

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE POLAR EXPRESS™

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



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Book Summary

One Christmas Eve many years ago, a boy lies in bed, listening hard for the bells of Santa's sleigh, which he has been told by a friend do not exist. Later that night he hears not bells but a very different sound. He looks out of his window and is astounded to see a steam engine parked in front of his house! The conductor invites him to board the Polar Express, a train filled with children on their way to the North Pole. The boy and his companions journey past tiny towns and forests full of wild creatures. They travel up and around mountains and across the Great Polar Ice Cap to the magical city at the North Pole. The train takes the children to the center of the city, where Santa and the elves have gathered for the giving of the first gift of Christmas. The boy is chosen to receive this first gift. Knowing that he can choose anything in the world, he decides on a simple gift: one silver bell from Santa's sleigh. Santa cuts a bell from a reindeer's harness and the delighted boy slips it into his bathrobe pocket as the clock strikes midnight and the reindeer pull the sleigh into the sky.

When the children return to the train, the boy realizes the bell has fallen through a hole in his pocket. Heartbroken, he is returned to his home. In the morning, his little sister finds one small box with the boy's name on it among the presents below the Christmas tree. Inside is the silver bell! The boy and his sister are enchanted by its beautiful sound, but their parents cannot hear it. The boy continues to believe in the spirit of Christmas and is able to hear the sweet ringing of the bell even as an adult.

Special Features of *The Polar Express*

The arrival of a steam engine—the Polar Express—on the boy's quiet street is startling and wonderful enough to make readers gasp out loud. This book in particular captures the magic of childhood with sensitivity and grace. The warm and vivid color pastels create expressive characters and scenes that are very much alive. The artwork, combined with Chris Van Allsburg's vivid prose, creates a journey that resonates on many levels for readers of all ages. This is a book to return to year after year.

The vivid visual world of *The Polar Express* is evoked by the text as well as by the pictures. Van Allsburg constructs a distinct sense of place, infused with magic by his skillful use of metaphor and simile. The train is "wrapped in an apron of steam," and the children drink hot cocoa "as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars." The lights of the North Pole appear to the boy as "the lights of an ocean liner sailing on a frozen sea."

The Polar Express is another example of Van Allsburg's ability to seamlessly blend the dream world with reality. Also a consistent theme in his work, *The Polar Express* describes a journey (both literal and symbolic) that brings about transformation for the characters and the reader as well. In *The Polar Express*, Van Allsburg chooses an object to represent an idea: the silver bell symbolizes not only a belief in magic, but a kind of joyful openheartedness that many children have—and that many grown people have forgotten. *The Polar Express* reminds children and adults alike that the world is full of wonder—all one must do is look for it, and listen, and believe.

Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog shows up in *The Polar Express* as a puppet on a post of the boy's bed frame.



Summary of Teaching Ideas

One of the most striking features of *The Polar Express* is its vivid sensory description. Children can be encouraged to notice the way Van Allsburg uses all of the senses when describing the boy's journey. For example, the reindeer "pranced and paced, ringing the silver bells that hung from their harnesses. It was a magical sound, like nothing I'd ever heard." He describes the sensation of the train rolling up and down the mountains "like a car on a roller coaster," and the taste of rich hot cocoa. This type of description provides a wonderful model for children who are working on writing fresh and unusual description.

Van Allsburg's writing also evokes a distinct sense of place. He writes, "the train thundered through the quiet wilderness," describing the striking contrast of the thundering train and the quiet woods. It can be helpful to examine his descriptions of the setting (which changes as the train makes its way to the North Pole), as it can be useful in the context of both reading and writing. When we are reading, for example, we can gather information about the story by paying close attention to the setting. It helps make the world of the story real for us. Van Allsburg's stories do not take place in a void but instead are rooted firmly in believable settings.

