

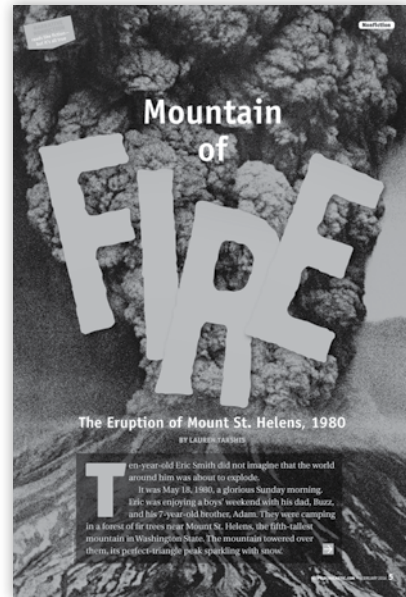
Mountain of Fire

One family's close encounter with the eruption of Mount St. Helens

Preview: This gripping article describes the harrowing experience of a family camping near Mount St. Helens when it erupted in 1980. We've paired the article with an editorial about the power of natural disaster stories.

Learning Objective: to apply ideas in the essay to the nonfiction article

Key Skills: supporting details, figurative language, key ideas, synthesis, author's craft



Step-by-Step Lesson Plan

Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1 Preparing to Read

Watch the video.

(10 minutes, activity sheet online)

- Project or distribute the **Video Discussion Questions**. Preview the questions as a class.
- Show the **Behind the Scenes video**. Have students answer the discussion questions in small groups.

Preview vocabulary.

(5 minutes, activity sheet online)

Project or distribute our **Vocabulary Words and Definitions** for students to refer to as they read. Highlighted words: *catastrophic, debris, evacuate, glacial, ice ages, landslides, molten, smoldering*. Assign the practice activity for homework.

2 Reading the Article

(30 minutes, activity sheets online)

- Give students a few minutes to preview the text features. Then have a volunteer read aloud the As You Read box on page 6.

- Read the article once as a class.
- Break students into groups to read the editorial “The Power of Natural Disaster Stories” and discuss the following questions, which draw on both of the texts:

Close-Reading Questions

(10 minutes, activity sheet online)

- ▶ Identify details in the opening section of “Mountain of Fire” that help you understand what the eruption was like for the Smiths. (supporting details) *Details include that a gray cloud blocked out the sun; hot, light rocks fell on the Smiths; a loud roar was followed by a blast of air; 500-year-old trees fell; hot ash fell from the sky; the ground shook; the air was hot.*
- ▶ Reread the second paragraph in the section “Dangerous Weather Changes.” What does it mean to “keep a low profile”? How does author Lauren Tarshis personify the volcano in this paragraph? (figurative language) *To keep a low profile is to try to stay unnoticed. Tarshis describes volcanoes as if they choose to do human activities: She writes that they “sit*

silently,” “release lazy puffs,” and “go back to sleep” (as well as “keep a low profile”).

► In “The Power of Natural Disaster Stories,” what two main reasons does Kristin Lewis give for why people are drawn to natural disaster stories? (key ideas) According to Lewis, people are drawn to natural disaster stories because we emotionally connect to the victims, and because we are fascinated by the power of nature.

► Lewis describes natural disasters as “awesome displays of the power of the natural world.” Using information from “Mountain of Fire,” explain how the eruption of Mount St. Helens fits this description. (synthesis) According to Tarshis, the eruption of Mount St. Helens turned 250 square miles of wilderness into a “smoldering wasteland.” The eruption caused a devastating landslide that swept away everything in its path, including homes and 500-year-old trees. The eruption also tore 1,300 feet off the summit of the mountain and killed nearly every living thing around it.

► Why might Lewis have included information about the wildfires in California in her article? (author’s craft) The author includes the information about wildfires in California to support her point that humans are drawn to stories about natural disasters. She explains that when the fires began, she “was glued to the news” and “clicked on endless images of destruction.” Also, Lewis is from California; she likely chose to highlight the wildfires because they were of particular interest to her.

• Bring the class back together to discuss the following critical-thinking questions:

Critical-Thinking Questions

(7 minutes, activity sheet online)

► Do you think it was reasonable for Eric’s dad to believe that his family would be safe when they went hiking on May 18, 1980? Explain. *Answers*

will vary. Students may say that yes, Eric’s dad was reasonable: Mount St. Helens had not erupted since the late 1850s, and people had come to think of it as safe. Also, although the volcano had shown signs of activity in March, that activity had stopped and logging companies had sent workers back to work. This would have sent a message that the area was safe. Additionally, Eric’s dad took his sons 11 miles from the volcano—

perhaps he did not understand how large an area could be affected by an eruption. On the other hand, it had been only about a month since the earthquakes and smoke had stopped; some students may say that Eric’s dad should have been more cautious.

► The subtitle of the editorial is “How to triumph over tragedy.”

In what ways can people triumph over tragedy after a natural disaster?

Draw on both texts in your answer. People can triumph over tragedy by being resilient—as the Smiths were when they rebuilt their home—and by helping those who have been affected, through donations or search-and-rescue efforts like those made by the people who found the Smiths. People can also triumph over tragedy by studying natural disasters and learning how to predict them or at least be more prepared for them.

► Would you be comfortable hiking near Mount St. Helens today? Explain. Students may say yes because, according to the essay, we can now predict eruptions more accurately than we could in 1980. Students may say no because they just wouldn’t want to take the risk.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What can we learn from natural disasters?
.....

What is our relationship to nature?
.....

Why are natural disasters intriguing?

3 Skill Focus: Connecting Texts

(15 minutes, activity sheet online)

Distribute the activity sheet **The Story of Mount St. Helens** for students to complete as homework. This activity will prepare them to respond to the writing prompt on page 9.

Differentiation

For Struggling Readers

In “The Power of Natural Disaster Stories,” the author writes that humans are drawn to stories about natural disasters. What is it about the story of Mount St. Helens that might draw people in?

For Advanced Readers

Research another natural disaster. In a well-organized essay, explain why it’s important to study and remember natural disasters. Include information from your research, “Mountain of Fire,” and “The Power of Natural Disaster Stories.”

Complexity Factors

See how these texts will challenge your students.

Purpose: “Mountain of Fire” describes the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens from the perspective of a family that survived the event. It also offers scientific and historical information about volcanoes. The editorial examines why natural disaster stories are so compelling.

Structure: The text includes narrative and informational passages. The editorial contains cause-and-effect structures.

Language Conventionality and Clarity:

- **Vocabulary:** challenging academic and domain-specific words (e.g., *catastrophic*, *evacuate*, *molten*)
- **Figurative language:** metaphors, similes, personification

Knowledge Demands: The texts refer to nuclear bombs and to numerous locations.

Lexile: 930L (article); 1080L (editorial)

Literature Connections

Other curricular stories of natural disasters:

- *The Big Wave* by Pearl S. Buck (novella)
- “The Wreck of the Hesperus” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (poem)
- *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy (nonfiction)

ONLINE RESOURCES

AUDIO: Hear the article read aloud.

VIDEO: Go behind the scenes of the article with the author.

ACTIVITIES TO PRINT OR PROJECT:

- Close-Reading and Critical-Thinking Questions*
- Vocabulary*
- Video Discussion Questions*
- The Story of Mount St. Helens*
- Read, Think, Explain: Identifying Nonfiction Elements (two levels)
- Quiz (two levels)
- Contest Entry Form
- Core Skill: Central Ideas and Details
- Core Skill: Summarizing (two levels)
- Core Skill: Text Structure
- Core Skill: Text Features

*Supports the lesson plan