

JUST A DREAM

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



Plot Summary

Young Walter is a careless boy who tosses rubbish on the grass, thinks recycling is a waste of time, and mocks his neighbor, Rose, for her delight in the tree she has just received for her birthday. Walter longs to live in the future, which he imagines to be full of robots, tiny personal planes, and machines that make life easier. One night when he falls asleep, his wish to live in the future comes true. However, his dreams carry him into a future not filled with the robots and machines he believes will make life better, but instead ravaged by the careless mistakes of the past. Walter travels in his sleep to the midst of an endless garbage dump situated on his own street, to a tree in a forest that is about to be cut down, to the top of a smokestack belching pollution, to the middle of a fishless sea, and to other places that show him possible negative versions of the future. When he wakes up, he is a changed boy. On his birthday, he asks for a tree, which is planted near Rose's birthday tree. When he falls asleep that night, he dreams of the future again. In this dream, he is shown a different version—instead of a world of robots and machines, laundry hangs on the line, a man mows his lawn with a motorless mower, and Walter is delighted to see that the two little trees have grown tall and strong in the clean air.

Special Features

Just a Dream can form an engaging component of an environmental study as well the basis for language arts lessons. The strong environmental message of the book is clear, but as in Van Allsburg's other work, the book focuses on characters' developing sense of personal responsibility. We are reminded that simple is not always worse; instead, it may be much healthier and more sustainable.

As in other Van Allsburg books, we are invited to explore the meeting point of dreams and reality. In this book, the world of young Walter's dreams has a substantial effect on his waking life. Walter experiences a dramatic change of heart as a result of the events he witnesses in his dream. Van Allsburg's characters often change as a consequence of their interaction with events in the story. He develops his characters through their actions rather than by telling readers directly what the characters are about. What Walter does tells us about the kind of boy he is.

Van Allsburg is also skilled at focusing in on one small moment and describing it in detail. This approach is difficult to achieve for

many young writers who tend toward abstraction. It can be helpful to use Van Allsburg's description of one moment to talk about focus with your students. For example:

He bought one large jelly-filled doughnut. He took the pastry from its bag, eating quickly as he walked along. He licked the red jelly from his fingers. Then he crumpled up the empty bag and threw it at a fire hydrant.

This passage tells readers a great deal about Walter's character by focusing in on one instant in his life.

Van Allsburg's artwork contributes largely, as usual, to the magic of the story. Using color pastels and composing from shifting perspectives and angles, he invites us to watch sometimes from within the scene and sometimes from above. His pictures help us focus in on one moment by zooming in on a detail or framing the view in an unusual way—for example, we focus on smokestacks from the top and close up.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog is hidden cleverly as a tiny hood ornament on the semi truck aiming for Walter's bed.



Teaching Ideas

Because Walter undergoes a transformation over the course of the story, *Just a Dream* provides wonderful teaching material for examining how story elements (characters, plot, and setting) combine to facilitate change. These types of reading lessons are better suited to children who have had some exposure to the story elements (as early as first grade). Children can be encouraged—either in the context of a class conversation or within their individual reading work—to not only notice and articulate Walter's changing perspective, and to look for evidence in the text that points to the change in his outlook.

Young writers often have a difficult time with focus in their stories, whether they are fictional or realistic narratives. *Just a Dream*

offers several teaching points for how the author zooms in on single, telling moment. Using the excerpt above (or others) can be helpful in teaching children how to focus in their own writing. You can also explain that Walter's character is exposed not because the author tells us directly that Walter is a careless boy who doesn't think about the effects of his actions, but because he describes in great detail what Walter does. This may help your students learn that creating realistic characters often includes describing their actions and how they move through the world.

