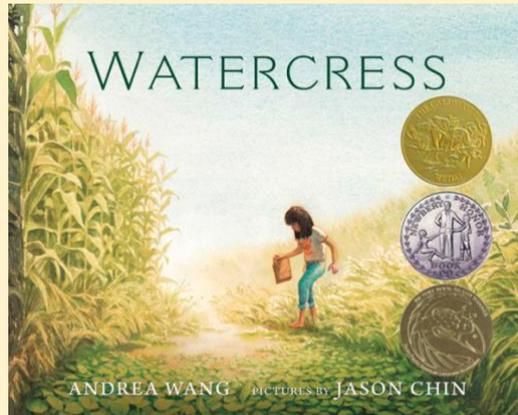


Activities for Using *WATERCRESS* with Students Grades 3-8

Based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)

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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 were based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for grades 3-8. If your school uses the Common Core State Standards, you may find activities for *Watercress* based on CCSS on the Teacher Resources page on my website at <https://wordtravelliteracy.com/>.

Whether you are a proponent of the TEKS, CCSS, or something else, 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

Throughout grades 3-8 under the category of English Language Arts and Reading, TEKS requires students to make connections between a text and their personal experiences and to describe these connections (ELA 3.7.A, 4.7.A, 5.7.A, 6.6.A, 7.6.A 8.6.A). Writing personal

narratives is another skill developed across grade levels (ELA 3.12.A, 4.12.A, 5.12.A, 6.11.A, 7.11.A, 8.11.A). *Watercress* is an excellent resource for encouraging these skills since it is a story based on a personal experience.

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 prompts below. Find additional writing activities throughout this resource. Refer to the TEKS composition standards for specific writing expectations across grade levels for elementary and middle school students at <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/curriculum-standards/teks/texas-essential-knowledge-and-skills>

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 learn it? 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 about that story and who told the story.
- D. Consider how the eating of watercress reflects the cultural experiences of the author and her family? 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.

POINT OF VIEW (Grades 3-5)

Under the category of English Language Arts and Reading for grades 3-5, standard 10 addresses the “Author’s purpose and craft,” specifically related to using multiple texts. ELA 3.10.E for grade 3 requires students to “identify the use of literary devices, including first- or third-person point of view,” while ELA 4.10.E and 5.10.E for grades 4-5 add that students will not only identify but also “understand” the difference. The activities below address this skill.

Grade 3 - English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.3.10.E

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 about a time when they were hungry.

Grade 4 - English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.410.E

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 – English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.510.E

Activity: As in the fourth-grade activity, *Watercress* could be compared to the picture book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco. Both are picture books, and both are autobiographical, but *Watercress* focuses on one day in the life of the author, while Polacco’s book covers several years. Expand the conversation about point of view and discuss why each author may have decided to write the story in the time frame they chose.

Have students write an account of a personal experience that takes place in the course of one day. Then write about a series of related experiences that take place over several days, weeks, or even years.

COMPARING STORIES WITHIN AND ACROSS GENRES (Grades 6-8)

Under the category of English Language Arts and Reading for grades 6-8, standard 6 substandard B addresses “Response skills,” specifically related to creating a written response comparing texts with similar themes (ELA.6.6.B, 7.6.B, 8.6.B) as well as sources across genres. The titles below all have a similar theme in that they are written by well-known children’s authors about their personal experiences, but the genres range from picture books to chapter books to stories told in verse. Substandard E supports the analysis of substandard B by first encouraging students to interact with texts in ways that are meaningful to them such as through notetaking or illustrating (ELA.6.6.E, 7.6.E, 8.6.E). The activities below address these skills.

Grade 6 – English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.6.6.B, ELA.6.6.E

Activity: Compare *Watercress* to *Brown Girl Dreaming*, told in verse, by Jacqueline Woodson. Her book won the National Book Award and was also a Newbery Honor in 2015. It is written as a series of poems starting with her birth, highlighting her young years moving from Greenville, SC to New York City, and ending with her resolve to become a writer with the encouragement of her fifth-grade teacher. It is recommended for grades 5-6. Instruct students to write a compare/contrast essay discussing the subject, theme, and structure of the two books.

Grade 7 - English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.7.6.B, ELA.7.6.D, ELA.7.6.E

Activity: For further exploration compare *Watercress*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, and *26 Fairmont Avenue*, a chapter book written and illustrated by Tomie DePaola. The last title is a 2000 Newbery Honor Book.

Discuss how a picture book, a chapter book, and an autobiography 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. Start by taking notes on each text (ELA.7.6.E). Next, have students begin the essay by referring to their notes to briefly summarize each text (ELA.7.6.D). Then compare the three texts (ELA.7.6.B). What similarities do the books share that make them worthy candidates for the Newbery Honor? How do the books differ in structure and style?

Grade 8 - English Language Arts and Reading – ELA.8.6.B, ELA.8.6.E, ELA.8.8A

Activity: As mentioned previously, the books listed below are about the personal experiences of popular children’s authors that were written by the author, but the genres vary. The term *genre* means a “type or category.” Genre can relate to subject matter: realistic fiction, historical fiction, adventure, mystery, fantasy, autobiography, etc. but it also relates to structure: picture book, chapter book, novel, short story, book of poetry. ELA.8.8A requires students to demonstrate that they understand the differences between a wide variety of literary genres. The options below focus on analyzing genre differences in a variety of ways.

Begin each activity by reading the selections and taking notes (ELA.8.6.E).

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 comparing sources from different genres, 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 forms 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.

To further explore how the different expectations of the TEKS vary across grade levels, check out the vertical alignment of the standards at <https://www.teksguide.org>

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 [*Story Frames for Teaching Literacy: Enhancing Student Learning Through the Power of Storytelling*](#) by Carolee Dean.

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