

White Death in the Cascades

The true story of the Wellington Avalanche of 1910

About the Story

Lexile: 860L

For qualitative complexity factors, go to Scope Online.

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

Key Skills: key ideas and details, text structure, setting, author's craft

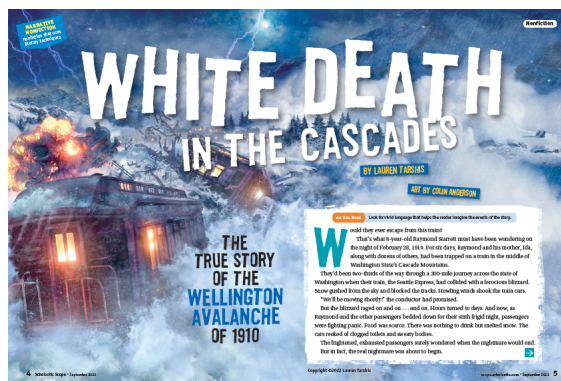
Essential Questions:

- How have railroads shaped American history?
- Who's in control: humans or nature?
- What is progress?

Standards:

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

Differentiated Articles:

- Lower-Lexile version
- Spanish language version

Connected readings from the Scope archives: Stories about . . .

- the 1910s
- how railroads have shaped American history

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

- Sensory Details Scavenger Hunt
 - Writing Planner:
The Wellington Disaster
 - Close Reading and Critical Thinking
 - Choice Board
 - Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice
 - **Core Skills Workout:**
Summarizing*, Text Features, Text Structure*, Nonfiction Elements
 - Quiz*
 - Contest Entry Form
- *Available on two levels

Step-by-Step Lesson

1. Preparing to Read

25 minutes

Do Now: Museum Gallery Walk (20 minutes)

- **Display primary sources:** Before class, print and hang the following texts and images “gallery style” so that students will be able to circulate throughout the room, with small groups clustering around each primary source.
 - [American Progress \(painting, 1873\)](#)
 - [“We’ll Keep the Tracks Safe for You” \(sheet music, 1919\)](#)
 - [“New map of the Union Pacific Railway, the short, quick and safe line to all points west” \(map, 1883\)](#)
- **Have students analyze each primary source in the exhibit:** Students should carry a pencil and a journal for recording notes as they silently tour the exhibit. The sample questions below from the Library of Congress can guide students through the analysis process. Project them on your whiteboard or post them at each station.
 - *What do you notice first?*
 - *Find something small but interesting.*
 - *Where do you think this came from?*
 - *Why do you think somebody made this?*
 - *Who do you think was the audience for this item?*
 - *What do you notice that you can’t explain?*
 - *What do you think was happening when this was made?*
 - *What do you wonder about?*

For more primary-source analysis tools for students from the LOC, click [here](#).

- **Debrief:** Have students share their observations, reflections, and questions—and discuss how they might find answers to their questions. Then ask: *Based on these documents, what conclusions can you draw about railroads and early train travel in America?* Tell students that they are about to read a story about a train disaster that occurred in 1910.

Preview Vocabulary (5 minutes)

- **Project Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice.** Review the definitions as a class. Highlighted words: *careened, encroachment, potential, rickety, telegraph*. Optionally, print or share the interactive link directly to your LMS and have students preview the words and complete the activity independently beforehand. (Audio pronunciations of the words and a read-aloud of the definitions are embedded on the interactive slides.)

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 as a class. (*Differentiation: Share the **lower-Lexile version** or the **Spanish version** of the article.*) Optionally, have students listen to author Lauren Tarshis read her article aloud while they follow along. The **audio 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

(15 minutes)

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

1. **How does author Lauren Tarshis portray the United States at the turn of the 20th century (the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s)? Why is this information important to the story?** (key ideas and details) *Tarshis portrays the turn of the 20th century as a time of great change in the U.S. New electric lights, motorcars, skyscrapers, and factories were transforming American life; everything seemed to be getting bigger, faster, brighter, better. This information helps readers understand why people were shocked by the Wellington disaster: In 1910, few imagined such a disaster could happen.*
2. **What does the section “Iron Horses” help readers understand?** (text structure; setting) *The section “Iron Horses” helps readers understand that trains transformed American life in both positive and negative ways. On one hand, expanding railroads connected people, places, and goods. On the other hand, the expansion of railroads had tragic consequences: the destruction of Native Americans’ homelands, the horrific working conditions for railroad builders and workers, and the loss of lives in train disasters.*
3. **Sensory details use descriptive words that appeal to the five senses; they allow readers to read the author’s words and feel like they’re living in the story. List examples of sensory details in the article. What do these details add to the story?** ✨ (author’s craft) *Answers will vary but may include “Snow gushed from the sky,” “Howling winds shook the train cars,” “The cars reeked of clogged toilets and sweaty bodies,” “massive hunks of snow broke loose from the steep mountainside that loomed above,” “the snow turned into a killer wave,” “It careened down the mountainside, obliterating everything in its path,” “Gleaming steel skyscrapers*

soared higher than the 1,000-year-old trees being chopped down to build new houses and factories,” “And rising above it all was the sound—whooo whooo!—of train whistles,” “with two shrill shrieks of its whistle and a puff of steam,” “Lulled by the gentle sway of the train and the clackety-clack of the wheels on the rails,” and “all Raymond could see was a thick swirl of snow.” These details help readers feel like they’ve been transported to 1910 and are living in Tarshis’s story, experiencing what Raymond Starrett experienced.