Guiding Questions for a *Just a Dream* Read-Aloud

- What do you think of the way Walter tosses his wrappers on the ground and makes fun of Rose's tree? What do these behaviors tell us about Walter's character?
- At the beginning of the story, Walter thinks that life will be much easier in the future, with robots and machines to help us do everything. Do you agree or disagree? Why? What do *you* think the future will be like?
- *As you read the story to your students, pause at several scenes in Walter's dream journey and discuss the issues described. For example:* Why do you think there are no more fish in the sea in Walter's dream? What can be done about the problem of reduced fish stock in the world's oceans?
- Walter's ideas change drastically over the course of the story. What does he learn from his dream?
- Have you had an experience that changed your mind about something?
- What does Chris Van Allsburg teach readers about caring for the Earth?

Zoom In on One Little Moment and Write About That

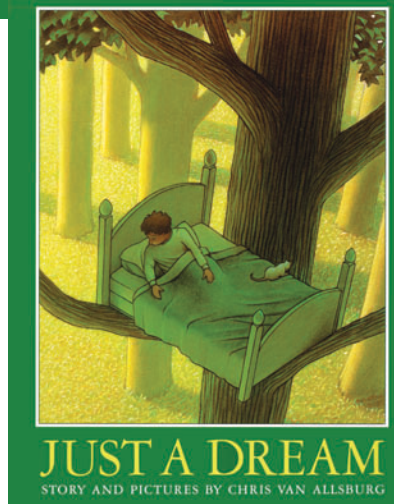
A lower-grade writing lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Just a Dream*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge:

The children should have experienced *Just a Dream* as a read-aloud before you teach this lesson so that they are familiar with the storyline. The lesson is designed for use within the context of a writing workshop, but can be presented independently as well. The lesson works best if your students have been studying personal narrative, fiction, or other types of narrative writing. It will be helpful, although not necessary, to have already spoken to your students



about the importance of focusing their writing to create more powerful stories.

Introduction:

Tell your students that one way writers make their stories powerful and interesting is to zoom in on one little moment in time and describe it in detail. When we focus in on one moment, our writing becomes more authentic because we are able to portray in detail what happened. Describing one small moment in the life of a character can also reveal a great deal about the character's personality.

Teaching:

Van Allsburg does a wonderful job describing Walter in *Just a Dream* by focusing in on one small moment when he is walking home from school. Instead of saying very little about a series of activities spread out over time, Van Allsburg zooms in on just a few minutes of activity. As a result, we start to build ideas about who Walter is. Read the following excerpt to your students:

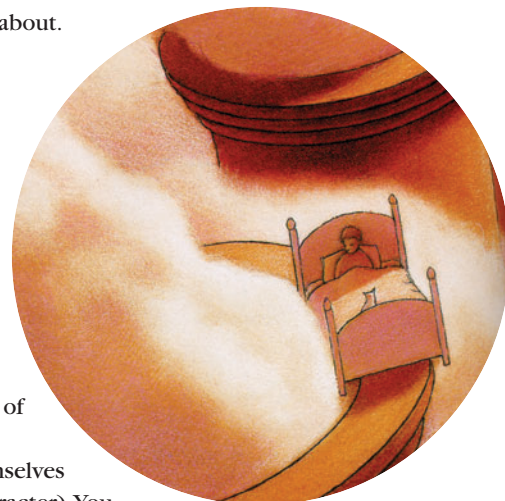
He bought one large jelly-filled doughnut. He took the pastry from its bag, eating quickly as he walked along. He licked the red jelly from his fingers. Then he crumpled up the empty bag and threw it at a fire hydrant.

Ask the children to turn and talk to someone near them (or to their talk partner, if they are organized into talk partnerships) about what they know about Walter after you read the excerpt. They will probably refer to his being messy or careless, and indifferent to the environment. Tell them that Van Allsburg doesn't come right out and say these things; instead, he focuses on one moment in Walter's life and we see for ourselves.

Tell your students to think of a character that they have been working on in writing workshop lately—either themselves or an invented character. Ask them to take a couple of minutes to think about one moment in the character's life that shows a lot about his or her personality. This is easier for most young writers in the context of personal narrative because they can employ their memories in addition to their imaginations. Ask them to turn and talk to a neighbor about the moment that they plan to write about.

