

Reversing the Chicago River 5th Grade Nonfiction

Center for Urban Education at DePaul University © 2005

In 1900, Chicago's government did something very bold. They changed the direction of the Chicago River. Until 1900, the river flowed into the lake. Then Chicago made a great change. It had started to get ugly, there was pollution downtown.

Chicago started as a small town. But it grew to a great city. In 1890, there were 1 million people living here. By 1900, just ten years later, there were 600,000 more people here. The river was polluted. Factories dumped trash into it, and sewers drained into it. Because the river flowed into the lake, people were getting sick. People got their drinking water from the lake, and the lake was getting polluted. Downtown was especially affected. The center of the city was right where the river ran.

Chicago has a history of bold planners. Once again, Chicago leaders made a plan. They would turn the river back so that it would flow the other way. Then they would send the pollution away from the lake. It was a big job, it would take a lot of work. They had to dig a canal to move the water the other way. They had to put a wall across the river where it met the lake. Then they would be able to lower the water in the river and pull the lake water out.

They did it. They built the wall, called a lock. They were ready to change the river, to get it to flow the other way. But the people of St. Louis heard about the plan, and they were worried. Both cities were on rivers, and people in both cities needed clean water. In St. Louis, people worried because they knew that the pollution would come their way. The river would reach the Mississippi River, which flows by St. Louis. It would bring pollution to them.

Chicago has a history of bold leaders. The mayor decided to go ahead with the project. The mayor of St. Louis was fighting the plan. He was angry, and so were citizens of St. Louis. Early one morning on January 2nd, 1900, Chicago leaders took shovels to the place where the river would join the new canal. They dug out the place between the river and the canal. They found it was too big to do with shovels, so they used dynamite. Still it would not work. They were very worried because their plan might not work. Then they used a big machine called a dredge. It pulled out the last big pieces of earth, and then the water rushed backwards. They had reversed the river. The leaders cheered, and so did most people in Chicago when they heard the news.

Once it was done people of Chicago marveled. The citizens cheered the mayor. And the people of St. Louis complained. Only later would people figure out how to stop pollution before it got into the lake. Today, Chicago filters its waste. But the river will always go the other direction. Once reversed, it would be very difficult to put back.

About 100 years later, Chicago would make another great change. They would turn what was a big railroad yard into a park. That park is called Millennium Park, and because of that park thousands of people have a better life in Chicago. They can leave work and enjoy nature, just blocks from where their offices are. Just come downtown and you'll see how beautiful this place is.

Compare and Contrast Nonfiction

Questions developed by Center for Urban Education for use by Chicago Public Schools 2008-2009.

Choose the best answer for each question.

1. What is one way Chicago was different after they changed the river?

- a. There was more water.
- b. There were more people.
- c. The city was healthier.
- d. There were more jobs.

3. How is a canal like a river?

- a. Both are wide and deep.
- b. Both hold water that flows.
- c. Both have blue water.
- d. Both are built by people.

2. How are Chicago and St. Louis alike?

- a. They are both located on rivers.
- b. They both built canals.
- c. They are the same size.
- d. They are both capitals.

4. How was changing the river like building Millennium Park?

- a. Both took place long ago.
- b. Both changed pollution.
- c. Both improved living in the city.
- d. Both were unpopular.

5. *Write your own answer to this question. How were the people of Chicago and people of St. Louis alike?*

TEACHER NOTES: Develop Students' Skills: Exercise Thinking

These questions have not been validated, so decisions about student's achievement should not be made based on their responses. They are intended to exercise skills. Recommended activities include: students work in pairs to choose the best response; give students the questions without the responses so they generate their own answers; students make up additional questions; students make up questions like these for another passage.

Answers: *You can remove this answer key and then give it to students and ask them to figure out the basis for the correct response.*

Item	1	2	3	4
Answer	c	a	b	c

Question 5 is open-ended. Here is a suggested response.

Answers may include: both lived in big cities; both wanted a better environment.