

The Great Kapok Tree

Intended Grade Levels

Academically advanced students in grades 2–3

Materials

- *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* by Lynne Cherry (or online read-aloud)
- Handout 1: Blank Literary Analysis Wheel—Primary

Note to Families: This lesson uses the Literary Analysis Wheel—Primary to support the development of more complex questions to ask your child(ren) as they read through stories and poems at home. The text and questions used in this example lesson are designed for academically advanced students in grades 2–3. We suggest that the following process be used:

- **Read** or listen to the book. Discuss any unknown vocabulary or sections that did not make sense as students read or listened to the text.
- Discuss questions in the **Comprehend** section. Relisten or reread the book as needed to respond to each question using evidence from the text.
- **Analyze** the text using Handout 1 as a guide, drawing arrows to show relationships among various elements on the wheel. Help your child see that various elements interact to help create meaning.
- **Extend** your child’s learning by completing one or more projects in this section or visiting other websites provided for further learning.

Read

Read or watch a read-aloud of Lynne Cherry’s *The Great Kapok Tree*. There are read-alouds available online via YouTube and other online formats. Resources that include the pictures and the text may be most helpful.

Comprehend

- What is the setting of the story?
- Who are the characters?
- What point of view (first, second, third) is the story told through?
- What is the sequence of events that takes place in the story?
- What interesting literary techniques or words are used in the story? (Consider pointing out the similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia.)

- What conflicts exist in the story? (Consider discussing conflicts that are internal or external.)
- The boa constrictor initially tells the sleeping man, “This is a tree of miracles. . . .” Explain what this statement means.
- What benefit does the tree provide each animal? What benefits do the animals provide the tree? How are the interactions between the animals and the tree mutually beneficial?
- Who or what do you think is the most central character in this story—the man, the animals, or the tree? Why?
- What is the main conflict or problem in the story, and what is done to resolve it?
- How does the author use the illustrations to help the reader understand the impact of the man cutting down the tree? (There is an increase in the number of animals who live in or depend upon the tree, gathering together as the story progresses.)
- What does the Great Kapok Tree symbolize (e.g., hope, life, survival, preservation)? (If students are unfamiliar with symbols, help them recognize that a symbol is something that represents something else. Provide examples as needed.)
- How does this story make you feel? Why? (Explain that “mood” is a literary element that centers around the feelings of a reader as they explore the story.) What is the mood of the story? How does the author accomplish that through illustrations and words? Does the mood change or remain the same throughout the story?

Analyze

Asking complex questions: The Literary Analysis Wheel—Primary is a tool that can be used to ask more complex questions. Note that literary elements such as setting, point of view, character, etc., each have their own block of space on the wheel and information can be added as you ask simple questions. Complex questions arise when students explore the interaction between two or more elements. Drawing arrows to show the relationship between two elements can be helpful for students. See Figure 1 for an example of a completed wheel.

- **Setting + Characters:** How does the setting of the rainforest, and more specifically the Great Kapok Tree, influence how the characters respond to the man? Provide examples from the story. (Sample response: The setting of the kapok tree reveals the wide variety of species who claim the tree as part of their habitat. One by one they come down from different parts of the tree to explain why the setting/tree is important for their survival.)
- **Use of Words/Techniques + Characters:** How does the author help us understand the importance of the Great Kapok Tree as being vital to life? (Sample response: The number of animals that live in the tree help us understand the tree’s importance for a variety of animals.)
- **Sequence/Plot + Characters:** How does the introduction of each animal add to the conflict of the story? (Sample response: As each animal reveals the importance of the tree in their life—shelter, home to raise young, etc.—the reader begins to realize the significance of one organism in helping maintain balance in an ecosystem.)
- **Setting + Reader (Mood):** How does the setting of the story contribute to the feelings you have as a reader? (Sample response: The setting of the kapok tree and the rainforest made me curious. As the animals continued to talk about the tree’s importance in their lives I became worried about what would happen if the man ended up cutting down the tree.)
- **Use of Words/Techniques + Theme:** Onomatopoeia is a literary form that uses a word to mimic the sound of what it is describing. For example, the word *splash* sounds like a splash; the word *buzz*

sounds like the buzzing of a bee. How does the author use onomatopoeia to help the reader understand the interactions of the story? (Sample response: The onomatopoeias help reveal the interaction between the animals and the man. The “chop!” and “whack!” at the beginning of the story helps reveal part of the negative interaction that is occurring between the man and the tree.)