Because the story describes a journey with a clear beginning, middle, and end, it is an excellent story to use with younger children who are working on retelling a story. Children must be taught to fully absorb a story in order to develop theories and make meaning of the text. Retelling the story helps children not only remember what happened but also to choose the important parts and sequence them. This story is particularly suited to this activity—it has a clear storyline and many details, providing an opportunity for students to practice sifting through information to find important structural elements.



• Ask the students to bring an object to school that holds as much meaning for them as the boy's bell holds for him. Follow your read-aloud and book conversation with a share circle. Discuss how it is not just the objects themselves that we love; it is the people and ideas that they represent or remind us of. You may want to invite your students to write about their special objects and what those objects represent.

Below you will find several ideas for how you might undertake a *Polar Express* reading and celebration in your classroom as well as some guiding questions aimed to develop rich book conversation when discussing *The Polar Express* with your students. You will also find two sample lessons: a writing lesson designed for upper grade students using *The Polar Express* to teach the use of simile and metaphor in description, and a reading lesson designed for lower grade students who are working on retelling. Below each lesson are some ideas for adaptation for either older or younger children, and some suggestions for expanding the lesson. Finally, you'll find some additional fun language arts activities based on *The Polar Express*.

Ideas for a Polar Express Reading Celebration!

- Invite students (and their families, if you wish!) to come to school in the morning in their pajamas. Your students will be delighted if you join them in this endeavor! Sit all together in a cozy spot in your classroom or the school library and read the book aloud. Follow the read-aloud with a book conversation (see some sample guiding questions for a *Polar Express* book talk below). Add to the magic by celebrating with hot cocoa “as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars” and candy with nougat centers “as white as snow.” (Cookies and instant hot chocolate or even regular chocolate milk easily do the trick. You can even make cookies in the shape of trains—train cookie cutters can be found in many cooking stores.)
- Younger children will be thrilled if, on the day of the reading, you set up their chairs in two rows like the seats of a train. Give the students train tickets, which you will collect as you invite them to take a seat on *The Polar Express*. You can even ask them to buckle themselves in! This kind of dramatization invites young readers into the magic of the story in an accessible, tangible way.
- In the days leading up to the reading, using a roll of craft paper, make a train mural for your hallway or classroom. Cut out the “cars” yourself and then cut yellow squares of paper for the windows. Have the children draw themselves on the yellow squares—when you glue them on the cars it will look like the children are riding on the train. Gather around the mural as you read.
- Find a bell that resembles the boy's bell in *The Polar Express*. When you are reading the book and the boy receives the bell, take out your silver bell and show the students. When you read that only those who truly believe can hear the bell, ring the bell for your students and ask if they can hear it!

Guiding Questions for a Polar Express Book Conversation

- The boy's friend told him that Santa doesn't exist, but the boy continues to believe. Think of a time in your own life that you have experienced this situation. How does it feel to keep firm when other people tell you you are wrong?”
- Notice how Chris Van Allsburg adds to his descriptions of the train ride to the North Pole by comparing one thing to another (give some examples). How does this kind of descriptive language add to the story for you?
- The boy can ask Santa Claus for anything in the world. Why do you think he chooses a simple bell?
- Why can the boy and his sister hear the bell while their parents cannot?
- Why can the boy still hear the bell as an adult, while his sister and friends cannot?
- What do you think Chris Van Allsburg wants the bell to represent?



Simile and Metaphor in *The Polar Express* An upper grade lesson

What You'll Need:

- A copy of *The Polar Express*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector with a T chart: “plain language” on one side and on the other “comparisons”
- Markers/overhead pens
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

Background Knowledge

It will be helpful if the children are familiar with the story before you teach this lesson. It is important to give students a chance to experience the story as an unbroken whole, and then to discuss it as a class, before isolating one element as a teaching tool. This lesson is designed to be used in the context of a writing workshop

in which students are writing every day on topics of their own choosing. It can fit well within either a personal narrative study or a fiction study. The lesson can be taught outside the context of a writing workshop as well.



