

Jim Murphy – Excerpt from *The Great Fire*

Created by Student Achievement Partners

GRADE LEVEL: 6

GENRE: Informational

SUBJECT(S): English Language Arts

LENGTH: 17 pages

ASSESSMENT:

This Grade 6 Mini-Assessment is based on an excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy. This text is worthy of students' time to read and also meets the expectations for text complexity at Grade 6. Assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will employ quality, complex texts such as this one.

Questions aligned to the CCSS should be worthy of students' time to answer and therefore do not focus on minor points of the texts. Several standards may be addressed within the same question because complex texts tend to yield rich assessment questions that call for deep analysis. In this mini-assessment there are 7 questions that address the Reading Standards below. We encourage educators to give students the time that they need to read closely and write to sources. While we know that it is helpful to have students complete the mini-assessment in one class period, we encourage educators to allow additional time as is necessary.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ADDRESSED:

RI.6.1; RI.6.2; RI.6.3; RI.6.4; RI.6.5; RI.6.8

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NAME: _____

DATE: _____

PERIOD: _____

Excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy

The Great Fire of Chicago is considered the largest disaster of the 1800s. It is rumored to have started in the barn of Patrick and Catherine O’Leary.

- (1) A shed attached to the barn was already engulfed by flames. It contained two tons of coal for the winter and a large supply of kindling wood. Fire ran along the dry grass and leaves, and took hold of a neighbor’s fence. The heat from the burning barn, shed, and fence was so hot that the O’Learys’ house, forty feet away, began to smolder. Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water. The sound of music and merrymaking stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of “FIRE!” It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.
- (2) 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 jerrybuilt¹ 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.
- (3) 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

¹ Built cheaply or poorly constructed

businesses—paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.

- (4) 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.
- (5) The links between richer and poorer sections went beyond the materials used for construction or the way buildings were crammed together. Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained. As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed. The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.
- (6) Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception. In 1863 there had been 186 reported fires in Chicago; the number had risen to 515 by 1868. Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms. The next year saw even more fires spring up, mainly because the summer had been unusually dry. Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all. Trees drooped in the unrelenting summer sun; grass and leaves dried out. By October, as many as six fires were breaking out every day. On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control. What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.
- (7) It was this gusting, swirling wind that drove the flames from the O'Learys' barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed of James Dalton's went up in flames; to the west, a barn smoldered for a few minutes, then flared up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers.

From THE GREAT FIRE by Jim Murphy, map by Heather Saunders. Copyright © 1995 by Jim Murphy. Reprinted by permission of Scholastic Inc.

Questions for Students

1. Reread this sentence from paragraph 5 of the passage:

The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet.

Which two phrases in the sentence best help the reader determine the meaning of the word “elevate”?

- A. “The answer was”
 - B. “to make the roads and sidewalks”
 - C. “out of wood”
 - D. “above the waterline”
 - E. “in some places”
 - F. “by several feet”
- 2. What was the main reason that the middle class and poorer districts in Chicago burned down more easily than other districts in the city did?**
- A. The buildings in these districts had wooden decorations painted to look like marble or stone.
 - B. The roofs of the buildings in these districts were made of materials that burned easily.
 - C. These districts contained many wooden buildings that were built closely together.
 - D. These districts were crossed by miles of pine-block streets and wooden sidewalks.
- 3. According to the passage, how did the location of the businesses affect the Great Fire?**
- A. The location of the businesses was one reason “the situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts.”
 - B. The location of the businesses provided some of “the links between richer and poorer sections” of the city.
 - C. The location of the businesses meant that the “wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards.”
 - D. The location of the businesses helped bind “the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.”

4. How do the details in paragraphs 3 and 4 about the poor, middle-class, and wealthier neighborhoods contribute to the development of the central ideas of the passage?

- A. The paragraphs support the idea that the fire spread widely because of the amount of wood in all three areas.
- B. The paragraphs support the idea that wood was the most readily available resource because of the number of trees in the area.
- C. The paragraphs support the idea that long ago people were unaware of the importance of well-constructed buildings.
- D. The paragraphs support the idea that Chicago was different from other large cities during that time.

