

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Overview: In this project-based learning activity, students investigate the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill as a complex environmental disaster with human, economic, ecological, and policy impacts. Working in teams, students rotate through five investigation stations using Gale resources to examine what happened, why the disaster occurred, who and what were affected, how different groups responded, and what changed as a result. Students use evidence from their investigation to develop recommendations for preventing and responding to similar environmental disasters in the future.

Before the Activity: Divide students into teams of approximately 3–5 students. Provide students with access to Gale resources available at your school. Determine how students will record evidence. This may be on paper or in a shared digital document. Decide whether students will rotate physically through stations or move through them digitally. Preview resources as needed for grade level and complexity.

Suggested Timing: Structure timing depending on grade level and the depth of research expected. Stations may be completed during one extended class period, across multiple class periods, or over several days. Additional time may be provided for teams to analyze their evidence and develop their final recommendations.

During the Investigation: At each station, students should:

- Read the station's investigation questions.
- Use the recommended Gale resource type to investigate the topic.
- Select reliable evidence that helps answer the questions.
- Record important facts, quotations, examples, data, or perspectives.
- Record the title and citation for at least one Gale source.
- Discuss how the evidence contributes to their understanding of the disaster and its impacts.

Encourage students to make connections between stations. Evidence discovered in one investigation may help explain an issue encountered in another.

Teacher Role: Act as a facilitator rather than the source of the answers. Help students refine searches, evaluate sources, distinguish between evidence and opinion, recognize differing perspectives, and identify connections among environmental, economic, social, and political issues. Encourage students to consider trade-offs and competing priorities. Responses to an environmental disaster may benefit one group while creating challenges for another. Students should use evidence to determine which concerns deserve the greatest attention rather than searching for a single "correct" solution. For students who need additional support, consider providing suggested search terms and/or preselected Gale Topic Pages. More advanced students can conduct independent searches and investigate complex questions involving environmental regulation, corporate responsibility, energy policy, economic impact, and long-term ecosystem recovery.

Preparing for the Final Task: After completing all five stations, ask teams to review the evidence they collected before developing their final product. Their recommendations should reflect information gathered across multiple stations rather than focusing on only one aspect of the disaster. Students should be prepared to explain the evidence behind their recommendations, acknowledge competing perspectives or trade-offs, and identify lessons from Deepwater Horizon that could influence how governments, industries, and communities prepare for future environmental disasters.

STUDENT DIRECTIONS: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Your Role: You are part of a team investigating one of the largest environmental disasters in U.S. history: the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Your team has been asked to investigate what happened, why the disaster occurred, how the spill affected people and the environment, how different groups responded, and what changed in the years that followed. But your job is not simply to explain the disaster. You will use what happened at Deepwater Horizon to consider a larger question: **What can we learn from the Deepwater Horizon disaster to better prevent and respond to environmental disasters in the future?**

Your Investigation: Working with your team, move through five investigation stations. Each station examines a different part of the Deepwater Horizon story. At each station:

- Read the investigation questions.
- Use the suggested type of Gale resource to research the topic.
- Discuss what you discover with your group.
- Record important evidence that could help you answer the driving question.
- Record the title and citation for at least one Gale source you used.

Do not try to write down everything you find. Look for evidence that seems important, meaningful, surprising, or useful for understanding the disaster and deciding what lessons should be learned from it.

Think Across the Stations:

As you investigate, look for connections. Consider:

- What caused the disaster?
- Could it have been prevented?
- Who or what was most affected?
- How did the effects change over time?
- Did different groups experience the disaster differently?
- Who was responsible for responding?
- Which responses were effective? Which were not?
- What changed because of the disaster?
- What could governments, companies, scientists, and communities do differently in the future?

You may discover that there is not one simple answer. Environmental decisions often involve competing needs, risks, costs, and perspectives.

Preparing for Your Final Task: After completing all five stations, review the evidence your team collected. Look across your investigation rather than focusing on only one station. Use your research to develop recommendations based on what the Deepwater Horizon disaster can teach us about preventing and responding to future environmental disasters. Your final recommendations should be supported with evidence from your Gale research, consider both immediate and long-term impacts, recognize that different people and groups may have different priorities, address environmental impacts as well as human and economic consequences, explain what should be done differently in the future—and why.

Case Study: The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

You are a member of a federal investigation team tasked with determining what caused the Deepwater Horizon disaster and recommending policies to reduce the risk of future offshore drilling accidents.

Working in teams, move through a series of investigation stations, each using a different type of Gale resource. Each station reveals another piece of the story and builds evidence for their final recommendations.



