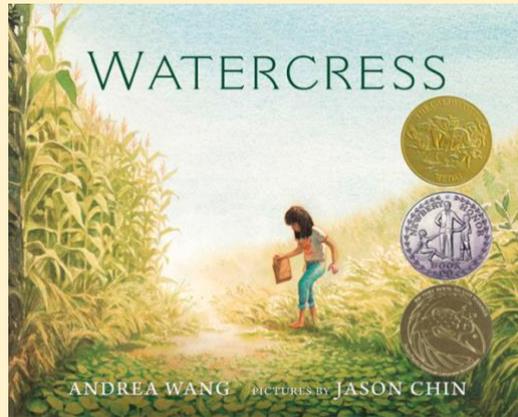


Activities for Using *WATERCRESS* with Students Grades 3-8

Based on the Tennessee Academic Standards

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Watercress

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Watercress, written by Andrea Wang and illustrated by Jason Chin, is a picture book based on a childhood memory of the author. It won both the 2022 Caldecott Medal as well as a Newbery Honor. Since Newbery titles are typically for older students, this book is a perfect example of a story that is appropriate for students of all ages. *Watercress* also won the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature in the picture book category making it an excellent book to connect to the social studies curriculum. Find details about *Watercress* at [Neal Porter Books](#), [Holiday House Books for Young Readers](#).

The following activities are based on the Tennessee Academic Standards for grades 3-8. It may be downloaded from the Teacher Resources page at <https://wordtravelliteracy.com/>.

It is intriguing to see how picture books can meet learning objectives for older students. For a conversation about the differences between *memoir*, *autobiography*, and *autobiographical*, see the blog post on [“Memoir vs. Autobiography: All Our Stories Matter.”](#)

WRITING PERSONAL STORIES

Activity: Read *Watercress* to the class and then have a discussion about connections inspired by the book. Next, use *Watercress* as inspiration for writing about personal experiences by asking students to choose one of the writing prompts below appropriate for grades 3-8. Find additional writing activities throughout this resource. Refer to the Tennessee Academic Standards Foundational Literacy Standards: Sentence Composition **FL.SC.6** for grammar, capitalization, and punctuation expectations for grades 3-5. Refer to Language Standards: Conventions of

Standard English **L.CSE.1** for specific grammar usage standards for grades 6-8 and **L.CSE.2** for capitalization, punctuation, and spelling standards for each grade.

Writing Prompts:

- A. Recall a time when you were embarrassed. Describe what happened.
- B. Have you ever learned something unexpected about a friend or family member? What did you learn? How did you feel about what you discovered?
- C. Have you ever heard an interesting story about a parent or grandparent? Where did you hear it? Write down as many details as you can recall.
- D. Describe a food that is important to your family. Write about an occasion when your family shared that food during a meal, holiday, or celebration.

READING STANDARDS FOR KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Standard 2 under the Reading Standards for Key Ideas and Details R.KID.2 requires students to understand the development of the theme or main idea and to summarize a text. The standard is slightly different for literature versus informational text but the emphasis for both is on explaining how the details support the main idea for informational text and a main idea or theme for literature. In grade 3 the focus is on stories from diverse cultures. Since *Watercress* is based upon the experience of a Chinese immigrant family, it is rich with details that portray this diversity. In grades 4-5 the focus is on summarizing and describing how the details of a story convey a theme. Details like “hand-me-down clothes” and finding free furniture on the side of the road add to the main character’s embarrassment of picking watercress by the side of the road with her family. Grade 6-7 standards add that the summary should be objective while Grade 8 requires students to analyze how the theme is developed over the course of the story in regard to characters, setting, and plot. The character arc of moving from embarrassment to understanding to pride makes *Watercress* a perfect book to use for showing how a character grows and develops in response to a personal experience. It also demonstrates how setting affects point of view which will be discussed later.

ADDITIONAL STANDARDS BY GRADE LEVEL

Grade 3 – Reading Standard – 3.RS.CS.6 – Compare and contrast the point of view of the narrator vs. the characters in a story.

Activity:

Compare and Contrast *Watercress* with *Magic Ramen: The Story of Momofuku Ando*, also written by Andrea Wang (illustrated by Kana Urbanowicz). *Watercress* centers on a personal experience of the author that is written in first person while *Magic Ramen* explores Momofuku Ando and his efforts to combat hunger in Japan after World War II. It is written in the third person. Discuss as a class how students can tell which point of view is being used. Broaden the discussion to talk about how both books deal with the subject of hunger in very different ways.

Have students write a personal narrative from their own perspective about a time when they were hungry.

Grade 4 – Reading Standard – 4.RL.CS.6 – Compare points of view found in different stories.

Activity: Read *Watercress* as well as *Thank You, Mr. Falker* written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco. Both stories are about the personal experiences of the author, but *Watercress* is written in the first person while Polacco’s book is written in the third person. Discuss the two books and then write about how the different use of Point of View (POV) affects the impact of each story. What could be some reasons that an author might choose to write a personal story in the first person versus the third person?

