

TEACHING GUIDE

Charlotte's Web

60TH

ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

Foreword by
Kate DiCamillo



E. B. White

PICTURES BY

Garth Williams



ABOUT THE BOOK

“Some pig.” These are the words in Charlotte’s web, high in the barn. Her spiderweb tells of her feelings for a little pig named Wilbur, as well as the feelings of a little girl named Fern . . . who loves Wilbur, too. Their love has been shared by millions of readers.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E. B. White, the author of such beloved classics as *Charlotte’s Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, was born in Mount Vernon, New York. He graduated from Cornell University in 1921 and, five or six years later, joined the staff of *The New Yorker* magazine, then in its infancy. He died on October 1, 1985, and was survived by his son and three grandchildren.

Mr. White’s essays have appeared in *Harper’s* magazine, and some of his other books are: *One Man’s Meat*, *The Second Tree from the Corner*, *Letters of E. B. White*, *Essays of E. B. White*, and *Poems and Sketches of E. B. White*. He won countless awards, including the 1971 National Medal for Literature and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, which commended him

for making a “substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children.”

During his lifetime, many young readers asked Mr. White if his stories were true. In a letter written to be sent to his fans, he answered, “No, they are imaginary tales . . . But real life is only one kind of life—there is also the life of the imagination.”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In chapter 1, Fern is very upset that her father is going to destroy Wilbur because he is a runt. She argues until he agrees to spare the pig. Her father says that Fern is “trying to rid the world of injustice.” What does he mean by this?
2. Fern shows her parents that she is responsible enough to care for Wilbur. What do you need to do to care for any pet? Do you have a pet?
3. When Wilbur escapes from his pen, he runs about frantically until he lets himself be captured. He thinks, “I’m really too young to go out into the world alone” (chapter 3). Do you ever feel this way? What do you like to do independently? When you are trying something new on your own, do you feel excited, brave, nervous, or frightened?
4. *Charlotte’s Web* takes place on Mr. Zuckerman’s farm. What animals would you expect to see on a farm? Which farm animal would you most want to be, and which farm animal would you least want to be? Why?
5. In chapter 5, Wilbur reflects upon his new friendship with Charlotte. He is happy to have a new friend, but he is worried about some of her qualities. He thinks, “I’ve got a new friend, all right. But what a gamble friendship is!” Think about one of your friendships. What do you like best about your friend? Do you have any worries about this friendship?
6. In chapter 5, Charlotte explains that she must “live by my wits.” What does she mean by this? Think of examples of people living by their wits. In what ways do you live by your wits?



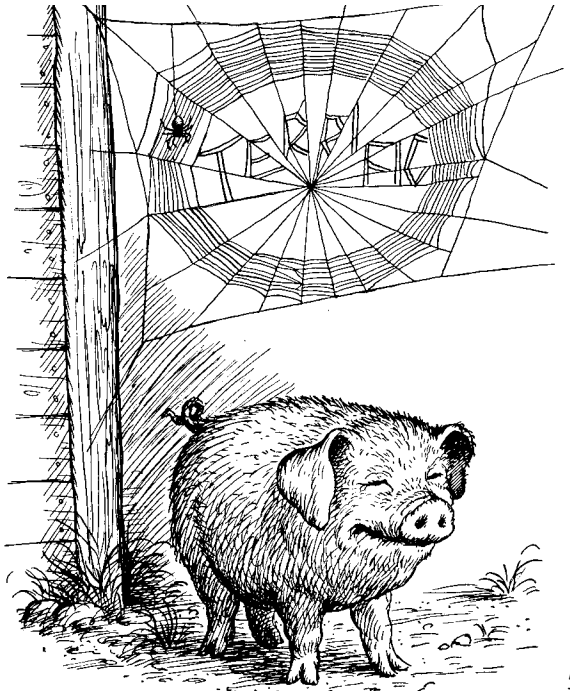
7. In chapter 9, Charlotte compares her life to the lives of others. She says people “rush, rush, rush, every minute . . . I stay put and wait for what comes. Gives me a chance to think.” How do you feel about your lifestyle? Do you rush from one activity to the next, or do you have time at home to relax and think? Which do you enjoy more, going from place to place or spending time relaxing and thinking?



