

Lightning Literature & Composition

Grade 4

Teacher's Guide

by

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For Toby and Simon



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How to Use This Teacher's Guide

Welcome to the **Grade-4 Lightning Literature** program! With this series I hope to instill a love of great literature in children, to help them expand their ability to read intelligently and deeply and improve their communication abilities, and to prepare them for more advanced language arts concepts. The three key components to this series are literature, grammar and mechanics, and composition.

Even if you've completed previous Lightning Literature programs, I recommend you read this introduction.

Literature

Reading Selections

I spend a lot of time reviewing books for this series, and I hope children (and parents and teachers) will discover new books and authors they love. My primary considerations when choosing the titles were literary quality and appropriateness for this age level (at least for read-aloud, if not always read-alone, as children vary widely in how quickly their reading ability develops). All these books demonstrate exemplary writing and contain ideas and topics of import. I also strove to find books that wouldn't be too upsetting at this age-level, though each child is different, and what will upset one will not bother another.

Some of these begin to broach difficult topics. At the beginning of each week I will inform you in the teacher's guide of any tricky topics covered in the week's reading. Only you can best know how to approach these ideas with your students.

This year includes one work of nonfiction. I wish I could have included more. There are also three books of historical fiction. While I consider it important to read nonfiction, it is extremely difficult to find nonfiction books for children that have literary merit. Almost all children's nonfiction is of the *Lizards of the World* type, which is great if you love lizards or need to write about lizards for a research report, but does very little to teach writing or appreciation of literature. If you find time for extra reading, I encourage you to peruse the biographies in the children's section of your local library. And don't limit yourself to people your child (or even you) already know—it's fun to find out about the lives of people new to us as well.

Another area I considered important in choosing literature this year is providing some multi-cultural experience. This is important, not for political correctness, but to provide students one of the great gifts of literature—a broadened view of the world and greater understanding of other people. It also provides people who are part of those cultures literature with which they can more closely identify. This year students will read books about Chinese immigrants (*The Earth Dragon Awakes*), Native Americans (*Morning Girl*), Chinese fables (*Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*), a family in Chile (*The Dreamer*), and a family in Malawi (*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*).

I had hoped to include a weekly reading of a multicultural fairy tale with this course, but every book I found that seemed a good fit was out of print, and I don’t want to burden parents or teachers with finding difficult books. There are some that are in print, but considering the number that go out of print quickly, I don’t have much hope for their longevity. I encourage parents to go to their local library, or look for used copies of a collection of multi-cultural fairy and folk tales on line. They’re fun to read and can easily be tied into geography lessons.

Daily Reading

Four days each week, I assign a certain number of chapters until the book is completed. As always, you can read aloud to your students or students can read on their own. You can also do a combination—perhaps reading some books to your child while assigning others as read-alone. Some children will be reading at a level beyond these books, but you will find that reading these books with the questions and lessons that go along with them improves your child’s literary skills and comprehension.

As in previous years of this series, there are four weeks devoted to poetry. This year I use two books for the poems: *Gone Fishing* and *Love That Dog*.

Comprehension Questions

Each day of reading includes comprehension questions for the chapters or pages read that day. This year the questions are in the student guide, and their answers are in the teacher’s guide.

Questions are of various types. Some questions are literal—the answers can be found directly in the reading. Some questions are inferential. These require the student to understand something not directly stated in the text. Another type of question is evaluative. Here students are asked to provide either a judgment about something that happened in the story (“Do you think this character did the right thing?”) or to reflect on some aspect of the story in their own lives (“Have you ever felt the way this character is feeling here?”). Predictive questions ask the student to guess what will happen next in the story. Finally, I introduce some questions requiring literary analysis (“What did we learn about the character from what they just did here?”).

I always urge parents and teachers to use comprehension questions as a tool to improve reading comprehension rather than a test of it. Children are still learning to attend fully to books, and these questions can help them learn to focus on their reading in a more mature manner. If a child is stressed because they are afraid they will answer the questions wrong, their focus and love of reading will decrease rather than increase.

Book Discussion

On the day after the last chapter of the book has been assigned, I provide help in the teacher’s guide for leading a discussion of the book. This discussion can be between just a parent and one student or it can be a larger group. I also include some discussion questions in the student guide. (These are also found in the teacher’s guide.)