5. This question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: Which statement below best summarizes the central idea of this passage?

- A. The Great Fire of Chicago was one of the most damaging fires in American history.
- B. The Great Fire of Chicago quickly got out of control in some neighborhoods but not others.
- C. Chicago firefighters could not put out the fire even though many people tried to help.
- D. Chicago provided almost perfect conditions for a widespread and damaging fire.

Part B: Which sentence from the passage provides the best support for the correct answer in Part A?

- A. "Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water."
- B. "Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn."
- C. "The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts."
- D. "Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception."

7. This question has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

Part A: Based on *The Great Fire*, which statement is true about conditions in Chicago in 1870-1871?

- A. Land for building homes was abundant in Chicago.
- B. Firefighters in Chicago were inexperienced.
- C. The growth of Chicago was being carefully planned.
- D. A fire was likely to occur almost every day in Chicago.

Part B: Which sentence from the passage provides the best support for the correct answer in Part A?

- A. "Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally."
- B. "As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed."
- C. "Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms."
- D. "On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control."

Information for Teachers: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses for the Text(s)

Regular practice with complex texts is necessary to prepare students for college and career readiness. This text has been placed at grade 6 for the purpose of this exemplar. This section of the exemplar provides an explanation of the process that was used to place the text at grade 6, illustrating why this text meets the expectations for text complexity in Reading Standard 10. Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards and the Supplement to Appendix A: *New Research on Text Complexity* lay out a research-based process for selecting complex texts. According to Appendix A of the CCSS, the first step in selecting grade-level appropriate texts is to place a text within a grade-band according to a quantitative text complexity score.

The quantitative data for *The Great Fire* is below:

The Great Fire	Quantitative Measure #1		Quantitative Measure #2	
	Flesch-Kincaid:	9.0	Lexile:	1000L

After gathering the quantitative measures, the next step is to place the quantitative scores in the Conversion Table found in the Supplement to Appendix A (www.coresstandards.org/resources) and determine the **grade band** of the text:

Figure 1 reproduces the conversion table from the Supplement to Appendix A, showing how the initial results from Flesch-Kincaid and the Lexile measure were converted to grade bands.

Figure 1: Updated Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Ranges from Multiple Measures⁷

Common Core Band	ATOS	Degrees of Reading Power [®]	Flesch-Kincaid [§]	The Lexile Framework [®]	Reading Maturity	SourceRater
2 nd – 3 rd	2.75 – 5.14	42 – 54	1.98 – 5.34	420 – 820	3.53 – 6.13	0.05 – 2.48
4 th – 5 th	4.97 – 7.03	52 – 60	4.51 – 7.73	740 – 1010	5.42 – 7.92	0.84 – 5.75
6 th – 8 th	7.00 – 9.98	57 – 67	6.51 – 10.34	925 – 1185	7.04 – 9.57	4.11 – 10.66
9 th – 10 th	9.67 – 12.01	62 – 72	8.32 – 12.12	1050 – 1335	8.41 – 10.81	9.02 – 13.93
11 th – CCR	11.20 – 14.10	67 – 74	10.34 – 14.2	1185 – 1385	9.57 – 12.00	12.30 – 14.50

Qualitative Analysis for *The Great Fire*

Category	Notes and comments on text, support for placement in this band	Where to place within the band?					
		Early 6- mid 6	Mid 6 - early 7	Early 7 – mid 7	Mid 7 to early 8	Mid-8 to end 8	NOT suited to band
Structure (story structure or form of piece or sentence demands if notable)	The structure of the text is mostly cause and effect, showing the main reasons the Great Fire started in Chicago when it did. The relationship between the main idea and supporting details is clear.						
Language Clarity and Conventions (including vocabulary load)	The vocabulary used in the text is accessible to the average sixth grader and appropriate for grade level. The few words that may be challenging for this audience are surrounded by strong context clues that will enable students to understand the unfamiliar terms. The sentence structure varies from simple to complex but are of average length and can be dissected easily if needed.						
Knowledge Demands (life, content, cultural/literary)	The passage is self-contained, meaning that no outside knowledge is required. Students may or may not know the location of Chicago, but a lack of knowledge of that fact will not impact understanding. Also, no prior knowledge of the Great Fire is needed, as the text describes it fully. Students will need to infer that wood burns easily, but there is context in the text to support that inference.						
Levels of Meaning (chiefly literary)/ Purpose (chiefly informational)	The purpose is singular – to explain the reasons the Great Fire started.						
Overall placement Grade 6	Justification: The text, as indicated by both quantitative and qualitative data, should be assigned to Grade 6, most appropriately administered in the early part of the school year. While sufficiently complex and of high quality, the text does not place unreasonable demands on the student, as the vocabulary level, syntax, and knowledge demands help with accessibility.						

