

“This Is the End of Chicago!”

The harrowing true story of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871

About the Story

Lexile: 880L

For qualitative complexity factors, go to Scope Online.

Learning Objective: to identify cause-and-effect relationships that appear in a narrative nonfiction article

Key Skills: text structure, key ideas and details, cause and effect, author’s craft

Essential Questions:

- How do advances in technology affect our lives?
- Why do we study the past?
- How and why does misinformation spread?

Standards:

The article and lesson support these Common Core anchor standards: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.5, R.7, W.2, SL.1, L.4, L.5, L.6

For more standards information—including TEKS—go to Scope Online.



Your Teaching Support Package

Find your full suite of support materials at scope.scholastic.com.

Audio:

- Author read-aloud
- Text-to-speech
- Vocabulary

Video: Behind the Scenes

Differentiated Articles:

- Lower-Lexile version
- Spanish language version

Connected readings from the Scope archives:

- Narrative Nonfiction: “Out of the Flames”
- Narrative Nonfiction: “Our Beautiful Town Is Gone”
- Poem: “Fire Flowers”
- Narrative Nonfiction: “Day of Disaster”

Skill Building Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Preparing to Write: Analyzing Cause and Effect
- Close Reading and Critical Thinking
- Vocabulary Definitions and Practice
- Video Discussion Questions
- Nonfiction Elements
- **Core Skills Workout:** Summarizing*, Text Features, Central Ideas and Details*
- Choice Board
- Quiz*
- Contest Entry Form

*Available on two levels



Step-by-Step Lesson

Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1. Preparing to Read

20 minutes

Do Now: Make a List (5 minutes)

- Project this prompt on your board:

Since 1922, the National Fire Prevention Association has sponsored the public observance of Fire Prevention Week in October. It is observed each year in commemoration of the Great Chicago Fire, which began on October 8, 1871, and caused devastating damage. In 1925, President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed Fire Prevention Week a national observance, making it the longest-running public health observance in the United States.

On a piece of paper, make a list of as many practices and technologies you can think of that we use to prevent and extinguish fires today.

- Have students share their responses. Then tell them that today they will read about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Watch the Video (10 minutes)

- Watch the **Behind the Scenes** video, in which author Lauren Tarshis talks about her writing and research process. Have students respond to the **Video Discussion Questions** (available in your Resources tab) in small groups or independently.

Preview Vocabulary (5 minutes)

- Project **Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice**. Review the definitions as a class. (Optionally, have students complete the practice activity for homework.) Highlighted words: *bedraggled, fouled, inferno, metropolis, scapegoat, sweltered*

2. Reading and Discussing

45 minutes

- Have a volunteer read the As You Read box on page 5 of the magazine or at the top of the digital story page.

- Read the article once through as a class. (*Differentiation: Share the **lower-Lexile version** of the article with students who may need it.*) Optionally, have students listen to the article **read-aloud** while they follow along. The read-aloud is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Divide students into groups to read the story again and respond to the following close-reading questions.

