



Beginning Literature I – Syllabus

Course Description: An excerpt-based class, students are introduced to various works of early elementary literature, including *Aesop’s Fables* (published 1484), Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Heidi* (1880), *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and Beatrix Potter (1902). All texts are included as part of the class; no materials are required for purchase.

Prerequisite: *The Composition* or equivalent experience.

Course Outline:

Week One: *What is a Fable?*

- Overview of Fables
- Oral Tradition
- Aesop’s Fables
- Characteristics of Fables
- Understanding and Responding to Literature

Week Two: *Fairytales*

- Historical Context
- The Value of Fairytales
- Hans Christan Anderson

Week Three: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

- Historical Context
- Word Play and Literary Devices
- Lewis Carroll

Week Four: *Heidi*

- More About the Victorian Era
- Johanna Spyri
- First Impressions

Week Five: *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

- Carlo Collodi

- Making Connections
- The Story of Jonah

Week Six: *The Jungle Book*

- Cultural Significance
- Rudyard Kipling
- Prose and Verse

Week Seven: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

- Historical Context
- L. Frank Baum
- Hero's Journey

Week Eight: *Animal Stories*

- Beatrix Potter
- Anthropomorphism

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



Beginning Literature I

Lesson One: What is a Fable?

Long before people could print books or easily write stories down, many stories were told out loud. Parents told stories to children. Teachers told stories to students. Travelers told stories to any villager that would listen.

One of the oldest forms of this type of story is the **fable**.

A fable is a story that teaches a lesson (called a *moral*), and many fables use animals as the main characters. The animals usually act like people (personification); they talk, argue, brag, make mistakes, help others, try to trick others, and learn lessons. Even though the characters may be lions, mice, turtles, rabbits, and more, if you look close enough, they can teach us much about human behavior.

ORAL TRADITION –

Oral tradition is the passing down of stories, lessons, songs, and history by speaking them aloud rather than writing them down. You might be thinking that sounds difficult, but most people didn't own books, so oral storytelling was one of the main ways people shared wisdom.

Think about how easy it is to remember a story like “The Tortoise and the Hare.” It may be short, but it is a memorable story. A listener can hear the story once and remember the most important details. This is how oral storytelling works.

But because stories have been told and retold through oral tradition, it means that many fables have been told in more than one version. A fable might sound slightly different depending on who is telling it. A fable might vary across memories and cultures, but the core messages often remain the same.

AESOP'S FABLES –

Many of the most famous fables are connected to Aesop, a storyteller from ancient Greece, whose earliest known fables date back to the 4th century. ⁽¹⁾ Not much is known about Aesop's life—most details may actually

be legend more than fact—but the fables connected to this name have been told and retold for thousands of years. ⁽²⁾ No matter the name behind the fables, the importance is found in the message of the stories themselves.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FABLES –

Before we have some fun reading fables and writing our own, let’s take a look at the key characteristics of fables:

ANIMAL CHARACTERS – Animals are often the main characters of fables. They typically have human attributes. This is something called *anthropomorphism*, which we will learn more about in a few weeks.

MORALS – Every fable has a lesson at the end of the story. As we learned earlier, this is called a *moral*.

SHORT STORY FORM – Remember, fables were originally passed down through oral tradition. Shorter stories were easier to remember and pass down generation to generation.

SYMBOLISM – The adventures (or misadventures) and humanlike attributes of the animals in fables symbolize human behavior and everyday issues.

HUMOR – Though fables symbolize important themes and teach important lessons, they often have a humorous tone.

UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE –

Many of us read for fun. But there are those who do not feel that reading is enjoyable. I’ll be honest and admit that even I can relate to that at times. Not every book is well-written or exciting. But even when we don’t enjoy reading or find a particular book interesting, we can still learn to read with *purpose*.

Even if you enjoy reading, there may be assignments you don’t enjoy. You might be tempted to read and just “get it done and over with.” But learning to read with purpose can change the entire process and overall experience. **Reading with purpose gives you a reason to read and discover that there may be more to the story than what your first impression tells you.**

The first step toward responding effectively to literature means acknowledging that reading has a purpose.

