

THE DAY THE RIVER CAUGHT FIRE

Curriculum Guide

Grades K–5

ELA / Reading • Social Studies • Science & Environment • Art & Creative Writing

■ A story of nature, community, and the power of change ■

This guide supports teachers, librarians, and caregivers in using *The Day the River Caught Fire* to spark meaningful conversations about environmental history, community responsibility, and the courage to speak up. Activities are designed for Grades K–5 and span multiple subject areas.

Grade Band	Time Estimate	Subjects Covered	Core Themes
K–2	3–5 class periods	ELA, Science, Art	Curiosity, community care, nature

Grade Band	Time Estimate	Subjects Covered	Core Themes
3–5	5–8 class periods	ELA, Social Studies, Science, Art	Environmental history, civic action, cause & effect

■ About the Book

The Day the River Caught Fire tells the powerful true-inspired story of a river so polluted it literally burst into flames — and the community of young people and adults who refused to look away. Through vivid illustrations and lyrical storytelling, the book invites young readers to explore what it means to care for the natural world, stand up for what is right, and believe that even small voices can change big things.

■ **Historical Connection:** *The book draws on the real-life story of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, which caught fire multiple times due to industrial pollution. The most famous fire in 1969 helped spark the modern environmental movement and led to the creation of the EPA and the Clean Water Act.*

Key Themes

- **Environmental Responsibility:** Humans have the power — and duty — to protect natural spaces.
- **Community & Collective Action:** Real change happens when people work together.
- **Cause & Effect:** Our choices ripple outward into the world around us.
- **Hope & Resilience:** Even after great damage, nature and communities can heal.
- **Using Your Voice:** Children can be powerful advocates for change.

■ Standards Alignment

Subject	Standards Addressed
ELA (CCSS)	RI/RL.K–5: Key ideas & details, craft & structure, integration of knowledge W.K–5: Opinion, informative, and narrative writing SL.K–5: Collaborative discussion, presenting ideas
Social Studies (C3)	D2.His.1–5: Cause and effect in history; people making change D2.Civ.1–5: Civic responsibility and community roles
Science (NGSS)	K-ESS3-3 / 5-ESS3-1: Human impacts on Earth's resources 2-LS4-1: Biodiversity and ecosystems
Visual Arts (NCCAS)	Creating, Presenting, Responding, Connecting Students create art responding to real-world themes

■ Before You Read — Building Background Knowledge

Vocabulary Preview (K–5)

Introduce these words before reading. Use pictures, gestures, and real-world examples.

Word	Kid-Friendly Definition	Grades
pollution	Harmful things (trash, chemicals, smoke) that dirty our air, water, or land.	K–5
river	A large, flowing body of fresh water.	K–2
environment	All the living and non-living things around us — trees, animals, water, air.	K–5
industrial	Having to do with factories and making large amounts of products.	3–5
activist	A person who works hard to make an important change in the world.	3–5
legislation	A law passed by the government.	4–5
ecosystem	A community of plants, animals, and other living things in one place.	3–5
restoration	Bringing something back to its natural, healthy state.	3–5

Activating Prior Knowledge

- **Think-Pair-Share:** Ask: "Have you ever seen a river, lake, or ocean? What did it look and smell like? What animals lived there?" Allow partners to share before whole-group discussion.
- **Picture Walk:** Before reading, flip through the illustrations. Ask students: "What do you notice? What do you wonder? What do you predict this book is about?"
- **KWL Chart:** Create a class KWL chart: What do we Know about rivers? What do we Want to know? (Complete the L — What did we Learn — after reading.)
- **Map Exploration (Grades 3–5):** Show students a map of the United States and locate Ohio and the Cuyahoga River. Discuss: What states are nearby? What waterways connect?

■ During Reading — Comprehension & Discussion

Discussion Questions by Grade Band

Grades K–2

- What happened to the river? How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think the river caught fire? What clues did the author give?
- What do you think the animals in the river were feeling?
- Have you ever seen something in nature that needed help? What did you do?

Grades 3–5

- What caused the river to become so polluted? Who was responsible?
- How did the community respond when they learned about the river's condition?
- What obstacles did people face when trying to create change? How did they overcome them?
- Why do you think it took so long for people to act? What might have stopped them sooner?
- What connections can you make between this story and environmental issues today?

■ **Reading Strategy Tip:** *Pause at key moments of tension and ask students to "turn and talk" with a partner. This deepens comprehension and builds oral language skills.*

Text-Dependent Questions (Grades 3–5)

Use these questions to build close-reading skills. Ask students to point to evidence in the text or illustrations.

Question Type	Sample Question
Literal	What does the author say happened when the river caught fire?
Inferential	Why might the community have ignored the river's condition for so long?
Critical	Do you think the author believes one person can make a difference? What evidence supports that?
Connective	How does this real event connect to environmental challenges you see today?