Introduction

Remind the students of the way that *The Polar Express* “comes to life” in our minds as we read. Tell them that one way authors bring stories to life is to focus on the way they describe places. In *The Polar Express*, Chris Van Allsburg describes the journey of the train in a really interesting way—by comparing one thing to another. Tell the students you will be showing them what you mean and inviting them to try this in their own writing.

Teaching

Tell your students to pay attention as you read aloud some excerpts from the book where Van Allsburg is comparing one thing to another, because you will be asking them to tell you about those parts later. Read them excerpts of the book that include similes like “hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars,” and “rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster.” You may even want to ask them to silently raise a hand when they hear a comparison.

Ask the students to look at the chart you have started—a simple T-chart with “plain language” on one side and “comparisons” on the other. Ask students to tell you what comparisons they heard. As they answer, write the similes they noticed on the “comparisons” side of the chart.

Discuss how the same image might have been described in a plain and boring way. For example, “the hot cocoa was sweet and good,” or “the train went up and down the hills.”

Write the “plain language” ideas next to their corresponding similes on the chart paper. Discuss with your students how using comparisons in descriptions can make the story come to life. Encourage them to try using a comparison or two in their own writing that day.

Writing Time

As your students write independently, confer with them about their work. Encourage them to use comparisons in their descriptions like Chris Van Allsburg does, in order to make their writing come to life.

If you do not have an ongoing writing workshop in place in your classroom, you can give your students more structure before you send them off to write. For example, you may want to ask them to imagine they are on a dream-journey like the boy’s journey on the Polar Express, and then to write that story. In the context of that assignment, you can confer with them about using comparisons in their writing.

Share

After your students have worked independently, bring the class back together. Share the work of a student or several students who tried out the idea of using comparisons in their descriptions.

Adapting This Lesson for Less Experienced Writers

- Instead of eliciting the “comparisons” from the students, point them out.
- Spend more time scaffolding their understanding. Create some comparisons together before sending the children off

to write on their own. For example, choose an object in the room to describe in a plain way (“the ceiling is gray”) and then using a comparison (“the ceiling is as gray as rain clouds”).

Expanding This Lesson

Notice the many different “craft moves” Chris Van Allsburg uses in *The Polar Express*. Make a chart listing them, and then turn each “craft move” into a day’s lesson.

- Describing the setting so clearly that readers feel they are there
- Using the five senses in description
- Writing the main character’s thoughts and feelings into the story
- Describing the weather

Retelling The Polar Express Using a Timeline A lower grade lesson

What You’ll Need:

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

Background Knowledge

It is helpful if your students are familiar with *The Polar Express* before you teach this lesson. It is also helpful if your students are familiar with the concept of a timeline. The lesson works best in classrooms where “read aloud” is a part of each day, a time when your classroom community gathers together and develops comprehension through book discussions. The lesson is designed for classrooms that support ongoing “reading workshop” work, where students read independently or in partnerships each day from books of their own choosing. This depends on having a leveled classroom library stocked with books appropriate for young readers. If you do not use reading workshop in your curriculum or do not have a leveled classroom library, the lesson can take place in the context of the stories your students are working with in their readers. Before this lesson, it is important to organize your students into “talk partnerships” and to ask them to sit next to these partners when they come to the rug. You will be asking them to turn and talk to each other during the lesson.

Introduction

Tell your students that one thing that helps readers make sense of the stories they read is to stop and retell what has happened so far, including only the important parts in their retelling. One way that readers keep track of the important parts and how they fit together is to make a timeline. Tell your students to watch you as you begin to read Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express*, paying attention to how the story moves forward, and make a timeline to help you retell the story. Tell them that they will be asked to help you with this process, and then they will get to try it out with their own books during independent reading time.



Teaching

As you read the story, tell the children to pay attention to how you stop, retell what has happened so far, add the important parts to your timeline, and then continue to read. Begin reading the story. Stop after a few pages—one good first stopping point is when the boy gets on the train. Model retelling what has happened so far in the story, paying attention to only the most important parts. For example, you might say, “The boy was lying awake waiting to hear the sounds of Santa’s sleigh bells. Instead he heard a train. He ran outside and the conductor invited him on board the Polar Express, a train bound for the North Pole.”

