

The Killer Wave

The amazing true story of Boston's Great Molasses Flood—and why it still matters today

About the Story

Lexile: 970L

For qualitative complexity factors, go to the Story tab.

Learning Objective: to explore key ideas and details in a work of narrative nonfiction

Key Skills: setting, literary devices, descriptive language, mood, inference, key ideas and details

Essential Questions:

- Why is it important to learn about disasters from the past?
- Why are laws important?
- What is justice?

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](https://www.scholastic.com).

Audio:

- Article read-aloud
- Text-to-speech
- Vocabulary
- NEW! Immersive read-aloud

Differentiated Articles:

- Lower-Lexile version
- Spanish language version

Connected readings from the Scope archives:

- "White Death in the Cascades"
- "'This Is the End of Chicago!'"
- "The Great Stink"
- "Day of Disaster"
- "Out of the Flames"

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

- Writing Planner: The Boston Molasses Flood
- Close Reading and Critical Thinking
- Descriptive Writing
- Choice Board
- Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice
- **Core Skills Workout:** Summarizing*, Nonfiction Elements
- Quiz*
- Contest Entry Form

*Available on two levels

Step-by-Step Lesson

1. Preparing to Read

15 minutes

Do-Now: Solve a riddle (5 minutes)

- Project the riddle below on your whiteboard:

I'm tropical.

I've been grown and used by humans since ancient times.

Boil me and I turn into sweet crystals.

Boiled again, I turn into a sticky syrup called molasses.

Boiled again, I'm used to make dynamite and other explosives.

What am I?

The answer is sugarcane, a tropical grass used to make sugar and molasses. (For those unfamiliar with molasses, you might mention that it is used in desserts like gingerbread.) Tell students that today they will read about a strange and terrible molasses disaster that struck Boston more than a century ago.

Preview Vocabulary (10 minutes)

- Project the **Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice**. Review the definitions as a class. Highlighted words: *comprehensive, distillation, hastily, imminent, laden, liable, rivets, shoddily*. Optionally, print or share the interactive link directly to your LMS and have students preview the words and complete the activity before class. Audio pronunciations of the words and a read-aloud are embedded in the interactive slides.

2. Reading and Discussing

45 minutes

- Invite a volunteer to read the **As You Read** box on page 6 of the magazine or at the top of the digital story page.
- Read the article once as a class. (*Differentiation: Share the **lower-Lexile version** or the **Spanish version** of the article.*) Optionally, bring students into the action of the story with our new **Immersive Read-Aloud**, in which they hear the story accompanied by music and sound effects. The Immersive 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 article again and respond to the following close-reading questions.

Close-Reading Questions (20 minutes)

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

- 1. In the introduction, what is the purpose of the information about World War I and the influenza pandemic?** (setting) *This information puts the molasses disaster in historical context. It tells what the people of the North End had gone through in the recent past and helps the reader understand their emotions. It also evokes the reader's sympathy and makes the molasses disaster seem all the more tragic.*
- 2. What aspects of the giant molasses tank bothered residents of the North End? Why did some people decide not to complain?** (key ideas and details) *Residents were bothered by the fact that the tank was ugly, blocked light, made rumbling noises, and leaked. Some residents didn't complain because they felt powerless against the giant company that owned the tank, USIA. Also, many people mistrusted immigrants at the time; some residents thought that no one would listen to them if they complained.*
- 3. What effect does the repetition of "Rat, tat, tat, tat" at the start of the section "A Violent Swirl" create?** (literary devices) *The repetition of "Rat, tat, tat, tat" builds suspense and creates a feeling of impending doom. The reader knows something terrible is coming.*
- 4. How does author Lauren Tarshis describe the wave of molasses? What mood does she create?** (descriptive language; mood) *Author Lauren Tarshis uses vivid descriptive language. She writes that the molasses wave was more destructive than a wave of ocean water. She uses words and phrases like "violent swirl," "staggering," and "colossal" to suggest the size and speed of the wave. She shows the wave's destructive power by listing the things it wrecked—a three-story fire station, houses, cars. The mood could be described as terrifying, urgent, or panicky.*
- 5. Referring to the trial, the author writes, "For the residents of the North End, it was a major victory." Why was the trial a "major victory"?** (inference) *The immigrants who lived in the North End had little influence and few resources to fight a big company like USIA. Before the explosion, they felt powerless. Yet they managed to fight for and get justice during the trial. Their victory gave them power.*
- 6. How did the Boston Molasses Flood lead to important changes that make us safer today?** (key ideas and details) *Because of the trial's ruling, comprehensive building codes were passed in Massachusetts and then adopted in cities and states across the country. These codes are rules*

that must be followed when constructing homes, buildings, or other structures to ensure that the work is done properly and safely.