For further exploration, share the picture book, *The Hundred Year Barn*, written by Patricia MacLachlan and illustrated by Kenard Pak. Although it is written in the first person and sounds like a personal story, it is NOT an autobiography nor is it a memoir. Discuss with students how they can determine if a story is autobiographical by looking at the author’s notes and online interviews.

Have students write an account of a personal experience in the first person. Then ask them to write the same account in the third person. Ask them to explain which version they prefer and explain why.

Grade 5 – Reading Standard – 5.RL.KID.3 – Compare and contrast two different characters or settings in a story.

Activity: Compare and contrast the main character in the story with her mother and their very different perceptions of picking watercress on the side of the road. Discuss how their different childhood settings (the daughter was raised in Ohio and the mother grew up in China during the great famine) contributed to how they viewed the value of things that could be obtained for free. As a class, create a Venn diagram comparing the views of the mother and daughter about things like watercress, old clothing, and furniture left on the side of the road. Ask students to write about a time they received something for free and how they felt about it.

Grade 6 – Reading Standard – 6.RL.CS.5 – Analyze how a specific scene in a story helps develop the plot.

Activity: Analyze the scene where the narrator finds out that her mother’s family ate anything they could find during the great famine and how the mother’s brother died of starvation. Discuss what information is conveyed through the text and what information is revealed only in the illustrations. How does this scene change the daughter’s perception of watercress? Compare and contrast *Watercress* with *Emmanuel’s Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah* written by Laurie Ann Thompson and illustrated by Sean Qualls. How was the death of

Emmanuel's mother handled in the illustrations in that book? Discuss how picture books tackle difficult subjects such as death and write a compare/contrast essay.

Grade 7 – Reading Standard – 7.RL.CS.5 – Analyze the structure of various texts.

Activity: Compare *Watercress*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, a memoir in verse written by Jacqueline Woodson, and *26 Fairmont Avenue*, a chapter book written and illustrated by Tomie DePaola.

Discuss how a picture book, a chapter book, and memoir told in verse all written about personal author experiences all became Newbery Honor titles. Instruct students to write an essay comparing the similarities and differences between the three books. What similarities do the books share that make them worthy candidates for the Newbery Honor? How do the books differ in structure and style and how do the different text structures affect the themes found in each book.

Grade 8 – Reading Standard – 8.RL.CS.5 – Compare and contrast two or more books with different text structures.

Activity: The books listed below are about the personal experiences of popular children's authors that were written by the author, but the text structures vary greatly.

Option A: Choose two or three books from the selections previously mentioned or the additional listings below and write a compare/contrast essay focusing on the structure of each book. Is it written as a picture book, a chapter book, or something else? Have a class discussion about the difference between a book that is a *memoir*, an *autobiography*, or a story that is simply *autobiographical*. Decide which category each title best fits and explain why.

Option B: To further explore different text structures, have students choose one of the books from the list below and then choose a work of fiction by the same author. Write an essay discussing how the author's personal experiences may have affected their fiction. Also, discuss how the structure of the personal story differs from the structure of the fictional title.

Option C: Andrea Wang, the author of *Watercress* first wrote the story as an essay for adults. Discuss whether or not *Watercress* could have been written as a poem, a song, a film, a graphic novel, or a chapter in a longer memoir. Pick another title from the list below and discuss whether that book could have been written in another genre. Would additional information be required? How would the various structures have affected the story's impact?

For a composition activity to follow options A-C, have students use *Watercress* as inspiration for writing a short story about a day in their life. Next, instruct them to rewrite their short story as a picture book, a poem, a page from a graphic novel, a scene from a play, or a short chapter. Discuss why they chose the format they ultimately picked.

TITLES

Watercress written by Andrea Wang and illustrated by Jason Chin

Thank You, Mr. Falker written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson.

26 Fairmont Avenue written and illustrated by Tomie DePaola.

You may also want to add these additional titles:

Boy: Tales of Childhood by Roald Dahl

My Own Two Feet: A Memoir by Beverly Cleary

The Tarantula in My Purse and 172 Wild Pets: True-Life Stories to Read Aloud by Jean Craighead George

Woodsong by Gary Paulsen

But I'll be Back Again by Cynthia Rylant

For teens consider adding:

Hole in My Life by Jack Gantos

Ordinary Hazards: A Memoir by Nikki Grimes

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy by Sonya Sones

For additional narrative intervention strategies, activities, and lesson plans see <i>Story Frames for Teaching Literacy: Enhancing Student Learning Through the Power of Storytelling</i> by Carolee Dean.

References

Tennessee State Board of Education. (2017, October 20). Tennessee English Language Arts Standards. Retrieved July 16, 2022 from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/massivemeetingsfolder/meetingfiles4/10-20-17_III_J_Non-Substantive_Changes_to_Math_ELA_Science_Standards_Attachment_2_-_ELA.pdf