The focus of a book discussion is to answer the question, “What is the author trying to say with this book, and how does he or she say it?” A skilled author uses story, characters, setting, and the other literary aspects to impart a message (the theme of the book). Skilled readers learn to uncover these messages.

I give you notes on various aspects of each book—story, characters, setting, etc. Sometimes the information is general (for example, the basic story line). Other times I focus on aspects that underscore the theme.

Your child may well have other ideas about the story, characters, etc. than what I have here, and that's fine. Literature isn't math—I can't give you just a series of black and white answers. This is both exciting and (to some) frustrating. **The bottom line for any assertion about a book is, can the student support what they say with the book?** If a student says a character is friendly, they have to show something in the book that tells us that.

Literature is dynamic. Different people will see different things depending on their outlook, experience, personality, etc. Your child will see some unexpected things in some of these books—and what they see may tell you more about them than about the books. It's important to honor personal responses to books (authors want personal responses from their readers), but it's also important for children to learn how to analyze a story beyond just their own feelings. These discussions are part of that process.

The first aspect I cover for every story is **Theme**. Although this is the most abstract aspect, it's what these discussions are aiming for—understanding of theme, or the author's message. The other aspects (story, characters, setting) will often underscore the theme, so it's useful to you to know it first. After theme, the teacher's guide provides details in the following areas: Story, Character, Setting, External details, Internal details, and Conflict. I also sometimes include Symbolism, but that is optional for more advanced students.

Theme

.....
Story is the main plot-line. I provide a brief summary for each book.

Story

.....
Character includes a description of the main character(s) (physical and personality).

Character

.....
Setting is where and when the story happens.

Setting

.....
External Details are any pertinent details of the story that aren't captured in any of the other summaries, for example, minor characters in the story. This may also include cause-effect and unusual things about the book's structure.

External Details

Internal Details are emotions and other feelings the characters experience that aren’t part of their central personality. For example, a character might normally be happy but experience sadness in response to an event in the book.

.....

Internal Details

Conflict includes telling what the character wants, what keeps the character from getting it, and what the character does to overcome the obstacle.

.....

Conflict

Symbolism is the use of one thing to represent something else. Usually an author uses something concrete (an animal, a piece of clothing, music, etc.) to represent something abstract (loyalty, companionship, happiness, etc.). This is an advanced concept, and rather than asking questions about it (at this stage), it’s probably better to simply point it out to your child and discuss it together. As they are taught symbolism in stories they will begin to see it on their own.

Symbolism

Reading Journal

After the book discussion, turn to the appropriate pages in the Student Worktext. Your child will write or dictate two sentences: a sentence expressing something they felt about the book (“What I think of this story”) and their favorite sentence from the book

This Reading Journal is optional. If your student is already overwhelmed by the composition assignments, feel free to drop this.

Grammar and Mechanics

I have grouped grammar, punctuation, capitalization, parts of speech, sentence diagramming, and even occasional literary concepts under the umbrella term “grammar and mechanics.” The student work text contains basic instruction and examples. Always read the instructions with your child, and be sure they understand them before having them complete the page. The teacher’s guide contains more detailed instruction when needed and answers to the worktext pages.

Grammar and mechanics are reviewed frequently in the student work text. Sometimes multiple concepts are addressed in one review worksheet. As with all aspects of learning, students vary widely in how easily these concepts will stick with them. Remember that your primary goal is for your child to love language arts. Don’t risk impeding that to ensure an understanding of periods or pronouns by the end of the year. I will review these concepts in later grades in this series as I build on them, so there is plenty of time. Often something will click easily with a child only a year later that they simply couldn’t understand when it was first introduced.

Correspondingly, unless you have a student who wants grades, I recommend avoiding letter or percentage grades on the worktext pages (or any aspect of this course). Do show your child what they missed on the worktext questions, and review the missed questions together so they understand the problem. But use them as tools to reinforce the concepts and check your child’s understanding rather than a judgment on their performance.

