



Book Study: *The Cricket in Times Square* – Syllabus

Course Description: Throughout this class, students engage directly with George Selden's 1960, Newbery Honor-winning book, *The Cricket in Times Square*. While reading the entire text, students will study Selden's use of description and practice their own descriptive responses alongside unexpected but fun characters – Chester Cricket, Tucker Mouse, and Harry Cat. Weekly vocabulary lists will be included with each lesson for study or spelling practice.

IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT EDITIONS: Students must have their own copy of the text for this class. However, please note that this book has recently undergone some updates/revisions to be more culturally sensitive. Any edition published/printed prior to May 2022 is the original. Any edition published/printed May 2022 or after is the updated edition. **This class is written based on the original text.** Students with the new edition should not experience any significant challenges in terms of completing the homework, but there may be discrepancies between some of the lesson material and the content of the revised edition.

Prerequisite: *The Composition* or equivalent experience.

Course Outline:

Week One: *A Very Strange Sound*

- Read Chapter 1-2
- Describing Sights, Sounds, & Characters

Week Two: *One Familiar Thing*

- Read Chapters 3-4
- Describing Experiences & Places

Week Three: *A Cricket House*

- Read Chapters 5-6
- Describing Different Cultures

Week Four: *A Bad Dream*

- Read Chapters 7-8
- Describing Home & Problems/Solutions

Week Five: *Mulberry Leaves*

- Read Chapters 9-10
- Describing Feelings & Fun

Week Six: *Who Was Singing?*

- Read Chapters 11-12
- Describing Memories, Ideas, and Miracles

Week Seven: *Read About the Cricket!*

- Read Chapters 13-14
- Describing Dislikes and Change

Week Eight: *The Bell*

- Read Chapter 15
- Describing Goodbyes
- Final Response

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Beginning Writer* grading rubric and will be averaged to receive a final course grade.



Book Study: *The Cricket in Times Square*

Week One: A Very Strange Sound

SAMPLE LESSON

George Selden was born on May 14, 1929 in Hartford, Connecticut. His formal education was completed at Loomis School, a private school located in Windsor, Connecticut. After graduating, Selden studied at Yale University, Columbia University, and abroad in Rome, Italy.

Selden's first two books were published in 1956 and 1957. Neither of the books was successful, and Selden was glad the books were soon out of print. Next came *The Cricket in Times Square* in 1960, propelling Selden's popularity and success as an author. Selden says of his inspiration for the book: "One night I was coming home on the subway, and I did hear a cricket chirp in the Times Square subway station. The story formed in my mind within minutes. An author is very thankful for minutes like those, although they happen all too infrequently."

The Cricket in Times Square went on to win the Newbery Honor and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. In addition, the success of this work caused Selden to write six other books in *The Cricket* series and a number of other fiction and non-fiction works.

Selden passed away on December 5, 1989 at the age of 60.

Assignment 1A: Read Chapters 1-2 of *The Cricket in Times Square*.

The Cricket in Times Square is a fun book with an interesting but easy-to-understand plot. With talking animals as a central focus, the book also has a hint of humor. Still, George Selden keeps things simple overall—he introduces minimal settings and only a handful of characters. There are many things which you may enjoy about this book, but something that stands out is Selden's use of description. Woven into the simple plot and cast of characters is description that makes our eyes brighten, our minds imagine, and our ears listen. Throughout this class, we will study more about description and how Selden uses it. Then, each week, you will get to practice your own descriptive writing in response to the chapters you have read.

DESCRIBING SIGHTS & SOUNDS –

In the opening chapter, we meet Tucker Mouse, who is watching young Mario keep the Bellini family newsstand on a Saturday evening. Tucker says, “The poor kid might as well go home.” Then, the story tells us that Tucker “looked around the station.” Of course, after this, the story *could* continue: “Tucker Mouse looked back at Mario.”

But, if you read this section again, you see that there is an entire paragraph sandwiched between Tucker looking at the station and Tucker looking back at Mario. The story reads:

The bustle of the day had long since subsided, and even the nighttime crowds, returning from the theaters and movies, had vanished. Now and then a person or two would come down one of the many stairs that led from the street and dart through the station. But at this hour everyone was in a hurry to get to bed. On the lower level the trains were running much less often. There would be a long stretch of silence; then the mounting roar as a string of cars approached Times Square; then a pause while it let off old passengers and took on new ones; and finally the rush of sound as it disappeared up the dark tunnel. And the hush fell again. There was an emptiness in the air. The whole station seemed to be waiting for the crowds of people it needed.

What does this passage accomplish? First, a passage like this helps to slow the plot. A plot that is made up of action after action goes too quickly. This is almost like you trying to sprint—run really fast—continuously around your house without taking any breaks. Pretty quickly, you get tired and out of breath. If you are going to run for a long time, you have to run at a steady pace and learn to control your movement, your speed, and your breath.

The same is true for a good story. Action-driven plots can quickly cause a reader to become overwhelmed, almost out of breath, in a sense. The action comes so fast that the reader cannot absorb or appreciate the story. Descriptive passages help the reader to slow down and gain a sense of time.