✴ The **Sensory Details Scavenger Hunt** in your Resources tab reviews sensory details and contains a graphic organizer for recording examples, if you’d like to go deeper with sensory details.

4. **What made train travel through the Cascade Mountains so treacherous?** (key ideas and details) *More snow fell in the Cascade Mountains than perhaps anywhere in the world; blizzards and avalanches were and still are common there.*
5. **Consider these lines from page 9: “Did Raymond sense the growing panic? Did he hear the muffled roars of distant avalanches that terrified passengers as they lay awake at night? Did he gag at the stench that filled the train car, or overhear the crew whispering that food was now running low at Bailets?” Why do you think Tarshis uses a series of questions here?** (author’s craft) *Tarshis likely uses questions here because she doesn’t know for certain how Raymond was experiencing the unfolding nightmare; there is likely no record of what Raymond was thinking, wondering, or picking up on in these moments. By using questions, Tarshis is able to convey what was happening around Raymond while telling the reader that we can’t know exactly how he was experiencing it.*

Critical-Thinking Questions

(5 minutes)

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

1. **Tarshis writes, “That said, the Wellington disaster was not the first time, or the last, when humans would pay the price for underestimating nature’s power.” What does she mean? Can you think of other examples when humans have underestimated nature’s power?** *Tarshis means that throughout history, humans have failed to recognize the strength of nature’s forces and suffered disastrous consequences for it—and that we will surely make the same mistake again. When we underestimate nature, we overestimate our own strength and ingenuity. Examples might include disasters such as the “unsinkable” Titanic going down after colliding with an iceberg or climbers who died on Mount Everest.*
2. **What lessons can be learned from the story of the Wellington Avalanche of 1910?** *Answers will vary. Students may offer that we shouldn’t underestimate nature’s power, that the desire for profit shouldn’t be placed above safety, and that everyone’s perception of progress is not the same.*

3. Consider the primary sources from the gallery walk. Does reading the article confirm, challenge, or change any of the conclusions you made about railroads and early train travel? If so, how? *Answers will vary.*

3. Skill Building and Writing

30 minutes

- Have students complete **Writing Planner: The Wellington Disaster**. This activity will help them organize their ideas in preparation for the activity 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 reading from the *Scope* archives:

Stories that also take place in the 1910s:

- Narrative Nonfiction: [“Attack at Sea”](#) (December 2015/January 2016)
- Paired Texts: [“The Fire-Breather”](#) (February 2017)
- Narrative Nonfiction: [“The Shattered Sky”](#) (November 2017)
- Narrative Nonfiction: [“Out of the Flames”](#) (November 2018)
- Narrative Nonfiction: [“The Pigeon Hero of World War I”](#) (March 2019)
- Narrative Nonfiction: [“Frozen Dreams”](#) (February 2020)
- Drama: [“The Night of Terror”](#) (March 2020)

Stories that explore how railroads have shaped American history:

- Paired Texts: [“The Amazing History of Shopping in America”](#) and [“The Rise of Amazon”](#) (October 2019)
- Paired Texts: [“The Vanishing Beasts”](#) and [“Return of the Buffalo”](#) (April 2021)
- Narrative Nonfiction: [“This Is the End of Chicago!”](#) (October 2021)

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. Did train travel cause more people to move west? *Yes, it did.*
2. Did the Seattle Express begin its journey in Spokane, Washington? *Yes, it did.*
3. Was Raymond and his mother's train car luxurious? *Yes, it was.*
4. Was the hotel in Wellington able to feed the passengers? *Yes, it was.*
5. Did Raymond make it out of Wellington alive? *Yes, he did.*

Either/Or Questions

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

1. Was traveling on the first trains safe and fast or slow and dangerous? *Traveling on the first trains was slow and dangerous.*
2. Were the tracks blocked by snow or by other trains? *The tracks were blocked by snow.*
3. Were the passengers stuck on the train for six hours or six days and nights? *The passengers were stuck on the train for six days and nights.*
4. Was the train parked on the edge of a canyon or inside a tunnel? *The train was parked on the edge of a canyon.*
5. On the day of the disaster, did the temperature rise or fall? *On the day of the disaster, the temperature rose.*

Short-Answer Questions

Challenge students to produce simple answers on their own.

1. Why was traveling in the Cascade Mountains so dangerous? *The Cascade Mountains are one of the snowiest places in the world. Trains faced blizzards and avalanches.*
2. Why did some people blame the Great Northern Railway for the disaster? *Some people blamed the Great Northern Railway for the disaster because it knowingly sent two trains into a blizzard.*

Language-Acquisition Springboard

Boost students' language skills by fostering appreciation for literary devices. After reading the article, tell students that *onomatopoeia* means words that sound like the thing they stand for. Ask:

1. What makes the *whumph* sound in the story? *the sound of the snowpack breaking loose from the mountain*
2. What makes the *whooo whooo* sound in the story? *the train's whistle*
3. What makes the *clackety-clack* sound in the story? *the train traveling along the tracks*

Ask students to think of other sound words. Challenge them to make the sound represented by each word, using their bodies or items they have nearby. Some sound words they may use include: *bang, buzz, click, crack, crunch, hiss, hoot, hum, rumble, and snap.*