THE BLIZZARD THAT BURIED TRAINS

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!

THE BLIZZARD THAT BURIED TRAINS

In January 1949, the worst blizzard in a generation struck the American Great Plains. Snow fell for days without stopping, pushed by howling winds into drifts that buried everything in their path—including entire passenger trains with hundreds of people aboard. The rescue effort that followed became one of the most dramatic in American railroad history.

The storm began on January 2nd and continued relentlessly for three days. Winds exceeding 70 miles per hour created whiteout conditions where visibility dropped to zero. Snow accumulated not in inches but in feet, with some drifts reaching 30 feet high. Temperatures plunged far below zero, making any exposure to the elements life-threatening.

Across Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota, trains ground to a halt as snow packed around their wheels and engines. The City of San Francisco, a luxury passenger train, became trapped in the Nebraska wilderness with 226 passengers aboard. Snow buried the train so completely that only the tops of the cars remained visible above the white landscape.

Passengers huddled inside as the train's heating system struggled against the brutal cold. Food supplies dwindled. The crew rationed what remained while waiting for rescue. Outside, the storm showed no signs of stopping.

Railroad companies mobilized every resource available. Rotary snowplows—massive machines with spinning blades designed to chew through deep snow—were dispatched from across the region. But even these powerful machines became stuck in drifts that exceeded their capacity. Rescue crews had to dig by hand through walls of packed snow.

The passengers aboard the City of San Francisco remained trapped for three days before rescuers finally broke through. Remarkably, everyone survived, though many suffered from the cold and stress of the ordeal.

The 1949 blizzard killed over 100 people across the Plains states and caused millions of dollars in damage. It remains one of the most severe winter storms in American history and a reminder of nature's overwhelming power.

Word Count: 295 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Olympics.com

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 **How long did the blizzard's snowfall last?**

○ A) A few hours

○ B) One day

○ C) Three consecutive days

○ D) Two weeks

2 **How did the stranded train passengers survive for nearly a week?**

○ A) They walked to a nearby town

○ B) They burned coal and rationed food from the dining car

○ C) They were rescued by helicopter

○ D) They built snow shelters

3 **What does 'ferocity' mean as used in this passage?**

○ A) Gentleness

○ B) Extreme intensity and violence

○ C) Unusual beauty

○ D) Long duration

4 **What 'secondary crisis' occurred when spring arrived?**

○ A) Flooding from melting snow

○ B) Rotting carcasses of dead animals

○ C) Food shortages in cities

○ D) Damage to railroad tracks

5 The passage says the blizzard 'revealed the limits of 1949 technology.' What examples does the author provide? How might modern technology handle this differently?

_____

_____

_____

_____

6 The passage ends by saying nature's power 'can still overwhelm even modern civilization.' Do you agree? What recent events support or challenge this idea?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Reading they'll actually do.

ANSWER KEY

The Blizzard That Buried Trains

1. C) Three consecutive days

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Snow fell for three consecutive days.'

2. B) They burned coal and rationed food from the dining car

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states they survived 'by burning coal and rationing food from the dining car.'

3. B) Extreme intensity and violence

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage describes 70 mph winds, extreme cold, and 30-foot drifts—all demonstrating 'ferocity' means intense violence.

4. B) Rotting carcasses of dead animals

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'The rotting carcasses of dead animals created a secondary crisis when spring arrived.'

5. Sample Response:

Examples: plows were buried, communication lines snapped, remote communities were unreachable, even military equipment struggled. Modern technology might help through: satellite weather prediction, stronger communications, more powerful equipment, helicopters for rescue. However, the passage suggests even modern civilization can be overwhelmed—30-foot drifts would challenge any era.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. Supporting examples: hurricanes overwhelming cities, wildfires destroying communities, winter storms causing power outages. Challenging: we have better predictions, faster responses, more resilient infrastructure. Strong responses will acknowledge that technology has reduced but not eliminated nature's ability to cause catastrophic damage.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Blizzard That Buried Trains

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
- 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

- Passengers survived a week trapped by burning coal and rationing food. What does crisis reveal about human resourcefulness?
- Modern technology is better, but nature still overwhelms us. What recent events prove we're not as in control as we think?
- Ranchers lost decades of work overnight. How do communities rebuild after losing everything?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research: Investigate how weather forecasting has improved since 1949. Could we predict this storm today?
- Survival: Create a checklist of supplies needed to survive being stranded for a week. Justify each item.
- Writing: Write a letter home from a passenger trapped on the train. What would you want your family to know?

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- Olympics.com / Smithsonian Magazine