
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE CITY BUILT ON GARBAGE

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 CITY BUILT ON GARBAGE

Stand in Lower Manhattan today and you might be standing on what was once the Hudson River. Roughly 25 percent of the land below Canal Street is artificial—created over centuries by filling harbors, coves, and shorelines with garbage, rubble, and debris.

The process began with Dutch colonists in the 1600s. As New Amsterdam grew crowded, residents started extending their properties into the water. They built wooden walls at the shoreline, then filled in behind them with whatever was available: oyster shells, broken pottery, food scraps, construction waste. The waterline moved outward, inch by inch.

When the British took over in 1664, the practice continued. Maps from different eras show the shoreline steadily advancing into the harbor. Water Street, which once sat on the water's edge, is now several blocks inland. Front Street, so named because it fronted the harbor, now faces modern buildings on land that didn't exist when it was named.

The most dramatic expansion came after disasters. The Great Fire of 1835 destroyed much of Lower Manhattan. Rather than haul away the debris, workers pushed it into the East River, creating new land. When old ships became unseaworthy, they were sailed to the waterfront, sunk in shallow water, and buried under fill. Archaeologists have found the remains of several 18th-century vessels beneath modern streets.

The World Trade Center site itself sits on fill. When excavation began for the original Twin Towers in the 1960s, workers removed over a million cubic yards of earth and rock. This material was deposited along the Hudson River shoreline, creating Battery Park City—92 acres of new land that now holds thousands of residents.

Walking through the Financial District, it's easy to forget you're walking on manufactured ground. The skyscrapers, the streets, the subway tunnels—all built on what was once water, now filled with centuries of New York's castoffs.

Manhattan is a monument to human ambition—and to the strange truth that one of the world's most valuable real estate markets is built, quite literally, on garbage.

Word Count: 336 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: The Guardian

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

How much of Lower Manhattan is built on artificial land?

- ☐ A) About 10 percent
- ☐ B) About 25 percent
- ☐ C) About 50 percent
- ☐ D) About 75 percent

2

What materials did Dutch colonists use to fill in the harbor?

- ☐ A) Concrete and steel
- ☐ B) Oyster shells, broken pottery, food scraps, construction waste
- ☐ C) Sand imported from beaches
- ☐ D) Soil from upstate New York

3

What does 'castoffs' mean in the final paragraph?

- ☐ A) Valuable treasures
- ☐ B) Things thrown away or discarded
- ☐ C) Fishing boats
- ☐ D) Important documents

4

How was Battery Park City created?

- ☐ A) It was always dry land
- ☐ B) Material excavated from the World Trade Center site was deposited there
- ☐ C) The Hudson River naturally dried up
- ☐ D) An earthquake raised the land

5

The passage mentions that 'Water Street' and 'Front Street' were named for their waterfront locations but are now blocks inland. How do these street names serve as 'historical evidence'? What else might city features reveal about the past?

6

The passage calls Manhattan 'a monument to human ambition.' What does it suggest about how humans reshape their environment? Are there limits to how much we should transform natural landscapes for human use?

ANSWER KEY

The City Built on Garbage

1. B) About 25 percent

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Roughly 25 percent of the land below Canal Street is artificial.'

2. B) Oyster shells, broken pottery, food scraps, construction waste

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states they filled with 'oyster shells, broken pottery, food scraps, construction waste.'

3. B) Things thrown away or discarded

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage describes land filled with garbage and debris, calling it 'centuries of New York's castoffs'—discarded items.

4. B) Material excavated from the World Trade Center site was deposited there

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'This material was deposited along the Hudson River shoreline, creating Battery Park City.'

5. Sample Response:

The street names preserve history even though the geography has changed—'Water Street' no longer touches water, proving the shoreline moved. This shows names can be archaeological evidence. Other city features that reveal history might include: building foundations below current street level, buried streams now in pipes, or neighborhoods named for features that no longer exist (like 'meadow' or 'marsh').

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. The passage shows humans dramatically reshaping nature—turning water into land using garbage and debris over centuries. This demonstrates remarkable engineering but raises questions: What ecological costs weren't considered? What happens to buried materials over time? Limits might include: environmental impact, sustainability, and respecting some natural spaces. Strong responses will weigh human needs against environmental concerns.

TEACHER GUIDE

The City Built on Garbage

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

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

- Manhattan's most valuable land sits on centuries of trash. What does this say about how we transform waste into worth?
- Filling harbors is now illegal. How do we balance the needs of growing cities with environmental protection?
- Old ships and artifacts are buried under Wall Street. Should cities dig up their history or build on top of it?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research: Investigate what archaeologists have found buried under Manhattan. Create a museum exhibit description.
- Mapping: Research the original Manhattan shoreline vs. today. Create a before/after map showing expansion.
- Debate: Was building on garbage innovative problem-solving or environmental destruction? Defend a position.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- The Guardian / BBC News