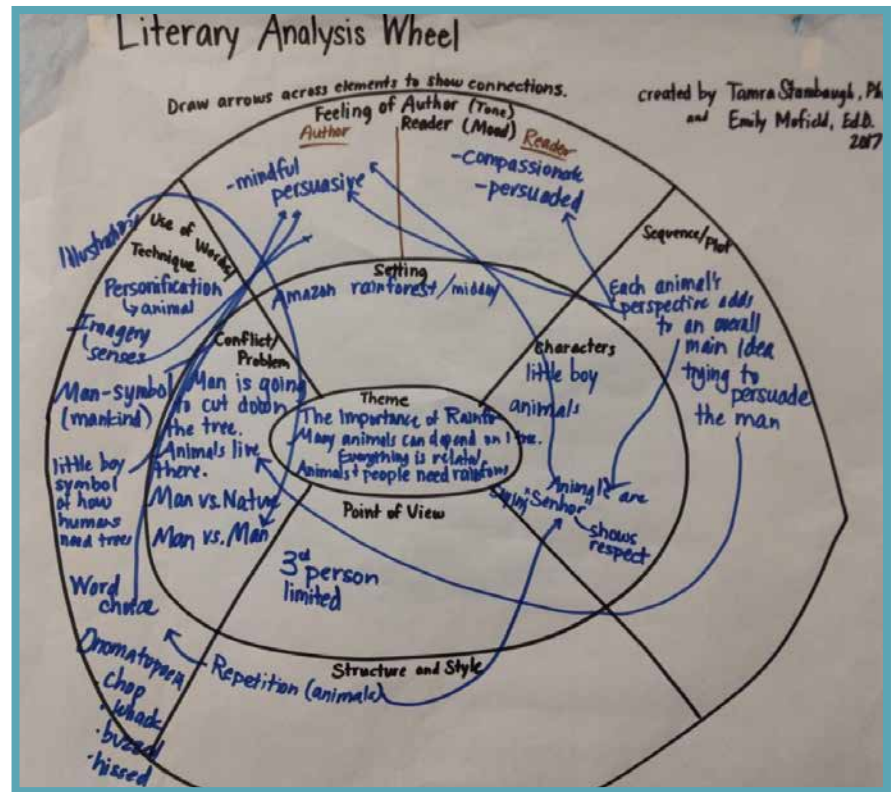
• **Characters + Theme:** How does the author use different close-up and far-away photos of the man and his face to help us understand the message of the story? (Sample response: As the story progresses, the images of the man become more focused and larger; the man’s eyes move from closed to open. It is as if each character’s message is moving closer and closer to the man and his understanding until his eyes are opened.)

• **Point of View + Sequence/Plot:** How does the point of view and order of different animals introduced in the story add to the conflict? (Sample response: The arguments of the animals and what they contribute because of the tree’s shelter are used to convince the man of what he should do, providing a cumulative effect.)

• **Structure and Style + Theme:** Look at the specific number of animals represented on each page. How does the author use the number of animals that continue to increase throughout the story to convey the importance of conserving the kapok tree? (Sample response: At first there are only a few snakes, then a few pages later the page is filled with frogs. The number of animals seems to increase on each page, except for some animals like the jaguar and the sloths, which do not live in large groups. The number of animals helps show how important the tree is to the balance of life in the rainforest.)

Figure 1

Completed Literary Analysis Wheel for The Great Kapok Tree by Lynne Cherry



Note. Used with permission of Wendy Buchannan.

Assess

Is your student able to explain with evidence the interactions that exist between literary elements (e.g., setting + conflict, word choice + mood, etc.)?

Extend

- Ask your student(s) if they think humans should cut down trees for purposes of shelter or safety. Have students seek out different resources online that outline pros and cons. Ask students to create a two-column chart that lists some of their initial ideas about pros and cons of cutting down trees, and then develop an argument.
- Have your student(s) select one animal from the story: bee, monkeys, birds (toucan, macaw, cock of the rock), jaguar, porcupines, anteaters, or sloths. Ask students to research the animal in more depth to learn more about their behaviors, needs within a habitat, etc. Ask students to reread the message their animal relays to the man, and discuss the following questions: *What is the effect of cutting down the tree, as your animal reports it? What are the long-term or future issues that would occur if your animal left or died (implications)?*
- Have students create a 3- to 4-frame comic strip that highlights the most important events in *The Great Kapok Tree* and ends with the main message.
- What lessons from *The Great Kapok Tree* are important to consider in your local community? Have students write a letter to a local leader explaining the short- and long-term effects of human's interactions with their environment in your specific community. Make sure students outline the problem, examples, short- and long-term effects, and a solution or action. Students should also include information about the importance of interactions between humans, plants, and animals, as explained in *The Great Kapok Tree*.

