
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE SHIP THAT SANK IN 20 MINUTES

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE SHIP THAT SANK IN 20 MINUTES

On August 10, 1628, thousands of people gathered along Stockholm's waterfront to witness the maiden voyage of the Vasa, the most powerful warship in the world. The Swedish king had ordered it built to intimidate enemies and showcase Sweden's naval might. Twenty minutes later, the Vasa lay at the bottom of the harbor.

The Vasa was massive—over 200 feet long and armed with 64 bronze cannons. It was decorated with hundreds of carved sculptures painted in brilliant colors. The ship had taken two years and over 1,000 workers to build. Sweden's King Gustavus Adolphus wanted the most impressive warship ever constructed, and he kept demanding changes during construction.

That's where the problems started. The king kept insisting on more cannons, which made the ship top-heavy. When engineers conducted a stability test—having 30 men run back and forth across the deck—the ship swayed so dangerously that they stopped the test early. But no one dared tell the king his magnificent warship was fatally flawed.

On the day of its launch, the Vasa sailed less than a mile before a gust of wind hit its sails. The ship tilted sharply, water poured through the open gun ports, and within minutes the magnificent vessel had sunk in just 100 feet of water. Between 30 and 50 people drowned.

The disaster was so embarrassing that Sweden tried to forget it. The Vasa sat on the harbor floor for over 300 years. Then, in 1961, engineers raised the remarkably preserved ship. The cold, brackish water of Stockholm's harbor had protected the wood from decay.

Today, the Vasa sits in its own museum, visited by over a million people each year. It's the world's best-preserved 17th-century ship, offering an unmatched window into history.

The Vasa's fate teaches an important lesson: when those in power refuse to hear bad news, disasters follow. Every engineer knew the ship was unsafe, but fear of the king's anger kept them silent.

Word Count: 327 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Vasa Museum

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How long did the Vasa sail before sinking?

- ☐ A) About 20 minutes
- ☐ B) About 2 hours
- ☐ C) About 1 day
- ☐ D) About 1 week

2 What caused the Vasa to be top-heavy?

- ☐ A) Too many passengers
- ☐ B) The king demanded more cannons
- ☐ C) Rot in the wood
- ☐ D) Improper anchors

3 Why did the engineers stop the stability test early?

- ☐ A) It started raining
- ☐ B) The king ordered them to stop
- ☐ C) The ship swayed dangerously
- ☐ D) They ran out of time

4 Why was the Vasa so well preserved after 300 years underwater?

- ☐ A) Divers protected it
- ☐ B) It was wrapped in protective material
- ☐ C) The cold, brackish water prevented decay
- ☐ D) The bronze cannons released preservative chemicals

5

What lesson does the author draw from the Vasa disaster?

- ☐ A) Ships should never carry cannons
- ☐ B) Sweden should not have built warships
- ☐ C) People must be able to deliver bad news to those in power
- ☐ D) Engineers in the 1600s were incompetent

6

How might the Vasa disaster inform modern engineering and management practices?

- ☐ A) Only kings should make engineering decisions
- ☐ B) Organizations should create systems where safety concerns can be raised without fear
- ☐ C) Stability tests are unnecessary
- ☐ D) Ships should never be decorated

ANSWER KEY

The Ship That Sank in 20 Minutes

1. A) About 20 minutes

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Twenty minutes later, the Vasa lay at the bottom of the harbor.'

2. B) The king demanded more cannons

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage explains: 'The king kept insisting on more cannons, which made the ship top-heavy.'

3. C) The ship swayed dangerously

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'the ship swayed so dangerously that they stopped the test early.'

4. C) The cold, brackish water prevented decay

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage explains: 'The cold, brackish water of Stockholm's harbor had protected the wood from decay.'

5. C) People must be able to deliver bad news to those in power

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage concludes: 'when those in power refuse to hear bad news, disasters follow. Every engineer knew the ship was unsafe, but fear of the king's anger kept them silent.'

6. B) Organizations should create systems where safety concerns can be raised without fear

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. The Vasa sank because engineers feared speaking up. Modern organizations learn from such disasters by creating 'psychological safety'—environments where people can report problems without punishment.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Ship That Sank in 20 Minutes

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The engineers knew the Vasa was unsafe but didn't tell the king. Have you ever been afraid to tell someone in authority that they were wrong? What happened?
- The Vasa's failure made it historically valuable in ways the successful ship never would have been. How can failures sometimes become more important than successes?
- The king kept demanding changes during construction. How can last-minute changes to a project cause problems?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Build a simple boat from household materials and test how adding weight to the top affects its stability in water.
- Research another famous shipwreck (Titanic, Edmund Fitzgerald, etc.) and compare the causes and lessons learned to the Vasa.
- Create a comic strip showing the timeline from the Vasa's construction to its sinking, highlighting the moments when someone could have prevented disaster.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Vasa Museum / Smithsonian