

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE TOWN WHERE EVERYONE LIVES IN ONE BUILDING

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.

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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!

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THE TOWN WHERE EVERYONE LIVES IN ONE BUILDING

In Whittier, Alaska, nearly the entire population lives inside a single building. The 14-story Begich Towers contains apartments, a post office, a church, a convenience store, a medical clinic, and a police station. Residents can go weeks without stepping outside—and during brutal winter months, many choose to do exactly that.

Whittier exists because of geography and war. During World War II, the U.S. military built a secret port here, protected from Japanese attack by mountains on three sides and accessible only through a narrow fjord. They also drilled a tunnel through the Chugach Mountains—the only land route in or out.

After the war, the military constructed Begich Towers and another large building called Hodge Tower to house soldiers. When the Army left in the 1960s, civilians moved in. Hodge Tower was eventually condemned, leaving Begich Towers as the town's sole residential building.

The location is spectacularly beautiful—surrounded by waterfalls, glaciers, and towering peaks—but also spectacularly harsh. Winter temperatures plunge well below zero. Winds regularly exceed 60 miles per hour. Snow accumulates so heavily that the town once recorded over 30 feet in a single winter. The tunnel to the outside world closes at night.

Living in one building creates an unusual community. Everyone knows everyone. Children play in the same hallways year after year. Teenagers have nowhere private to go. The convenience store owner knows what everyone buys. Privacy is scarce, but so is loneliness.

About 200 people call Whittier home year-round, though the population swells in summer when cruise ships dock and tourists flood the town. For those few months, the isolated community becomes a busy port. Then the ships leave, the tunnel closes earlier each evening, and Whittier returns to its strange, contained existence.

It's not for everyone. Some residents love the tight-knit community and stunning wilderness. Others find the isolation unbearable and leave within months. Whittier is an experiment in extreme togetherness—a town that asks: How close is too close?

Word Count: 332 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: The Guardian

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Why was Whittier originally built?

- A) As a tourist destination
- B) As a secret military port during World War II
- C) As a mining town
- D) As an experimental community

2 How do residents reach Whittier by land?

- A) By highway along the coast
- B) Through a tunnel drilled through the mountains
- C) By bridge over the fjord
- D) There is no land route

3 What does 'tight-knit' suggest about the Whittier community?

- A) Residents make clothing together
- B) People are closely connected and know each other well
- C) The buildings are packed together
- D) The weather keeps people bundled up

4 According to the passage, what is ONE disadvantage of living in one building?

- A) There is no medical care available
- B) Privacy is scarce
- C) Food is unavailable
- D) There are no children

5

The passage says living in Whittier means 'Privacy is scarce, but so is loneliness.' How are these two ideas connected? What does this trade-off reveal about community life?

6

The passage ends by asking: 'How close is too close?' What do you think? Is extreme togetherness healthy or unhealthy for communities? What level of privacy do humans need?

ANSWER KEY

The Town Where Everyone Lives in One Building

1. B) As a secret military port during World War II

DOK 1 — Recall. *The passage states: 'During World War II, the U.S. military built a secret port here.'*

2. B) Through a tunnel drilled through the mountains

DOK 1 — Recall. *The passage states: 'They also drilled a tunnel through the Chugach Mountains—the only land route in or out.'*

3. B) People are closely connected and know each other well

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. *The passage describes everyone knowing everyone and children playing together—characteristics of a 'tight-knit' or closely connected community.*

4. B) Privacy is scarce

DOK 2 — Text evidence. *The passage states: 'Privacy is scarce, but so is loneliness.'*

5. Sample Response:

The ideas are connected because the same closeness that eliminates privacy also eliminates loneliness—everyone knowing your business means someone always knows if you need help. This trade-off reveals that community involves sacrificing some individual freedom for connection. You can't have complete privacy AND complete social support. Whittier is an extreme example of this universal trade-off.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. Some might argue humans evolved in tight communities and Whittier recreates that natural state. Others might say modern humans need more privacy and personal space. Evidence from the passage: some residents 'love' it while others 'find the isolation unbearable and leave within months'—suggesting different people have different needs. Strong responses will consider both the benefits of connection and the need for personal space.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Town Where Everyone Lives in One Building

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

- An entire town in one building—school, church, store, all under one roof. What would you gain and lose living this way?
- The building exists because of extreme climate. How does environment shape community structure?
- Residents know everyone and share everything. Is this ideal community or loss of privacy?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Design: Create a floor plan for a building that contains an entire town. What would you include?
- Research: Investigate how extreme climates shape community design around the world. Compare three examples.
- Writing: Write a 'day in the life' narrative from a resident's perspective. What's gained and lost?

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- The Guardian / Japanese government records