You should read to connect the ideas in the story to things you already know. You should read to learn more about other people or other subjects. You should read to expand your current knowledge, broaden perspective, grow your critical thinking skills, and develop empathy for other people and cultures. *Reading stories helps us to better understand what it means to be human.*

The next step toward responding effectively to literature is shifting your mindset. You should make your goal of reading one of learning. When you look at reading this way, it's impossible to look at a book as just another pointless story. If you approach reading as an opportunity to learn, you will gain more from the story (even if reading is not your favorite activity or the book is not a story you enjoy).

COMPREHENSION – When you first read a text, you should be making an effort to comprehend the text. This may mean looking up words you don't know or rereading portions you don't understand the first time.

FOCUS – To focus your reading, you may need to reread the text again. This will allow you to discover or understand a deeper meaning. This is especially helpful when we want to better understand an individual character, theme, or figurative language.

QUESTION – As you read, ask questions about the text. Question the story, the characters, the author's purpose, etc. Asking questions develops curiosity and discussion and also helps us connect the text to a bigger picture.

CONNECTION – As you read, think about how the story connects to you, other literature (stories, poems, films, etc.), and the world around you.

The final step to understanding literature and learning how to respond to it is becoming familiar with story elements. These components are found in every work of fiction.

TITLE – The name of the story (a simple but important element)

AUTHOR – The person (or sometimes people) who wrote the story

CHARACTERS – The people in the story (who the story is about)

SETTING – The location and time in which the story takes place

PLOT – What happens in the story (beginning, middle, and end)

THEME – The main idea of the story

CONFLICT – The major problem or issue in the story

RESOLUTION – How the problem or issue is solved

RESPONDING TO LITERATURE –

Responding to literature means more than saying whether you liked or disliked a story. It means more than answering a list of comprehension questions. **Responding to literature means thinking carefully about various elements of the text.** *It means digging deeper.*

Throughout this class, you will be asked to answer various literature questions and respond to writing prompts. So here are a few tips for success:

- **Answer in complete sentences.** Not only is this typically an assignment requirement, but it is also a good habit to develop. Answering in complete sentences is the first step toward well-developed and thoughtful answers.
- **Refer to the question in your answer.** This is an important part of *being specific*.
Example: What is your favorite instance of dialogue thus far in the text? Why?
My favorite piece of dialogue is...
- **Answer “WHY.”** This is another important part of *being specific*. It’s never good enough to say, “Just because.” Dig deeper and think about *WHY* you chose the answer you did. In literature, there will be many times there is no black-and-white, right or wrong answer. It’s all about showing that you’ve dug deeper and made an effort to connect with and understand what you read.
Example: What is your favorite instance of dialogue thus far in the text? Why?
My favorite piece of dialogue is . . . because it really shows Lucy’s sweet personality and sense of imagination.
- **Use examples.** When necessary, use examples from the text to support your answers. In the examples from the above points, you could include the exact quote

you're claiming is your favorite. Other times, you may simply include summaries or paraphrases. These all count as examples to support your thoughts and ideas.

Assignment 1A: Read the following fables attached with this week's lesson. Fables are very short, so they shouldn't take you long. Pay close attention to the characters, conflicts, and moral of the stories.

- "The Ant and the Grasshopper"
- "The Peacock and the Crane"
- "The Lion and the Mouse"
- "The Goose with the Golden Eggs"
- "The Crow and the Pitcher"
- "The Tortoise and the Hare"
- "The North Wind and the Sun"
- "The Boy Who Cried Wolf"
- "The Bundle of Sticks"
- "The Fox and the Grapes"

Assignment 1B: After you have completed reading each fable, choose **three** of the fables and answer the following questions **for each of your chosen stories**.

Remember to answer in complete sentences.

1. What is the title of the story?
2. Who are the characters in the story?
3. Where does the story take place?
4. What happens in the story? (*Summarize in two or three sentences. **Be sure to include the conflict and how/if it's resolved.***)
5. What is the theme (or moral) of the story?

Assignment 1C: Create your own fable! For this assignment, you will write your own fable. This story does not need to be complex. You can model it after one of *Aesop's Fables* or write a short rhyming story like what you might read in children's books.

Your fable should meet the following requirements:

- have a title
- be written as a **complete** narrative with a beginning, middle, and end
- include some sort of conflict or problem as well as a resolution or solution
- demonstrate use of symbolic characters and/or objects that represent people, places, and things from real life
- convey a theme, message, or moral to the reader

Sources –

1. “Fable.” *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/glossary/fable>.
2. “Aesop.” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aesop>.