Additional Resources

Additional online resources for students to explore if interested include:

- [David Attenborough's Kapok Tree](#)
- [Giant Kapok Tree](#)
- [The Virtual Rainforest](#)
- [Rainforest Alliance: Kids' Games & Activities](#)



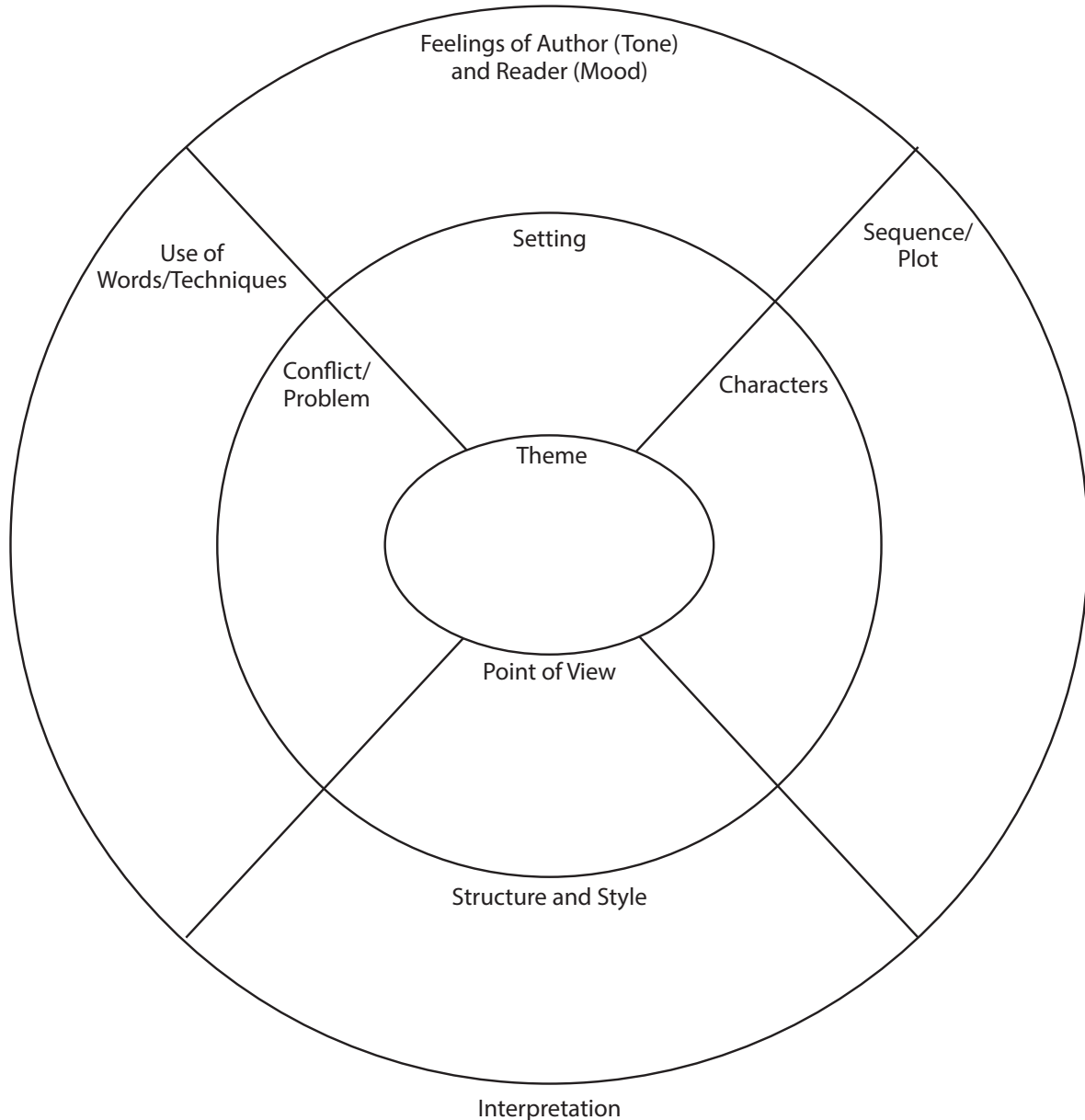
Note. This lesson has been adapted for at-home use from the following Programs for Talented Youth curriculum for advanced students in conjunction with Prufrock Press as a way to support student learning through the COVID-19 shelter-at-home. Adapted from *Interactions in Ecology and Literature: Integrated Science and ELA Lessons for Gifted and Advanced Learners in Grades 2–3* (pp. 19–27), by T. Stambaugh, E. Fecht, and E. Mofield, 2018, Prufrock Press. Copyright 2018 by Prufrock Press. Adapted with permission.

Handout 1

Blank Literary Analysis Wheel—Primary

Directions: Draw arrows across elements to show connections.

Text: _____



Created by Tamra Stambaugh, Ph.D., & Emily Mofield, Ed.D., 2017.



Note. From *Interactions in Ecology and Literature: Integrated Science and ELA Lessons for Gifted and Advanced Learners in Grades 2–3* (p. 30), by T. Stambaugh, E. Fecht, and E. Mofield, 2018, Prufrock Press. Copyright 2018 by Prufrock Press. Reproduced with permission.