8. Fern and her brother, Avery, spend their days on the farm swinging on a rope swing, catching frogs, and picking raspberries. Do you think these activities are similar or different to what a lot of kids do for fun today? What activities do you like to do?
9. Charlotte is desperate to save her friend Wilbur’s life, and she’s determined to come up with a plan. What are the disadvantages Charlotte faces as a spider trying to save a pig’s life? When Charlotte was planning, were you able to predict what she would do? If you were in Charlotte’s place, what would your plan have been? Do you think it would have worked?
10. When Charlotte put her plan into action (chapter 11), did you think it would work? Why or why not?
11. Mr. Zuckerman tells his wife, “Our pig is completely out of the ordinary” (chapter 11). Do you think this is true? Are there multiple characters in the story that are extraordinary?
12. When Charlotte’s plan starts to work, Wilbur becomes a famous pig. Fern is happy that Wilbur will be saved, but finds that now “the barn was not nearly as pleasant—too many people. She liked it better when she could be all alone with her friends the animals” (chapter 11). Would you like to be famous? Why or why not? What do you think are the costs of being famous?

13. In chapter 12, Charlotte says, “People believe almost anything they see in print.” Do you think that’s true? If you see something on the Internet, in the newspaper, or in a magazine, do you always assume that it is true? Why or why not? What about if you see something on television?
14. In chapter 13, Charlotte has to complete the difficult task of weaving “TERRIFIC” into her web. She talks to herself as she works until the task is completed. What is the most difficult thing you have accomplished? How did you do it? Did you encourage yourself by talking to yourself or in another way?
15. At first Wilbur is embarrassed that Charlotte is going to write “TERRIFIC” in her web, but eventually he begins to feel that he really is terrific. Why do you think Wilbur’s feelings about himself change?
16. In chapter 14, Fern says that her “best friends are in the barn cellar,” but by chapter 20, Fern is excited about spending time with her friend Henry Fussy. How has Fern changed from the beginning of the book to the end? Do you think this is a negative, positive, or neutral change? Does change always have to be negative or positive?

17. Read chapter 15.
How has fame affected Wilbur?
What is the most important thing in his life? What are the most important things in your own life? Do you think those things would change if you became famous?

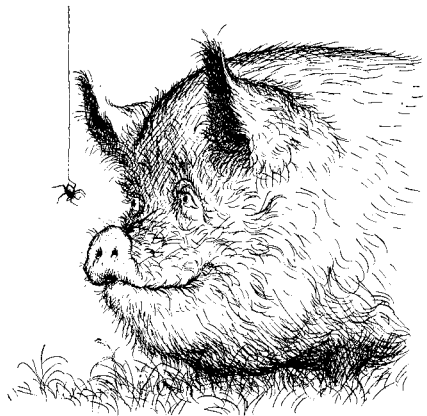


18. In chapter 16, after the old sheep tells Templeton about the food at the Fair Grounds, why does Charlotte wink at the sheep?
19. Have you ever been to a carnival or a fair? Describe the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells that you experienced there. What are your favorite things about a carnival?
20. Wilbur blushes when he receives a medal at the fair. Have you ever won an award or trophy? How did you feel (or how do you think you would feel)?
21. In chapter 21, Charlotte reflects upon her life and tells Wilbur, “By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that.” Think about ways that kids can “lift up their lives a trifle” by helping others. What can you do to “lift up your own life?”
22. Charlotte saves Wilbur’s future, and Wilbur saves Charlotte’s future. How does each character accomplish this?