⇒ ■ ELA / Reading Activities

Activity	Grade	Description
Letter to the River (K–2)	Grades K–2	Students write or dictate a short letter to the river, telling it what they hope for. Encourage illustrations. Share in a class "River Mailbox."
Opinion Writing: Should We Protect Rivers? (2–4)	Grades 2–4	Students write a 3-paragraph opinion piece with a claim, two reasons with evidence from the text, and a conclusion. Scaffold with a graphic organizer.
Cause & Effect Chart (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Create a multi-step cause-and-effect chain: Factories dump waste → River becomes polluted → River catches fire → Community demands change → Laws are passed.
Retelling with Story Maps (K–2)	Grades K–2	Students complete a story map with: characters, setting, problem, events, and solution. Use drawings for kindergarteners.
Narrative Writing: I Was There (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Ask students to write a first-person narrative from the perspective of a child, animal, or community member on the day the river caught fire.
Author's Purpose & Craft (4–5)	Grades 4–5	Analyze how the author uses word choice, imagery, and structure to create emotion. Students identify 3 specific craft moves and explain their effect on the reader.
Readers' Theater (2–5)	Grades 2–5	Adapt key scenes into a readers' theater script. Assign roles (narrator, community members, activist, official) and perform for another class.

■ Social Studies / History Activities

These activities connect the book to civic responsibility, historical thinking, and community action.

Activity	Grade	Description
Timeline of the River (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Students create a visual timeline showing key events in the Cuyahoga River's history: industrialization, fires, the 1969 fire, community protests, passage of the Clean Water Act (1972), and the river's recovery.
Community Helpers Circle Map (K–2)	Grades K–2	Draw a circle map of people who help keep communities clean and safe (sanitation workers, scientists, lawmakers, activists, neighbors). Connect to the book's characters.
Then and Now: Rivers (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Compare photos of the Cuyahoga River in the 1960s vs. today. Students write or discuss: What changed? What made it change? What still needs to improve?
Mock Town Hall (4–5)	Grades 4–5	Simulate a community meeting. Assign roles: factory owner, environmental activist, child, mayor, scientist. Each role prepares a 2-minute statement about what to do about river pollution. Class votes on a solution.
Change Makers Research (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Research real environmental change-makers (Rachel Carson, Wangari Maathai, Greta Thunberg, Mardy Murie). Students present one person's contribution and connect it to the book's message.
Civic Action Plan (4–5)	Grades 4–5	Students identify an environmental issue in their own community, research its causes, and create a simple action plan: problem → goal → steps → expected outcome.

■ Science / Environment Activities

Activity	Grade	Description
Clean vs. Dirty Water Observation (K–2)	Grades K–2	Show two jars — one with clear water and one with food coloring and a bit of soil. Ask: Which is safe? What do you think lives in each? Discuss what makes water healthy.
River Ecosystem Web (2–4)	Grades 2–4	Create a food web showing organisms that depend on a healthy river (fish, insects, birds, otters, plants). Discuss: What happens when one part is harmed?
Water Pollution Experiment (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Simulate pollution by adding small amounts of "factory waste" (safe materials like cooking oil, soil, food coloring) to a jar of water. Students observe, record, and discuss: What happens to the animals? Can you clean it up?
Local Waterway Investigation (3–5)	Grades 3–5	Research a local river, lake, or stream. Is it healthy? What lives there? Has it ever been polluted? Students present findings in a brief report or poster.
Human Impact Sorting Activity (K–3)	Grades K–3	Give students cards showing human activities (planting trees, littering, recycling, dumping chemicals). Sort into: Helps nature / Hurts nature / Both. Discuss each.
Design a Water Filter (4–5)	Grades 4–5	Engineering challenge: Using sand, gravel, cotton, and other materials, design a simple water filter. Test it with "dirty" water and compare results. Connect to the real science of water treatment plants.
Biodiversity Walk (K–5)	Grades K–5	Take students on a walk near school. Count and record plants, animals, birds, and insects. Discuss: Is our local environment healthy? What do you notice?