Close-Reading Questions

(10 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

- 1. How does the section “High Hopes” contribute to the article?** (text structure) *The section “High Hopes” helps readers better understand the time and place in which the Great Chicago Fire occurred, and it introduces people who will be affected by the fire later in the article. Tarshis provides important details that help transport readers back to 1871 Chicago: Women didn’t have the right to vote or work in most professions, large numbers of immigrants were coming to America, and Chicago had dairies that delivered fresh milk to people’s homes each morning by horse-drawn wagon.*
- 2. In the section “A Booming City,” how does Tarshis portray Chicago’s growth in the 1800s?** (key ideas and details) *Tarshis describes Chicago in the 1800s as part of an exciting new era of motion, connection, and innovation that was dawning in the United States. She also makes clear that not everyone benefited from this stunning growth: Nations such as the Potawatomi Nation were forced off their lands, human waste and garbage polluted the air and water, and many immigrants worked low-paying and often dangerous jobs.*
- 3. What factors made it easy for the Great Chicago Fire to ignite?** (cause and effect) *According to the article, fire risks were everywhere at the time of the Great Chicago Fire—people used flames from candles and lanterns as a light source, and wood- and coal-powered stoves for cooking. Plus, the weather conditions in the summer of 1871 were far hotter and drier than normal, and the days before the fire were especially warm with hot wind gusts.*
- 4. What factors caused the Great Chicago Fire to burn out of control?** (cause and effect, key ideas and details) *As Tarshis explains, a series of errors and confusion delayed the arrival of the fire department to the O’Learys’ neighborhood. What’s more, the firefighters must have been completely exhausted upon arrival: The entire department had spent 17 hours fighting another fire the previous day. And even though the department was better equipped than those of most cities at the time, the 190 firefighters, 172 alarm boxes, and pumper trucks they had were not nearly enough to keep a city of Chicago’s size safe. Another reason the fire burned out of control was the weather. The hot, dry wind picked up flames and embers and spread them across the*

city—a city made almost entirely out of wood. At the time, roads, sidewalks, bridges, and buildings were constructed out of the cheap and plentiful material, and they caught fire all too easily.

5. **Identify examples of figurative language in the section “The Barn Is Afire!”** What does this language help readers understand? (author’s craft) *Tarshis’s use of figurative language helps readers visualize the fire and understand just how violent and fast-moving it was. For example, she writes that “the hot, dry wind pulled sheets of flame from house to house” and that “like burning seeds,” the embers “grew into new fires wherever they landed.” She then describes the fire in a way that portrays it as a hungry monster, writing that “the fire was now hundreds of yards wide and growing fast, its flaming jaws devouring the endless feast of wood,” and that explosions inside the fire “tore rooftops from buildings and hurled them into the streets.”*

Critical-Thinking Questions

(5 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **Tarshis explains that Catherine O’Leary became the scapegoat for the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Why might some people unfairly blame someone for wrongdoing in this way?** *Answers will vary. Students may offer that when something terrible happens, people are angry and want answers. They sometimes want someone to blame. Perhaps it’s more comforting to believe that one person is responsible for a disaster than to accept that a combination of small decisions or bad luck could lead to something as tragic as the Great Chicago Fire. Students may also offer that, as Tarshis explains, the lies people spread about Catherine O’Leary were fueled by prejudice against Irish immigrants.*
2. **What lessons can be learned from this disaster story?** *Answers will vary. Students may say that the story shows the importance of paying attention to the warnings and valuable lessons that can be learned from those around us. The Chicago mayor had dismissed the Chief Fire Marshal’s pleas for additional firefighters and equipment, which the Fire Marshal made after observing what was happening in other big cities and within Chicago. Students may also offer that the disaster offers a lesson in resilience, as Chicago was able to rebuild and flourish again just a decade after the fire—and passed strict laws to make the city safer from fire. Students may also say that the story highlights the importance of helping others through the examples of the cities that rallied to send food, funds, and supplies to Chicago and the strangers who extinguished Bessie’s burning coat with their bare hands.*

3. Skill Building and Writing

20 minutes

- Have students complete **Preparing to Write: Analyzing Cause and Effect**. This activity will help them evaluate evidence and organize their ideas in preparation for the writing prompt on page 10 in the printed magazine and at the bottom of the digital story page.
- Alternatively, have students choose a culminating task from the **Choice Board**, a menu of differentiated activities.

Connected readings from the *Scope* archives about devastating fires:

- [Narrative Nonfiction: “Out of the Flames”](#) (November 2018)
- [Narrative Nonfiction: “Our Beautiful Town Is Gone”](#) (October 2019)
- [Poem: “Fire Flowers”](#) (October 2019)
- [Narrative Nonfiction: “Day of Disaster”](#) (November 2019)