Expository texts explain what certain things are and how and why they came to be. As you read, notice how the author explains the origins of the Hindenburg—and its disastrous end.
In Germany in 1900, the first dirigible was successfully flown. This mammoth airship consisted of several giant, gas-filled balloons inside a hard, hollow structure that was moved along by motors and steered by fins. In 1931 the most advanced dirigible yet, the Graf Zeppelin, began flying from Germany across the Atlantic and back, carrying twenty passengers in dreamy luxury. Meanwhile, its designer, Hugo Eckener, had even grander plans in mind.

While the Graf Zeppelin was busy with these transatlantic flights, Eckener planned another airship that was soon taking shape at the Zeppelin Company in Germany. A bigger and better ship. The perfect airship. The Hindenburg.

The new zeppelin was to be so big that a giant new hangar had to be made to house it.
The gas cells in the Hindenburg were filled with hydrogen. Hydrogen can be extremely dangerous because it will explode if it comes into contact with a spark or a flame. All the German zeppelins ever made had been filled with hydrogen, but the zeppelin workers were very careful and they had an excellent safety record. In the early days there had been a few accidents in which crew members were killed, but no paying passenger had ever been hurt or killed in a German zeppelin accident.

The designers of the Hindenburg included all the latest safety measures in their new zeppelin. An American naval officer examined the ship and reported, “I consider all possibilities of danger in the new zeppelin eliminated.”

In the 1930s, the Nazis came into power in Germany. Eckener did not like their brutal ways. He resisted their control whenever he could, and he made speeches criticizing the Nazi party. Eckener thought that transatlantic travel could help create better understanding between different countries. He said that he wanted “to be of service to mankind in the development of air travel.” But the Nazis wanted zeppelins only to glorify Germany and to symbolize Nazi power.

The Nazis did not like Eckener, so they made him a “nonperson.” This meant that his name could not be mentioned in newspapers, and no one was allowed to print a picture of him. Eckener was forced to put the Nazi symbol, the swastika, on the Hindenburg. His dream airship would have to fly the Atlantic with the hated swastika displayed on the tail fins.
The Hindenburg made its first flight to America in May of 1936. The takeoff was so smooth that passengers did not even know the ship was airborne unless they were looking out the windows. The ride was perfectly steady and quiet as the ship cruised at 80 miles per hour over the Atlantic Ocean.

Only the rich could afford to travel by airship. The tickets were $400, about the price of a small car in those days. The passengers had their own rooms with beds and sinks, and there was even a shower on board. The kitchen was well stocked with the finest foods. On Atlantic crossings, the chefs used 440 pounds of meat and poultry, 800 eggs, and 220 pounds of butter.

When the airship arrived in America, cruising low over New York City, thousands of people filled the rooftops, windowsills, and streets, cheering wildly as the huge zeppelin floated overhead. Eckener later tried to explain the strange appeal of his giant soaring ships. A zeppelin, he said, was “like a fabulous silvery fish, floating quietly in the ocean of air. . . . It seemed to be coming from another world and to be returning there like a dream.”

The Hindenburg made nine more round-trip flights to the United States in 1936. The landing spot was in Lakehurst, New Jersey, about an hour south of New York City. During the winter of that year, the Hindenburg made seven trips down to Rio de Janeiro.

The first flying season was a huge success, and eighteen trips to the United States were scheduled for the next year. At the same time, the Zeppelin Company’s other ship, the Graf Zeppelin, was still keeping a schedule of regular flights from Germany to Rio de Janeiro.

Because of the success of the Hindenburg, Hugo Eckener was able to make an agreement with an American company. The Americans would build two big airships, and the Zeppelin Company in Germany would build two more. There would be four new airships flying the Atlantic. Eckener’s dream of regular transatlantic travel was beginning to come true.
On May 3, 1937, sixty-one crew members and thirty-six passengers boarded the *Hindenburg* for the flight to America. Fourteen-year-old Werner Franz was thrilled to be a cabin boy on the famous airship. He was the youngest member of the crew. Two of the passengers were even younger—Werner and Wallace Doehner, ages six and eight. Somewhere over the Atlantic, a steward politely took away Werner’s toy truck. It made sparks when it rolled. In an airship filled with explosive hydrogen, sparks could mean disaster.

The *Hindenburg* cruised low over the icebergs of the North Atlantic, close to the spot where the *Titanic* had gone down twenty-five years before. At four o’clock on the afternoon of May 6, the *Hindenburg* arrived over the landing field in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

There were thunderstorms in the area, so it cruised south over the beaches of the Atlantic coast to wait out the storms. Shortly after seven o’clock, the *Hindenburg* returned to the landing field and slowed to a stop about 250 feet above the ground. The crew dropped ropes from the ship’s nose so the men below could help bring the ship in. Everything was done according to plan. It was a routine landing. There was no warning of what was about to happen.
In thirty-two seconds, the mighty airship *Hindenburg* was a mass of flaming wreckage on the ground.

Amazingly, of the ninety-seven people on board, sixty-seven survived the explosion. One person on the ground was killed, and five survivors died later in the hospital.
One passenger who was an acrobat was able to hang on outside a window of the burning airship until it was low enough that he could drop off onto the sandy ground below. He stood up, brushed himself off, and limped away. One older couple walked down the steps of the slowly falling ship as if it was a normal landing. They escaped, injured but alive. The Doehner brothers survived when their mother threw them out of a window into the arms of the rescuers below.

Werner Franz, the fourteen-year-old cabin boy, rode the flaming airship almost all the way to the ground. A large water tank in the ship above his head burst, drenching him with water. He jumped to the ground as the flaming airship was falling around him and dashed out, soaking wet but unharmed.

The cause of the Hindenburg explosion is still a mystery. Hugo Eckener felt that there was static electricity in the air because of the thunderstorms in the area, and that this electricity might have ignited some hydrogen that was leaking near the back of the airship. Some people believe, however, that a bomb caused the explosion. There was no evidence of a bomb, but the swastikas on the tail of the ship might have made the Hindenburg a target for people who wanted to destroy a symbol of Nazi power.

Millions of people around the world watched newsreels of the Hindenburg explosion and heard reports about it on the radio. Zeppelins were now seen as death traps, and all interest in building more of them died with the Hindenburg. Eckener wrote that "it appeared to me the hopeless end of a great dream, a kind of end of the world."

Over the years, airplanes have been developed to be much faster and bigger than they were before. People now fly in airplanes instead of airships. Even Hugo Eckener had to admit that "a good thing has been replaced by a better." The mighty zeppelins no longer cruise through the ocean of air on grand voyages to distant lands. Like the Hindenburg, the era of the great airships is gone forever.
The Hindenburg made the trip from Germany to America in two and a half days. The only other way to cross the Atlantic was by ship, and the fastest ships needed five days to make the trip.

On one return trip from Rio de Janeiro, someone sneaked five monkeys on board the Graf Zeppelin. They soon got loose and were seen swinging through the girders inside the airship. Pets were shipped on the Hindenburg—dogs, birds, fish, and even a deer.

The Hindenburg was the biggest thing that ever flew.

The Hindenburg was named for a former president of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg.

Airships docked at mooring masts. A ring on the front of an airship was attached to the top of the mast. This allowed the ship to swing with the wind while moored.

The tower on the top of the Empire State Building was built as a mooring mast. It was never used.

Play stopped at a baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Pittsburgh Pirates in Brooklyn when the Hindenburg flew over on its way to a landing. Everyone wanted to watch the airship.

Eckener went to a party in New York City to celebrate the Hindenburg’s first flight. In the middle of the table was a mound of ice cream in the shape of a zeppelin.