■ Art & Creative Writing Activities

Activity	Grade	Description
Before & After River Mural (K–5)	Grades K–5	Split a long paper in half. Students illustrate the river before pollution on one side and after restoration on the other. Display as a class mural. Discuss: What colors tell the story? What details show the change?
Protest Poster (2–5)	Grades 2–5	Create a protest poster for river protection. Students choose a slogan, design an image, and select colors intentionally. Share and discuss: How does art create change?
"If I Were the River" Poem (1–5)	Grades 1–5	Students write a personification poem from the river's point of view. Younger students can dictate and illustrate. Older students use sensory language and metaphor.
Collage: What Our River Needs (K–3)	Grades K–3	Using magazine cutouts, natural materials, and drawings, students create a collage showing a healthy, thriving river ecosystem.
Storyboard a Sequel (3–5)	Grades 3–5	What happens after the story ends? Students storyboard 4–6 panels showing the next chapter in the river's recovery, including community action steps.
Shape Poems: Water (2–4)	Grades 2–4	Write a concrete/shape poem about water or a river. The words are arranged in the shape of a river, wave, or water drop.
Collaborative Class Book (K–2)	Grades K–2	Each student contributes one page to a class book titled: "How We Can Help Our River." Bind and donate a copy to the school library.

■ After Reading — Synthesis & Action

Culminating Projects

- **Environmental Report Card (3–5):** Students research their local waterway and give it a "report card" grade in categories: water clarity, wildlife, recreation, and cleanliness. Present findings with recommendations.
- **Pledge for the Planet (K–2):** Each student makes one pledge to help the environment. Create a class Pledge Wall. Revisit pledges monthly to celebrate follow-through.
- **Letter to a Local Leader (4–5):** Students write a persuasive letter to a local official (mayor, parks director, city council) about one environmental improvement they'd like to see in their community.
- **"Change the World" Presentation (3–5):** Students research one law or initiative that improved the environment (Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, National Parks system) and present: What was the problem? Who acted? What changed?
- **River Restoration Proposal (5):** In small groups, students design a proposal to restore a polluted river. Includes problem statement, causes, proposed solutions, timeline, and expected impact.

Assessment Ideas

Assessment Type	Description
Rubric-Based Writing	Use a 4-point rubric aligned to grade-level writing standards for opinion, narrative, or informational writing tasks.
Portfolio	Students collect their work across all activities into an Environmental Portfolio with a reflection page.
Anecdotal Notes	During discussions and activities, note student understanding of key concepts using observation checklists.
Peer Feedback	Students use a simple 2 Stars & 1 Wish protocol to give and receive feedback on writing or art projects.
Self-Assessment	Students reflect: What did I learn? What did I do well? What surprised me? What will I do differently?

■ Extensions, Differentiation & Family Connections

Extension for Advanced Learners (Grades 4–5)

- Research the history of the EPA: When was it founded? Why? What does it do today?
- Compare the Cuyahoga River story to another environmental event (e.g., Love Canal, Deepwater Horizon, Santa Barbara oil spill). What are the similarities and differences?
- Read a primary source: Find and analyze a newspaper article from 1969 about the river fire.
- Investigate: Is the Cuyahoga River healthy today? Use data from EPA or state water reports.
- Write and perform an original song, rap, or spoken word poem about clean water.

Scaffolding for Emerging Readers / ELL Students

- Pre-teach vocabulary using visual glossary cards with pictures and home language translations.
- Provide sentence frames for writing: "The river was _____ because _____."
- Allow oral responses, drawings, or video recordings as alternatives to written work.
- Partner emerging readers with a supportive peer for discussion activities.
- Use the illustrations as primary text — many key ideas are conveyed visually.

Family & Community Connections

Connection	Description
Family Reading Night	Host a river-themed family night where students share their writing and art.
Nature Walk Together	Send home a simple nature walk guide families can do in a park, near water, or around the neighborhood.
Home Pledge Card	Students bring home a pledge card for the whole family to sign: one action they'll take for the environment.
Community Partner Visit	Invite a local environmental organization, park ranger, or water authority to speak to students.

■ Text Sets & Related Books

Pair this book with the following titles for deeper exploration of environmental themes, community action, and the power of young changemakers.

Title	Author	Grades	Connection to Theme
The Lorax	Dr. Seuss	K–3	A classic allegory about environmental destruction and the power of speaking up.
What a Waste: Rubbish, Recycling and Protecting Our Planet	Jess French	2–5	Nonfiction exploration of pollution and sustainability solutions.
Wangari's Trees of Peace	Jeanette Winter	K–3	True story of a Kenyan woman who led a movement to restore her country's forests.
One Plastic Bag	Miranda Paul	K–3	True story of Isatou Ceesay, who helped recycle plastic bags in Gambia.
Save the Crash-test Dummies	Various	3–5	Explore engineering and design challenges related to environmental solutions.
The Water Princess	Susan Verde	K–2	A child's experience with water scarcity — opens conversations about clean water access.
Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults	Robin Wall Kimmerer (adapted)	4–5	Indigenous wisdom about reciprocal relationships with the natural world.

Thank you for bringing *The Day the River Caught Fire* into your classroom. Every student who reads this story becomes part of the long, beautiful chain of people who have refused to look away — and chosen to act.

Curriculum Guide developed for Grades K–5 • All activities may be adapted for your classroom needs.