Correct Answer(s) and Distractor Rationales

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
1	D, F	RI.6.4, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: Although “The answer was” introduces the ideas in the sentence, it does not provide context for “elevate.”</p> <p>Option B: Although the phrase “to make the roads and sidewalks” provides information about what was elevated, it does not serve as context for “elevate.”</p> <p>Option C: Although the fact that the roads and sidewalks were built “out of wood” is important to the central idea of the passage, it does not provide context for “elevate.”</p> <p>Option D: This is a correct answer: “Above the waterline” helps the reader determine what “elevate” means.</p> <p>Option E: Although the phrase, “in some places” introduces some additional helpful context, it does not give context for the meaning of “elevate.”</p> <p>Option F: This is a correct answer. “By several feet” extends the concept of “above the waterline” and thus provides context for the meaning of “elevate.”</p>
2	C	RI.6.8, RI.6.3, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: Although some buildings were characterized by painted wooden decorations, those buildings were the large and ornate ones, not the buildings in the middle class and poorer districts.</p> <p>Option B: Although it is possible that the buildings in the middle class and poorer districts had roofs that burned easily, the passage specifically describes the roofs of the larger buildings in the city; there is no textual evidence supporting the flammability of the roofs elsewhere.</p> <p>Option C: This is the correct answer. The passage makes clear that all districts had buildings made of wood that were built close together, causing these districts to burn more readily.</p> <p>Option D: Although it is probably true that all districts were crossed by wooden streets and sidewalks, the passage indicates that this “highly combustible knot” spread throughout the city; therefore, this fact does not explain why the middle class and poorer districts burned more readily than other districts did.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
3	A	RI.6.3, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: This is the correct answer. The fact that the businesses were located in the middle class and poorer districts made conditions worse there, most likely because they offered sources of fuel for the fire.</p> <p>Option B: Although the poorer and richer districts were linked by the fact that their buildings were made of wood, the passage is clear that the businesses were located in the middle class and poorer districts rather than the richer ones.</p> <p>Option C: Although there were fire hazards in the richer districts, they consisted mainly of large and small wooden buildings, stables, and trees, not businesses.</p> <p>Option D: Although the businesses were located in the middle class and poorer districts, that fact did not cause the city to be bound by a “highly combustible knot” of wooden sidewalks and roads.</p>
4	A	RI.6.5, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: This is the correct answer. The author structures these paragraphs to show commonality among the three kinds of districts.</p> <p>Option B: The passage emphasizes that the middle class and poorer districts, rather than the richer districts, were characterized by closely packed wooden buildings.</p> <p>Option C: Although the inference is logical that most buildings were made of wood because wood was the most readily available resource, there is no textual evidence supporting this inference. Wood and stone may have been equally available, but wood may have been less expensive or faster to build with.</p> <p>Option D: Although the text indicates a similarity between Chicago and other large cities at the time, it does not support an inference about how Chicago differed from other cities.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
5 Part A	D	RI.6.2, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: Although students may be strongly drawn to this option because it sounds as if it is what the passage might be about, there is no information in the text comparing the Great Fire to other fires in U.S. history.</p> <p>Option B: There is no textual evidence for this statement as the central idea of the passage; in fact, much of the text is devoted to showing how all neighborhoods were at risk of fire.</p> <p>Option C: Although the opening paragraphs suggest that many people tried to put out the fire, the idea that firefighters could not put out the fire even with help is not the central idea of the passage.</p> <p>Option D: This is the correct answer, and the author summarizes this idea early in the passage.</p>
5 Part B	B		<p>Option A: This option links to option C in Part A but does not support the correct response to Part A, which is D.</p> <p>Option B: This is the correct answer, supporting the statement of the central idea in option D in Part A.</p> <p>Option C: This option links to option B in Part A but does not support the correct response.</p> <p>Option D: This option links to option D in Part A but represents a misreading of the passage about the relationship between Chicago and other cities.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
6	<div data-bbox="499 261 768 573" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;"> <p>Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="499 605 768 917" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.</p> </div>	<p>RI.6.3, RI.6.2, RI.6.1</p>	<p>Option A: Although neighbors tried to put out the fire this does not provide a reason for the fire occurring in October 1871 instead of earlier or later.</p> <p>Option B: Although the statement about warning cries indicates the pervasive nature of the fire, it does not support the reason for the fire occurring in October 1871.</p> <p>Option C: Although the large numbers of wooden buildings in the middle class and poorer districts were one reason the city was likely to burn down, this fact does not tell why the fire occurred when it did.</p> <p>Option D: Although the soggy marshland ultimately contributed to the fire because it caused so many miles of wooden roads and sidewalks to be built, this fact does not explain why the fire occurred when it did.</p> <p>Option E: Although the knot of wooden roads and sidewalks contributed to the fact that Chicago was ready to burn, it does not account for the fact that the fire started in October 1871.</p> <p>Option F: This is a correct answer. The weather conditions in the fall of 1871 explain why the fire occurred in October 1871 and not earlier or later.</p> <p>Option G: Although there was a significant fire the night before the Great Fire started, that fact does not explain why the great fire occurred the next day.</p> <p>Option H: This is a correct answer. The fact that the wind was blowing steadily helped turn a small fire into a big one and provides one reason the fire started when it did.</p>