Then, show your students how they might begin a timeline. Draw a line on your chart paper or overhead and add the first bit. Tell your students that when you are making a timeline, you do not need to write complete sentences—it is more like writing notes to yourself to help you remember. The first point on the timeline might be “boy is in bed waiting to hear Santa.” The second might be “boy hears train outside—gets on Polar Express.” As you continue reading, turn over more responsibility to the students. The next time you stop, ask them to turn and talk to their partners, retelling what has happened so far. Give them only two or three minutes for this. When you come back together, elicit the next points on the timeline from your students. If they offer small details or go off on unrelated tangents, model for them how readers decide what the most important parts of the story are when they are doing a retelling and making a timeline. Tell them that they will be doing this on their own when they go off to read independently.

Reading Time

If you work within a reading workshop context, when you send your students off to read independently, ask them to sit next to their talk partners. As they begin reading, remind them to stop every few pages and retell what has happened so far in their own books. If your students use reading response notebooks, ask them to create their own timelines in their notebooks. They can do this on loose-leaf paper if they don’t use notebooks. As your students read, confer with them about how readers retell only the most important parts of stories and put those things on a timeline.

If you do not work within the context of reading workshop, you can choose to keep your students together on the rug and finish the timeline of *The Polar Express* as a community. You can also ask your students to work within their readers to create a timeline of whatever story they happen to be working on together. You can organize them into partnerships for the context of this lesson even if they do not generally work this way. Because retelling depends on talking, it is very helpful for the children to be in partnerships.

Share

When you come back together at the end of independent reading time, share the work of a reading partnership that has created timelines of the stories they have read, making sure to put only the most important parts on the line.

Adapting This Lesson for More (or Less) Experienced Readers

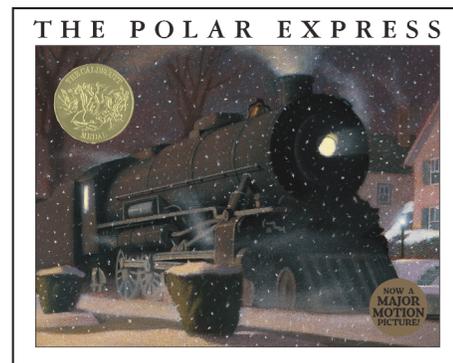
- If you are working with very young children who are not writing or reading independently yet, focus on the retelling aspect as opposed to the timeline aspect of this lesson. Even kindergartners can successfully retell a story they have heard.
- This is a simple lesson, but older children also benefit from slowing down their reading and retelling what has happened in their books. If your students are reading complex chapter books, you can teach them to retell each chapter separately and then link those retellings together to retell the whole book.

Expanding This Lesson

- Focus on the sequencing aspect of writing a timeline—demonstrate “messing up” the sequence of your Polar Express timeline and ask the children to help you organize it sequentially.
- Focus on retelling—when you stop every few pages to retell, it is important to link each retelling to the previous ones, so that by the end you are retelling the whole book.
- Use your timelines to discuss how the characters change as the plot moves forward. What are the turning points?

Just for Fun

- Imagine you are able to go on a magical journey like the boy. Where do you go? How do you get there? How are you changed by the experience?
- The boy’s bell is magic—only he can hear it. Imagine you find or are given a magic _____ that only you can _____ (you fill in the blanks). Describe how this object changes your life.
- The boy chooses a simple, meaningful gift over a fancy gift that is meaningless. Think of someone you love very much. What kind of gift could you give that person that would mean as much as the boy’s bell? It doesn’t have to be a real object!



The Polar Express (1985)

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- Caldecott Medal winner, 1986
- 5 million copies sold worldwide
- New York Times Best Illustrated Book
- *New York Times* Bestseller