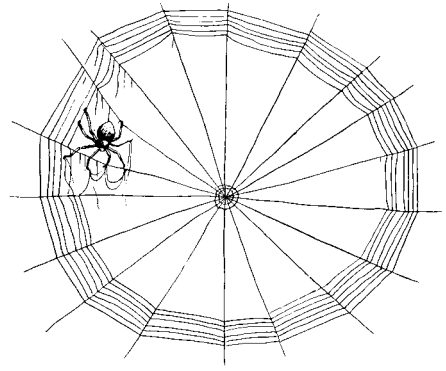


EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Based on the descriptions of Mr. Zuckerman's farm, have students create a map of the farm and label the areas (barn, apple orchard, woods, etc.).
2. At the beginning of chapter 4, Wilbur plans out a schedule for the day. His activities include napping, eating, scratching, and standing still. Prompt students to think about what activities they would choose if they could plan a perfect day. Have them create timelines or schedules of their ideal days, planning out activities starting with when they wake up and ending with when they go to sleep.
3. Charlotte is often introducing new words to Wilbur. Have students keep a running dictionary of "Charlotte's Words." In it they can record new vocabulary words, define them, and use them in sentences. Include such words as "salutations" (chapter 5), "untenable" (chapter 6), "gratified" (chapter 6), "sedentary" (chapter 9), "gullible" (chapter 10), "radiant" (chapter 13), and "versatile" (chapter 15).
4. In *Charlotte's Web*, each season is briefly described as a year passes. Read the book *The Seasons of Arnold's Apple Tree* by Gail Gibbons aloud to the class. Discuss the characteristics of each season and record the students' ideas on a chart. Then have students create a flipbook (fold a piece of paper in half longwise, and then cut the top fold into four sections to create four flaps). On the top of the flap, have students label and illustrate each season. Under the flap, students should record two characteristics of that season.
5. In chapter 7, Wilbur learns the sad fact that pigs are slaughtered for bacon and ham. Discuss how farmers make a living by raising livestock, growing crops, or producing milk or eggs. List the products generated on a farm and place them in the context of their nutritional food group by referring to www.choosemyplate.gov.



6. Charlotte describes how she spins a web in chapter 9. Show students photographs of spiderwebs (National Geographic’s website has useful photos). Have students describe the patterns they see in the webs. Then have them draw their own spiderwebs.



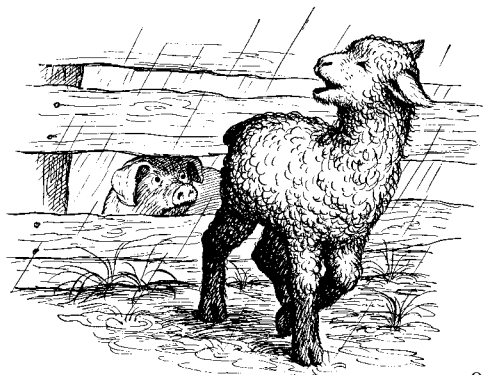
7. As a class or individually, have students create a character chart that includes the main characters (Fern, Charlotte, Wilbur, Templeton) from the story. Students can write the characters’ names, add an illustration of each character, and list several traits that describe each character.

8. Ask each student to choose a farm animal to research. Students can use books or the Internet to conduct their research. Then have individuals or pairs of students design PowerPoint slides that include facts about their animals—what they eat, where and when they sleep, how they’re born, etc. Collate the slides to create a class presentation about farm animals. Have students present to another class or invite their parents in to hear the presentation.

9. Templeton finds bits of magazine pages to inspire Charlotte. Bring a collection of magazines into the classroom (or ask students to bring some magazines into school). Then have each student create a collage that represents himself or herself using bits and pieces from the magazine pages.

10. A blue ribbon is given to the first-prize winner at the fair. Give your students blank ribbon outlines and have them create “Friendship Awards.” Secretly assign a classmate to each student, and ask students to design their ribbon specifically for that classmate. For example, a student who likes sports might be given the “Best Athlete” ribbon; a student who loves to draw might receive the “Best Artist” ribbon; etc. When the ribbons are completed, have an award ceremony in which students present the ribbons to their classmates.