Question Number	Correct Answer(s)	Standards	Rationales for Answer Options
7 Part A	D	RI.6.2, RI.6.1	<p>Option A: The passage does not support the inference that land was abundant; in fact, there are indications that lots were small and buildings close together, suggesting that land was scarce.</p> <p>Option B: Although it is clear that the fire got out of control, there is no textual evidence supporting the inference that firefighters lacked experience. On the contrary, the large numbers of fires would suggest that firefighters had vast experience.</p> <p>Option C: There is no textual evidence for planning in the growth of the city; there is a slight suggestion that there was less planning than desirable, given the businesses interspersed with the residences.</p> <p>Option D: This is the correct answer. The evidence in the text makes clear that the trend was for more and more fires to occur, with an average of more than one fire a day by 1870.</p>
7 Part B	C		<p>Option A: The fact that wooden buildings were packed closely together links to options A and C in Part A, but it does not support the correct response, that fires were becoming more and more common.</p> <p>Option B: The need for a solution to the water and mud problem links to option C in Part A, but it does not support the correct response.</p> <p>Option C: This is the correct answer. The fact that there were so many fires in 1870 indicates that it was likely that there was, on average, more than one fire per day.</p> <p>Option D: The fact that there was a serious but controlled fire on the night before the Great Fire started links to option B in Part A, but it does not support the correct response.</p>

Language of the Common Core State Standards Addressed by this Mini-Assessment

RI.6.1	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RI.6.2	Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
RI.6.3	Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).
RI.6.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.
RI.6.5	Analyze how a particular sentence, paragraph, chapter, or section fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the ideas.
RI.6.8	Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

Additional Resources for Assessment and CCSS Implementation

Shift 1 – Complexity: *Regular practice with complex text and its academic language*

- See Appendix B for examples of informational and literary complex texts:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf
- See the Text Complexity Collection on www.achievethecore.org

Shift 2 – Evidence: *Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational*

- See Close Reading Exemplars for ways to engage students in close reading on <http://www.achievethecore.org/steal-these-tools/close-reading-exemplars>
- See the Basal Alignment Project for examples of text-dependent questions:
<http://www.achievethecore.org/basal-alignment-project>

Shift 3 – Knowledge: *Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction*

- See Appendix B for examples of informational and literary complex texts:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf

This mini-assessment can be used as an independent activity or as part of a follow-up to the accompanying sample lesson found on the following link:

<http://www.achievethecore.org/page/522/the-great-fire-by-jim-murphy-with-mini-assessment>