Writing Time:

If your writers are working within the context of a writing workshop, confer with them as they write, urging them to focus in on one small moment in the life of their character (whether it is themselves or an invented character). You may want to carry a copy of *Just a*



Dream around with you as you confer so that you can refer to the passage about Walter and the jelly doughnut as you talk with each child. If students have trouble focusing on one moment you can help them to look closer.

If your students are not working with in a writing workshop model, you will want to give them more structure before they leave the rug—for example, ask them to think of an environmental issue that they care strongly about and to write about it in story form.

Share:

It can be very useful for children to see how their own thinking can be revised as they write. One way of exploring the work that children have done during writing time is to share the work of a student who started out writing in a vague, unfocused way about a character and then focused in on one little moment as you and the student conferred. Discuss with the community which piece of writing is more powerful. Almost without fail, the focused piece will be more compelling. It is helpful for children to have the unfocused and the focused writing displayed next to each other so that they can compare the results on their own.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Writers:

- More experienced writers might be challenged to create an entire story that takes place in one moment. They can be asked to use their senses to record all that they can remember or imagine about that moment, and then to shape the moment into narrative form.
- Ask your students to find examples in their reading of places where the author has zoomed in on one moment in time. Ask them to discuss how this approach gives readers a clearer sense of characters' personalities.

Expanding this lesson:

- Write a story about an experience your class has shared together. Ask each child to write about one small moment they remember from that experience. Combine the moments to form a story to be displayed in the classroom.
- Repeat this lesson but tell your students that focusing on one moment is like using the zoom lens of a camera, or the focus dial of binoculars, to make a story clearer. You may want to bring a camera or a pair of binoculars to class and ask students to notice how much more they see and understand about a thing or person being focused on when the binoculars are in focus or when the camera zooms in. You can also take pictures that show a scene or an object from close up and far away and ask your students to discuss how much more detail they see in the picture taken close up.

How Do Characters Change Through Interaction



with Story Elements?

An upper-grade reading lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Just a Dream*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector
- Markers/overhead pens
- Paper, pencils, and books for students to read on their own

Background Knowledge:

It will be helpful if you have been studying the story elements in your classroom reading work lately so that

this information is fresh in your students' minds. The story elements you will want to focus on are setting, plot, characters, and movement through time. While it is also helpful if students are familiar with the book *Just a Dream*, you can present the lesson right after reading the book to your students for the first time, if you wish.

Introduction:

First discuss with your students how Walter changes during the course of the story. Write some of the ways in which Walter changes on a piece of chart paper or on an overhead. Children will be likely to notice first that his ideas about the environment change. They may also notice that he becomes more responsible in terms of doing his chores and more thoughtful toward Rose about her tree; instead of mocking her, he decides he wants a tree of his own.

Refer to this list as you continue your lesson. Tell the children that when authors write stories, they usually make sure their characters change in some way. Explain that characters usually change in direct relation to the story elements. Tell the students that they will be looking first at how Walter changes within the ongoing context of the setting, plot, and other characters in the book. Next the students will examine character change in the context of their own independent reading work.

Teaching:

Discuss with your students how Walter changes in Van Allsburg's *Just a Dream*. Start by examining his interaction with the setting. On chart paper, write "Setting" and then discuss how Walter's interaction with the places he journeys to in his dreams shows him possible versions of the future, teaching him the importance of being thoughtful in the present. Children will be likely to recall details of the places Walter visits because of Van Allsburg's vivid artwork and descriptive prose. Label a second column on your chart paper "Plot" and ask your students to discuss the events in the storyline that change Walter's mind. Label a third column "Characters" and have the same kind of conversation. Before you send your students off to read on their own, tell them that they can carry on this kind of examination as they do their own independent reading. They can even write notes to themselves resembling the notes you took on chart paper.

Reading Time:

During reading time, confer with individual students about changes

in the characters they are reading about. Ask your students to think not only about how these characters are changing, but how their interaction with the story elements brings about the change. This is an important activity not only for making meaning out of books, but also for constructing and writing about characters in the stories your students are creating themselves.