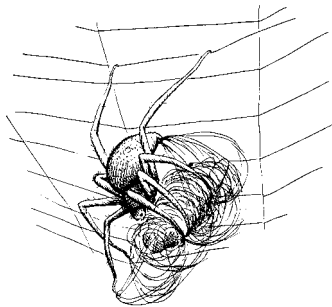
11. Charlotte's children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren live in the barn with Wilbur. Discuss these family relationships and have students think about their own parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Have each student design a family tree, on which he/she records the names of his/her relatives and delineates their relationships to him/herself.
12. Have each student construct a puppet of one of the characters from *Charlotte's Web*. They can use materials such as socks, paper bags, pipe cleaners, fabric, or felt to create their puppets. Then, in small groups, have students use their puppets to act out one of the chapters from the book. After the groups have rehearsed, have them present their puppet shows to the rest of the class.
13. Have students imagine that Charlotte is going to write about them in her web. Ask them to choose five words that describe themselves. Then have each student create a word web poster by writing his/her name in a center circle and drawing spokes and connecting lines radiating out from the center. Encourage students to weave their five words into the "webs" in creative ways.
14. Visit a local farm to observe the animals and how the farm operates. After the field trip, have students use clay, craft sticks, and other materials to create a model of the farm and the animals they saw there.
15. Have a class Spider Party! Students can make spider masks to wear, build spider treats to eat (four mini-pretzel sticks attached to each side of a marshmallow, and two tiny candies for the eyes), sing spider songs ("The Itsy Bitsy Spider"), and hear spider stories such as Eric Carle's *The Very Busy Spider*, Gerald McDermott's *Anansi the Spider*, Faith McNulty's *The Lady and the Spider*, Jonathan London's *Dream Weaver*, and any of the books from David Kirk's *Miss Spider* series.



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

SCIENCE

- Charlotte's life cycle is depicted in this story. Have students study other animals' life cycles and create posters to show the life cycles of the animals they've chosen. Students can compare and contrast the life cycles of their animals with Charlotte's spider life cycle.
- As a group or individually, have students compile a list of spider facts. Each student should choose a fact to record and illustrate on an individual page. Then collate the pages into an "All About Spiders" class book.
- In chapter 5, Charlotte describes how she captures her prey and eats it. Have students research other animals' hunting and eating habits.
- In chapter 6, we read about the summer birds that live on the farm (white-throated sparrow, phoebe, song sparrow, swallow). Have each student research one type of bird (not limited to those in the book) and create a fact card. On the front, students should draw their birds in detail. On the back, they should record between one and five facts (depending on the age of your students) about their birds. Collate the fact cards into a deck (hole-punch the cards and place them on a metal ring) for students to read and study.



MATH

- Have students write and illustrate math story problems about animals on the farm. For example, "The goose laid six eggs. Two eggs rolled away. How many eggs were left?" Students can break into pairs and solve each other's math story problems.
- In chapter 17, Mr. Arable gave Fern two quarters and two dimes, while he gave Avery five dimes and four nickels. Is this fair? (Have students do the math and compare the amounts.) What other coin combinations can be used to make 70 cents?

LANGUAGE ARTS

- In chapter 6, seven goslings are born. Create a two-column chart entitled “Baby Animals.” On the left side, list a variety of animals. On the right side, have students fill in the name of each animal’s offspring, guessing if they don’t know (goose/gosling, kangaroo/joey, etc.). Then check to see if the students’ answers are correct.

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Fern is learning the state capitals in school. Challenge your students to learn the 50 state capitals and then hold a team competition to see how quickly the students can recall them.
- Discuss the setting of *Charlotte’s Web* and introduce the terms rural, urban, and suburban to describe different types of communities. Discuss the differences between farm/country life, city life, and suburban life. Have students create a large mural depicting all three types of communities. Assign some students to draw the backgrounds while others create cut-out characters and details to glue onto the background. As an extension, students can think about what jobs they might have if they were adults living in these communities.



“E. B. White said, ‘All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world.’

White loved barns and pastures, dumps and fair grounds, ponds and kitchens. He loved pigs and sheep and geese and spiders. He loved rain, harnesses, pitchforks, springtime, fall. He loved spider webs, monkey wrenches, Ferris wheels.

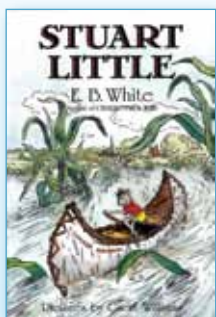
Every word of *Charlotte’s Web* bears the full weight of White’s love for the people, seasons, animals, and arachnids of this world. And every word of the book shows us how we can bear the triumphs and despairs, the wonders and the heartbreaks, the small and large glories and tragedies of being here.

We can bear it all by loving it all.”

—Kate DiCamillo, from the foreword to the
60th Anniversary Edition of *Charlotte’s Web*

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Teaching guide prepared by Sue Ornstein, a first grade teacher in the Byram Hills School District in Armonk, New York.

ISBN: 978-0-06-213573-5