If your child is not getting a concept, rather than forcing them to do the worktext pages on their own, work on them together as a teaching tool. Some lessons assume a previous exposure to the subject. If your child used the Grade-1, -2, and/or -3 Lightning Literature courses, they will have had this exposure. They may have also learned the topic from another language arts course. But if your child has not learned the topic previously, some lessons may be too cursory for them. In that case—or if your child struggled previously with this concept—feel free to work closely with them to provide a more thorough understanding.

Grades 1, 2, and 3 had mandatory grammar three days per week. This year I have extended it to four days per week.

A Note About Sentence Diagramming

Once sentence diagramming was always taught in schools; now it is rare. While I don't believe the old ways are always better, in this case I think students have lost something. While word choice, paragraph formation, and logical organization are vital to good writing (as are many other skills), the central unit of written language is the sentence.

Sentence diagramming is not merely drawing lines and repositioning words. It helps teach students the function of words in a sentence. For example, although we give adjectives, articles, and possessive pronouns different names, they are often diagrammed in the same manner because they often function in the same manner—to modify a noun. The reverse is also true—the same word may function as different parts of speech depending on its placement in a sentence. I can illustrate this succinctly with a bit of silliness: Don't allow your horse to horse around on the horse track.

In later years, students can apply sentence diagramming to sentences of authors they admire for a deeper look at why those sentences work—why they inform, delight, and inspire us. When students struggle with a sentence of their own, they can diagram it to see where a problem might lie.

Diagramming can be particularly helpful to students who are visual learners or those who enjoy puzzles. Try the diagramming this year—you might be surprised at how your student does. But if they struggle with it excessively and it continues to frustrate rather than illuminate, feel free to drop those questions. It may be that your student needs to wait another year or two before benefitting from sentence diagrams.

Composition

The composition portion of this course should, as with all aspects, be tailored to your child's level. Some children will only be writing (or dictating) a few sentences, while others will be ready for a paragraph or a whole story. You may have a child who can dictate a book but barely wants to write a sentence. Come to an agreement about balancing these things—perhaps every third lesson they will write their composition themselves and the others they will dictate. Or you can allow them to dictate everything. This is entirely up to you.

The composition assignments cover a variety of writing aspects—creative writing, essays of all sorts (descriptive, personal, opinion, etc.), research papers, poems, etc. Again, you want to make this an enjoyable experience for your child while also starting to push them towards quality work. Work closely with them on the compositions (unless they specifically ask you not to). At the end, stress what they did well in the composition; then discuss together how it might be improved.

COMPOSITION BOOK: The student will need lined composition pages. We have provided masters for 1/2" and 3/8" ruled lines (to be used according to your student's ability) in the back of this Teacher's Guide, which you can copy and collect in a three-ring binder. You may wish to purchase a composition book. If you are able to find a choice of composition books, your child can pick from the selection, making the book more personal. A couple of other options are ordering online and finding a site that has lined paper of various ruled lines free to print.

Tailoring This Course to Your Needs

These three things—literature, grammar and mechanics, and composition—are the core of this class. Regardless of your child's ability or interest, I urge you to complete, at least in some fashion, all of these.

The following portions are optional. Although I believe all are valuable, and I have reasons for including them, they are not central to the program. Depending on your child's existing skills, strengths, interests, and your time constraints, you may skip any or all of them. You could also do some on only some weeks.

BOOK DISCUSSION: Students are asked to record their favorite sentence from the book and their opinion of the book. These are a nice record to have, but they are optional.

EXTENDING THE LESSON: These are meant for the more advanced student, or for when any student is particularly excited by the reading or any of the extension ideas. They allow students to explore a book, its concepts, or its author in more depth, and can provide ways to extend the lesson into other areas such as science, history, and art.

SENTENCE DIAGRAMMING: If your student struggles with this portion of the grammar, you may drop it.

COMPOSITION: If the amount of composition overwhelms your student, it is fine to occasionally drop one.

Preparing for the Week

Before the week begins, complete the reading if you are unfamiliar with it. This will be especially important when you do the book discussion at the end of each book. Preview the grammar and composition assignments.

Gather any materials you need. The basics for this course rarely require extra materials, but if you plan on doing the lesson extensions you will likely need more. If you plan on reading other books by the same author, preview the books beforehand.

Free Days

Once each week I give a free day. You can take a day off language arts, use the day to complete any work from earlier that was missed, add extra projects—whatever you want. This can vary from week to week.