Share:

Invite one or two students to discuss with the class how their characters have changed and how their interactions with the story elements brought about these changes.

Adapting This Lesson for Use with Younger Writers:

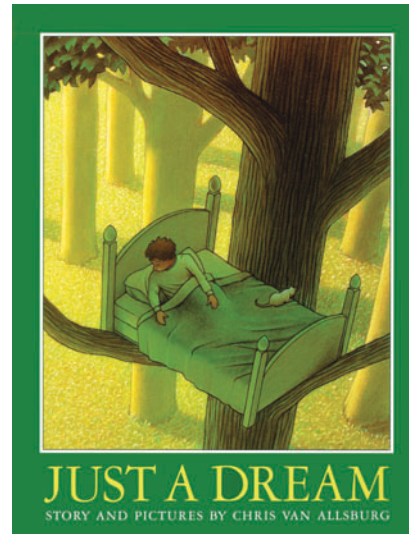
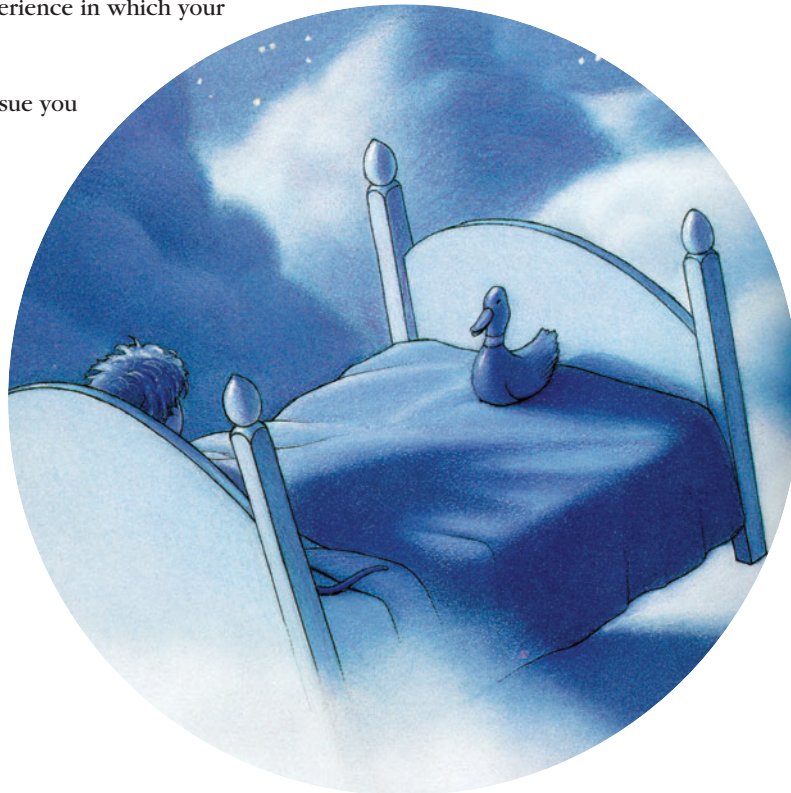
- Focus only on Walter's change. Talk about how characters often change over the course of a story. Ask the students to identify how Walter changes and to point out text evidence that supports their ideas.
- Focus only on *identifying* the story elements in *Just a Dream*. Make a list of the characters' names, the different settings, and a timeline to describe the plot.

Expanding This Lesson:

- Ask the children to design charts that show what they have learned about their characters' (or Walter's) change through interacting with the story elements. Hang these charts up in your room!
- Ask the students to write a character description of Walter at the beginning of the story and then another character description of him at the end of the story. How did Walter change?

Just for Fun

- Describe a transformational experience in which your own thinking was changed.
- Write about an environmental issue you care deeply about, in story form.
- Make posters for your school or community that teach others about the effects of their actions on the environment.
- Plant a class tree.



Just A Dream

“Van Allsburg reaches a new pinnacle of excellence in both illustration and storytelling . . . His fable builds to an urgent plea for action as it sends a rousing message of hope.”