
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD OF 1919

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 GREAT MOLASSES FLOOD OF 1919

On January 15, 1919, a wave of molasses swept through Boston's North End neighborhood at 35 miles per hour. It rose 25 feet high at its peak—taller than a two-story building. When it was over, 21 people had drowned in syrup.

The disaster began at the Purity Distilling Company, where a massive storage tank held 2.3 million gallons of molasses—enough to fill roughly 3.5 Olympic swimming pools. The molasses was waiting to be fermented into industrial alcohol. The tank was 50 feet tall and 90 feet in diameter, a giant steel cylinder looming over the busy streets below.

Without warning, the tank burst.

The sound was deafening—witnesses described it as a roar followed by a rapid-fire rat-tat-tat as thousands of rivets shot through the air like machine gun bullets. A wall of thick, brown syrup—weighing approximately 13,000 tons—surged into the streets at terrifying speed.

The wave demolished everything in its path. It crushed wooden buildings into splinters. It lifted a truck and smashed it against a pillar. It knocked an elevated train off its tracks. People, horses, and dogs were swept up and trapped in a suffocating, sticky mass. Some victims were found cemented to the ground.

Rescue efforts were nightmarish. Molasses in January is cold and thick, with the consistency of heavy tar. First responders couldn't run—they had to wade through hip-deep syrup that pulled at their boots with every step. Victims couldn't be simply lifted out; they had to be pried loose. Horses trapped in the muck had to be shot to end their suffering.

Investigations later revealed catastrophic negligence. The tank had been poorly constructed and never properly tested. Residents had reported molasses leaking from the seams for weeks. Rather than investigate, the company simply painted the tank brown to hide the evidence.

The cleanup took weeks. Crews used salt water, sand, and sawdust to absorb the mess. The harbor ran brown for months. And for decades afterward, Boston residents swore that on hot summer days, the North End still smelled faintly of molasses—a sticky ghost of the day the city's sweetness turned deadly.

Word Count: 356 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: The Guardian

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

How fast did the molasses wave travel through the streets?

- ☐ A) 5 miles per hour
- ☐ B) 15 miles per hour
- ☐ C) 35 miles per hour
- ☐ D) 55 miles per hour

2

What was supposed to happen to the molasses in the tank?

- ☐ A) It would be sold as food
- ☐ B) It would be fermented into industrial alcohol
- ☐ C) It would be shipped overseas
- ☐ D) It would be used to pave roads

3

What does the word 'negligence' most likely mean in this passage?

- ☐ A) Extreme caution and care
- ☐ B) Failure to take proper care or precautions
- ☐ C) A type of construction material
- ☐ D) Criminal activity

4

According to the passage, how did the company respond when residents reported molasses leaking from the tank?

- ☐ A) They immediately repaired the tank
- ☐ B) They evacuated the neighborhood
- ☐ C) They painted the tank brown to hide the evidence
- ☐ D) They hired inspectors to investigate

5

The passage uses several descriptive details to help readers understand the scale of this disaster. Choose two specific details and explain how each one helps readers visualize or understand what happened.

6

The company knew about the leaking tank but chose to hide the evidence rather than fix the problem. What does this decision reveal about business practices and public safety in 1919? Do you think similar situations could happen today? Why or why not?

ANSWER KEY

The Great Molasses Flood of 1919

1. C) 35 miles per hour

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage opens by stating the wave 'swept through Boston's North End neighborhood at 35 miles per hour.'

2. B) It would be fermented into industrial alcohol

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The molasses was waiting to be fermented into industrial alcohol.'

3. B) Failure to take proper care or precautions

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage describes the tank being 'poorly constructed,' 'never properly tested,' and leaks being hidden—all failures to take proper care.

4. C) They painted the tank brown to hide the evidence

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'Rather than investigate, the company simply painted the tank brown to hide the evidence.'

5. Sample Response:

Two effective details: (1) The tank held 'enough to fill roughly 3.5 Olympic swimming pools'—this comparison helps readers visualize the enormous volume, since most people know how large a pool is. (2) The wave was '25 feet high at its peak—taller than a two-story building'—this helps readers understand the terrifying height by comparing it to something familiar. Both details make abstract numbers concrete.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. The decision shows that in 1919, profits often came before safety, and regulations or inspections may have been weak or unenforced. Today, we have building codes, safety inspections, and legal consequences that make such obvious negligence less likely—but cost-cutting still causes disasters (bridge collapses, factory accidents). Strong responses will acknowledge both improvements in regulation and ongoing risks when companies prioritize money over safety.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Great Molasses Flood of 1919

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 company painted the leaking tank brown to hide evidence rather than fix it. Why do organizations sometimes hide problems instead of solving them?
- 21 people died because of corporate negligence. How should companies be held accountable for preventable disasters?
- Could a similar disaster happen today, or have we learned enough? What modern safety systems might prevent it?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Science: Research viscosity. Why does cold molasses move differently than water? Create an experiment proposal.
- Research: Find another industrial disaster caused by negligence. Create a cause-and-effect chart for both events.
- Writing: Write a newspaper article from the day after the flood. Include 'eyewitness' quotes.

DIFFERENTIATION

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

SOURCE

- The Guardian / Book: '438 Days' by Jonathan Franklin