STATION 1: The Incident

Resource Type: News Article and/or Reference

Investigation Questions

- What happened aboard the Deepwater Horizon?
- When and where did the disaster occur?
- What were the immediate consequences?

Evidence Collected

- Timeline of events
- Number of lives lost
- Initial environmental concerns



STATION 2: Understanding the Science

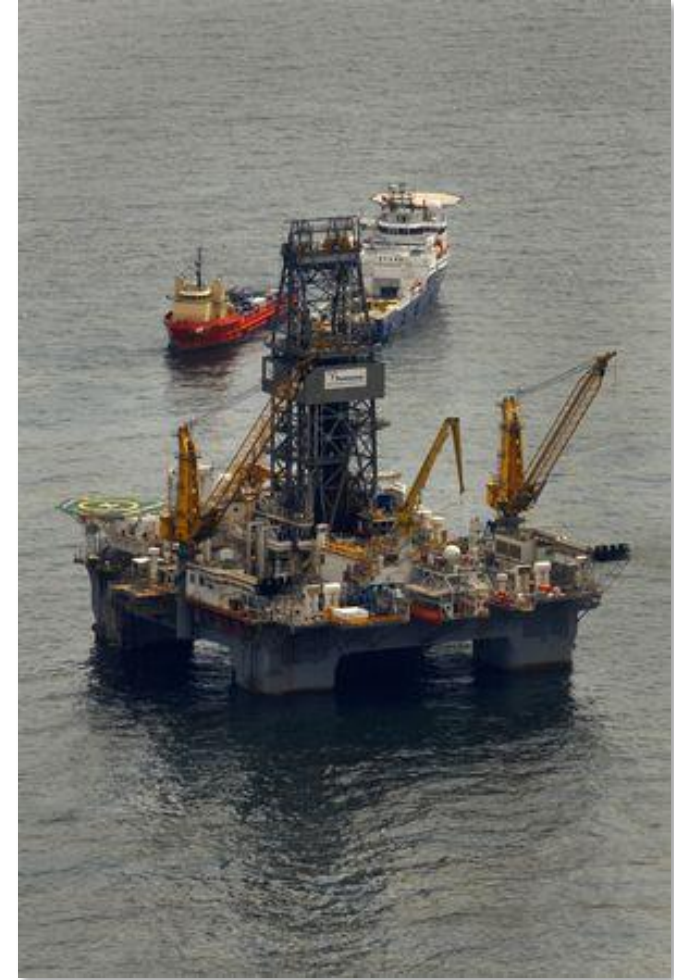
Resource Type: Reference Article

Investigation Questions

- How does offshore drilling work?
- What is a blowout?
- Why are blowout preventers important?

Evidence Collected

- Key scientific and engineering concepts
- Vocabulary
- How drilling operations are designed to prevent accidents



STATION 3: What Went Wrong?

Resource Type: Article or Journal

Investigation Questions

- What failures led to the explosion?
- Were there human errors, equipment failures, or management decisions involved?
- Could the disaster have been prevented?

Evidence Collected

- Root causes
- Multiple contributing factors
- Supporting evidence



STATION 4: Environmental and Human Impact

Resource Type: Images, Video, or Primary Sources

Investigation Questions

- How did the oil spill affect wildlife and ecosystems?
- How were coastal communities and industries impacted?
- What evidence demonstrates the scale of the disaster?

Evidence Collected

- Environmental impacts
- Economic consequences
- Personal accounts and visual evidence



STATION 5: Response and Lessons Learned

Resource Type: News Article or Report

Investigation Questions

- How did BP and the U.S. government respond?
- What cleanup efforts were implemented?
- What regulations or industry practices changed after the disaster?
- What was the global impact of this disaster?

Evidence Collected

- Response efforts
- Policy changes
- Ongoing environmental recovery



FINAL CHALLENGE

Your Task: Your investigation team must submit recommendations to a federal oversight committee.

Your Report Should Answer:

- What were the primary causes of the Deepwater Horizon disaster?
- Which pieces of evidence best support your conclusions?
- What three recommendations would you make to help prevent a similar disaster in the future?

[View possible proposal options on the next page.](#)

FINAL PRODUCT OPTIONS

Your Task: Select one of the options below as the format for your final proposal.

FINAL PRODUCT	AUTHENTIC AUDIENCE
Executive summary for Congress	Members of Congress and congressional staff
Press conference presentation	Journalists, community members, and the general public
Environmental impact infographic	Gulf Coast communities and environmental organizations
Safety recommendations for oil companies	Oil and gas industry leaders and safety officials