Critical-Thinking Questions

(5 minutes)

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

- 1. How might the 1919 disaster in Boston have been prevented?** *It seems like the disaster could have been prevented quite easily. It was common knowledge that the molasses tank was poorly constructed. It leaked, shards broke off, and it made strange noises for years before it fell apart. If the tank had been properly built and maintained, the spill likely never would have happened.*
- 2. What lessons can be learned from the Boston Molasses Flood?** *Students may offer that this story shows the consequences of putting business interests over people, and of rushing or cutting corners when building something. It also reminds us that our legal system can and should hold businesses accountable for their actions.*
- 3. Why is it important to learn about historical disasters like the Boston Molasses Flood?** *Answers will vary. Students may say that learning about the Boston Molasses Flood and other historical disasters provides valuable information that influences our practices and policies today.*

3. Skill Building and Writing

30 minutes

- Have students complete the **Writing Planner: The Boston Molasses Flood**. This activity will help them organize their ideas in preparation for the activity on page 9 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 disasters that led to new safety laws and regulations:

- [Narrative Nonfiction: "White Death in the Cascades" \(September 2022\)](#)
- [Narrative Nonfiction: "'This Is the End of Chicago!'" \(October 2021\)](#)
- [Paired Texts: "The Great Stink" and "Toilets of the Future" \(April 2020\)](#)
- [Narrative Nonfiction: "Day of Disaster" \(November 2019\)](#)
- [Narrative Nonfiction: "Out of the Flames" \(November 2018\)](#)

Support for Multilingual Learners

These questions are designed to help students respond to the text at a level that's right for them.

Yes/No Questions

Ask students to demonstrate comprehension with a very simple answer.

1. Were most residents of the North End immigrants? *Yes, they were.*
2. Was the molasses tank built well? *No, it wasn't.*
3. Were people living near the tank worried that it was unsafe? *Yes, they were.*
4. Did USIA accept responsibility for the disaster? *No, it didn't.*
5. Are buildings today safer than they were in 1919? *Yes, they are.*

Either/Or Questions

Encourage students to use language from the question in their answer.

1. Was the North End neighborhood home to poor residents or wealthy residents? *The North End was home to poor residents.*
2. Did USIA build the molasses tank slowly or in a hurry? *USIA built the molasses tank in a hurry.*
3. Did USIA listen to people's concerns about the tank or ignore them? *USIA ignored people's concerns about the tank.*
4. Can USIA's actions be described as responsible or irresponsible? *USIA's actions can be described as irresponsible.*
5. Was the North End destroyed forever or was it rebuilt? *The North End was rebuilt.*

Short-Answer Questions

Challenge students to produce simple answers on their own.

1. What happened to USIA as a result of the lawsuit? *USIA was found responsible for the disaster and was forced to pay \$628,000.*
2. What changes happened in Boston and across the country as a result of the lawsuit? *There are now rules to follow when constructing buildings and other structures to ensure things are done properly and safely.*

Language-Acquisition Springboard: Descriptive Language

After reading the article, point out some of the vivid language the author uses to describe the molasses tank and the flood. Ask students to describe what they see in their mind's eye when they read these phrases.

Sample questions below.

- Tarshis writes, "Every time the tank was refilled, it rumbled and groaned, as though its steel walls were crying out in pain." What do the words "groaning" and "crying out" make you think of? (*a person who is sick or injured*) Why do you think the author compares the molasses tank to a sick or injured person? (*to emphasize that the tank was in bad condition and making noises that alerted everyone to its worsening condition*)
- Tarshis writes, "The molasses formed a colossal brown wave—25 feet high at first, and traveling at a staggering 35 miles per hour." What comes to mind when you hear "wave"? (*an ocean; the sea*) Why do you think the author uses this word to describe the molasses? (*to show its great size and power*)