joined the three hosts. Together they made up the 48 teams.

The 2026 World Cup had 48 teams. Three countries hosted it: the United States, Canada and Mexico. The teams were split into 12 groups of four. In a group, each team plays the other three. A win earns three points. A draw earns one point. The group games came first, and then the knockout rounds began.

The top two teams in each group moved on. So did the eight best third place teams. That made 32 teams. After that, each round is one match, and the loser goes home. If a match is tied, it goes to extra time and then to penalties. The whole tournament had 104 matches.

In 2026, Messi played in his sixth World Cup. By the final, he was 39. Argentina reached it again. On July 19, 2026, Spain won 1 to 0 after extra time. It was Spain's second title. Messi scored eight goals and set up four more. He won the Silver Ball, the prize for the second best player.

Messi is a forward. His job is to score goals and help his team score them. He is left footed and 5 feet 7 inches tall. On August 31, 2026, he announced that he was retiring from Argentina's team. His last game for it was on October 6, 2026. Through November 2026, he still plays for Inter Miami in the United States.

The next World Cup is set for 2030. Most teams that want to play in it will start the way teams did for 2026. They will win games against teams from their own part of the world. And some day, a game like the 2022 final may come down to one player, one goalkeeper and a ball on a mark twelve yards away.

Questions

1. Where may a goalkeeper use his hands?

A. Anywhere on the field
B. Only inside the penalty area
C. Only during a penalty kick

2. Why does the book say a World Cup final cannot end in a tie?

A. The teams are tired

B. Fans would be unhappy

C. One team has to be the champion

3. What does the word qualify mean in this book?

A. Win matches to earn a place

B. Pay to join

C. Sign up online

4. When is a player in an offside position?

A. When he is closer to the goal line than the ball and the second to last defender

B. When he runs faster than the other players

C. When he is standing in the penalty area

5. How did Argentina win the 2022 final?

A. With a goal in the last minute

B. By winning the penalty shoot out

C. By scoring five goals

Words to know

offside: too far forward

qualify: earn a place

goalkeeper: goal guard

tournament: set of games

Answer key: How Soccer and the World Cup Work

1. B. Only inside the penalty area
2. C. One team has to be the champion
3. A. Win matches to earn a place
4. A. When he is closer to the goal line than the ball and the second to last defender
5. B. By winning the penalty shoot out