Did Tucker turn his head, take a quick glance at the station, and then turn back to Mario? Probably not. Instead, Tucker “looked *around* at the station.” The descriptive paragraph that follows helps us imagine Tucker—quietly, calmly, slowly—studying his surroundings. And this gives the action a break and helps us, the readers, to breathe and absorb, to slow down and appreciate where this story is set and what is about to happen in the story.

Secondly, this descriptive passage helps us to see, hear, and know the surroundings of the story. George Selden chose to set this story in New York City's infamous Times Square. However, the story isn't primarily set up on the streets in the hubbub of the bright lights and tall buildings. It is set below the street, in the subway station. From this passage, we are able to experience the sights and sounds of the subway station as the evening fades away.

Selden uses words such as *subside* and *vanish* to help us understand that the usual crowds are growing smaller as the evening wears on. He uses the word *dart* to show a few people hurrying out of the station to get home to their beds. He helps us hear the “long stretch of silence” and then the “mounting roar” of an incoming train. We see, hear, and feel the train entering the station and leaving again. We feel the hush of the station, the “emptiness in the air,” as the passengers leave.

And all of this happens before Tucker looks back at Mario again.

Description in writing helps us to imagine the story in our minds. More so, description in writing helps us learn to appreciate our surroundings. The people and places that surround us are as important as what we do and what we say. The people and places around us shape us and shape our stories.

And so, the interesting part about this story is that Mario finds a cricket in a bustling, noisy, dimly-lit subway station. He isn't out running through a meadow on a family picnic. He is a city boy who is used to crowds of people and noisy trains and honking cars. But for a moment, he hears a beautiful sound and finds a cricket – and this changes everything.

Assignment 1B: In one complete paragraph (4+ sentences), describe a place, using the subway station passage above as an example. You may choose the grocery store, the playground, a local swimming pool, the library, your dance studio, your church, etc.

Focus primarily on **sights** and **sounds**. What do you see at this place? What do you hear? Choose vocabulary words that will help you describe the sights and sounds. For example, your place might have a 'noisy crowd.' But why is the crowd noisy? Are they shouting? Are they laughing? Are they singing? Be as specific as possible, so that I can see and hear this place just as if I were standing there.

Remember to format your paragraph properly. Indent the first line. Write one line after the other. Justified text is optional but not required.

DESCRIBING PEOPLE –

In Chapter 1, we are introduced to Mario, and we hear a bit about Papa and Mama as well. In Chapter 2, Papa and Mama return to the newsstand, and we get a better understanding of each person's character.

We read that Mama is “a short woman—a little stouter than she liked to admit—who wheezed and got a red face when she had to climb steps.” She is bothered, disgusted even, by the cricket that Mario shows her. She tells her son to throw it away. When Mario tries to reason with her by stating that crickets bring good luck, she says with sarcasm, in a dry voice, “Cricketers are good luck—so I suppose ants are better luck. And cockroaches are the best luck of all. Throw it away.” Nothing deters Mama's disgust for the cricket until Papa puts in his final word. Then Mama is quiet. Perhaps from this, we can learn that Mama is an opinionated and stubborn woman, made hard from the challenges of life, but one who does love her husband and son dearly, even though she might not always show it very well.

In Chapter 2, we read that Papa is “a peaceful man.” He is described as being “tall and somewhat bent over” but still kind, a smiling sort of man. He is proud of his newsstand and works hard to take care of it and make it successful. He does not like arguments and tries to keep peace for his wife and son. In doing so, he proposes a solution for the cricket that satisfies Mama and makes Mario happy.

Why does George Selden tell us more about Mario's parents? Could the story just get by if we only knew about Tucker and the cricket? Maybe. But as we continue to read, we will find it helpful to know Papa and Mama and understand their personalities, even if only in a small way, because they are directly connected to Mario and, ultimately, the story of the cricket. Of course, we could have simply met Papa and Mama, heard the conversation about the cricket, and ended the chapter. But the author gives us space and time to visualize Papa and Mama in our minds, to understand their relationship with each other, their relationship with Mario, and their relationship with the newsstand. All of this description helps us appreciate the characters and appreciate the story more because a story isn't ever just about actions and talking but about how the plot affects the characters within.

Assignment 1C: In one complete paragraph (4+ sentences), describe a person, using the examples of Mama and Papa above. You may choose to describe one of your parents or grandparents, one of your siblings, or even a teacher or a friend.

What does this person look like? How does this person's voice sound? How does this person walk or talk (slowly, lively, sadly, etc.)? What is this person's personality? When describing this person, what are the most important things you want your reader to know?

Remember to format your paragraph properly. Indent the first line. Write one line after the other. Justified text is optional but not required.

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Week One – Vocabulary List

SAMPLE

(Note: weekly vocabulary lists are optional and do not need to be submitted with the homework.)

Definitions – Using a dictionary, look up each of the following words from Chapters 1-2. After reading the definition, write it down *in your own words*.

Spelling – You may also use this list for spelling practice. Copy each word on the list for three or four days. On the final day of your school week, write each word without looking at the list or have a parent quiz you in oral spelling. Can you spell each word correctly?

Vocabulary Words –

1. cautious
2. lurch
3. murmur
4. niche
5. resigned
6. rummage
7. scornful
8. scrounge
9. subside
10. wheeze