



Social Studies Exemplary Text Student Handout

Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn. The city boasted having 59,500 buildings, many of them—such as the Courthouse and the Tribune Building—large and ornately decorated. The trouble was that about two-thirds of all these structures were made entirely of wood. Many of the remaining buildings (even the ones proclaimed to be “fireproof”) looked solid, but were actually jerrybuilt affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy exterior decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had steeples that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.

The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts. Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally. Because both Patrick and Catherine O’Leary worked, they were able to put a large addition on their cottage despite a lot size of just 25 by 100 feet. Interspersed in these residential areas were a variety of businesses—paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.

Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. Stately stone and brick homes had wood interiors, and stood side by side with smaller wood-frame houses. Wooden stables and other storage buildings were common, and trees lined the streets and filled the yards.

Murphy, J. (1995). A City Ready to Burn. *The Great Fire*. New York: Scholastic.

The Great Chicago Fire. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/intro/gcf-index.htm>

This is an example of exemplary text found in *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: Appendix B Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks*. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf

Social Studies Exemplary Text Teacher Resource

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EFL 4
Word Count 273

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Teacher introduces the text with minimal commentary and students read it independently. Teacher then reads passage aloud. Give a brief definition to words students would likely not be able to define from context (underlined in text). Teacher guides the students through a series of text-dependent questions. Complete the performance task as a cumulative evaluation of the close-reading.

Text-Dependent Questions

1. What evidence does the author give to back up his description of Chicago as a city “ready to burn”?
2. How do the sentence structures employed in the second paragraph draw the reader’s attention to these facts?
3. What does the author mean by jerrybuilt? Use context clues to infer.
4. The author provides a list of businesses.
5. What do these businesses have in common? How is the location of these businesses important?
6. How are the dangers in the wealthier neighborhoods different or similar to the fire risks for those who lived in poorer areas?
7. Who do you think would be worse off if their home caught fire, a wealthy person or a middle class to poor person? Use the text for examples to support your answer.

Performance Tasks for Informational Texts

Students evaluate Jim Murphy’s *The Great Fire* to identify which aspects of the text (e.g., loaded language and the inclusion of particular facts) reveal his purpose; presenting Chicago as a city that was “ready to burn.” [RH.6–8.6]