

Alice, Peter, and Mole

A Four-Level Literature
Parent Manual

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by Michael Clay Thompson

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Four-Level Literature: Brief General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature, and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book, and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included should be seen as flexible options, not as a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the homeschool parent. The homeschool environment is different in many dimensions from the traditional school environment, and these recommendations take full advantage of the unique flexibility and purity of concentration that occurs in the homeschool setting. In writing a manual for homeschool use, however, I am mindful that the homeschool environment itself exists in many variations. Some children are homeschooled individually, others in small groups or classes. There will be homeschool children using this literature trilogy who are eight or nine years old, and others who are of middle school age. There will be homeschool parents who want a grade-free, creative environment, and others who want to establish a classical academic rigor that they may feel is lacking in the school system.

My strategy in this manual, therefore, is to provide paths for all of the above. I may refer to the *child*, or I may refer to the *class*, thinking of a small homeschool class. I may provide options for a third grader, and I may provide options for a seventh grader, who is by no means too old to read *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, or *The Wind in the Willows*. Virtually every activity in this manual can be

conducted as an ungraded, creative activity, or it can be graded by a parent who wants the child to learn how to navigate a grading system. I will not provide any system for grading.

It is important that the approach to literature be literary, focused on the texts, and simple. I do not want a panorama of activities, worksheets, and other busywork to be the program. The program is the books. I want our approach to be deft and quiet, rather than loud. I want us to behave with literary grace. I want our activities to cuddle up to the books. We will do some creative and academic work in conjunction with the books, with our hearts turned at all times toward the books.

Accordingly, we can think about the program strategy in terms of four simple levels. The four levels are preparing, reading, creative thinking, and writing.

1. Preparing

Prior to reading the book, we might use an encyclopedia to look up the author and learn about the author's life and the place of the book in cultural history. This content, however, is secondary to the content of the book itself; it would not be important if the book

were not important. An alternative is to do this research after reading the book, when the child may be even more curious about the details.

We might also prestudy the vocabulary by studying the words common to all books in the trilogy and then by taking a sneak peak at the words of the novel we are about to read. For *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wind in the Willows*, I have provided a short list of words common to all three books.

2. Reading

This is the main event. The success of our entire enterprise hangs on this level. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wind in the Willows* are among the best books ever written for children. We want the reading to be as natural as possible, as uninterrupted as possible, and as magical as possible. We do not want to introduce distractions such as worksheets, objective quizzes, imported systems of interpretation (e.g. symbolism), or literary terms at this stage. Let the child read. Let the story take over. Let there be talking animals and shouting playing cards. Trust the author.

It is not the child only who must read. This is not

a program that the parent can assign without also personally reading each book. Read together—even aloud at times. There will be no worksheets that can be passed to the student and then graded with an answer key by someone who has not read the story. This program is a magic synergy of book, student, and parent.

I cannot tell you how much to read per day. Pace will vary depending upon your situation. Some students read much faster than others. Thirty pages per day is not unusual, but talented readers often read far more than that—with ease. There are students who love to read an entire book at one sitting, others who would like to read a chapter per day. Set a pace that makes sense, but read complete chapters whenever possible, rather than stopping for the day in the middle of a chapter.

If the child wants to read more than you had planned, wonderful. We should adjust our processes to celebrate higher achievement.

As the reading progresses, you can monitor with quote quizzes, several quotations that you read aloud, letting the child try to name the character who spoke the words. Character quotes are pure, are the author's own words, and are ways of emphasizing characters. Character

quotes have personality. I usually read each quotation two times, and more upon request. The goal is not to catch the child; the goal is to set up a nice, brief talk. I have provided some quotations for you in this manual, but I encourage you to find others.

I do not like the practice of traditional written quizzes every so many chapters; that is too intrusive. It breaks the flow of the reading. We should leave the story alone as much as possible. Our pedagogy should tiptoe and whisper.

It is a good idea to have short intratextual discussions about what is happening in the story. Keep it simple; discuss the characters and what they are doing. Ask about their motivations, as if the characters are real people. Keep in mind that even for professional literary critics, the answers to such questions differ. Use Socratic questions, but with a light touch: “Why do you think Alice did that?” If the student expresses confusion about what is happening in the story, clarify the question before reading on.

Keep in mind that literature works because the child learns from the characters, not from what we say about the characters. The child must be listening to Ratty, studying

Peter's every move, waiting to see what Mole does next. The information stream goes from the character to the child, and we want to divert it as little as possible.

At the end of the reading, conduct a complete review of the book, asking about the best parts of the story, the student's favorite character, and what the book seems to be about, the theme or themes. Ask what the book makes one realize.

I like to ask, "If the book is really like the world, is that good news or bad news?" This is not a concrete question. I am not asking whether we still drive buggies. I am asking about human nature. I am asking, if these characters are judging each other on the basis of wealth or social position, is that like the world? The question requires the student to look past the concrete details of technology, clothing, outmoded language, and so forth, and assess the deeper elements of character, honor, tragedy, egocentrism, malice, and benevolence.

The exploration of the language illustrations is a culminating activity of the reading stage. After we have completed reading the book and discussing it as a whole from an intratextual point of view, we can go back and discuss the language illustrations. We can linger over

them. In each book I have provided close-ups of poetic techniques, four-level analyses of interesting grammar, and comments about writing strategies. These comments all focus on the author's writing technique.

I would like for us to carve out some dedicated time for the illustrations. This should be a thoughtful and relaxed approach, free of anxiety. We want a method that allows enjoyable rereading and thinking back over the illustrations. It cannot be hurried. I would select a portion of the text, a chapter or a number of chapters, and provide time to reread the illustrations, using questions such as:

1. Which illustration in this section (or book) do you think is most surprising?
2. Which illustration do you think is most important, academically?
3. Which illustration is your favorite?

All three of these questions are positive and designed to have the student articulate enjoyment or admiration for the writer's technique. If you have a small homeschool class, these questions are ideal for discussion.

The scope of the question, whether it covers one chapter or four chapters at once, is flexible. I do not want

to use these questions during the first reading because at that time they would break the spell of the story. These questions about illustrations are extratextual in nature and should be used after the story. They might also provide alternative topics for the writing level.

3. Creative Thinking

Literature is a high creative art, and it is not surprisingly a rich ground for creative thinking. I have used many creative approaches to literature, and these always seem to enhance the stories. Be it said: intellectual fun is intellectual. We will tolerate no cognitive sourpuss. Fun denotes comprehension; you never laugh at what you do not get. Once, in a traditional school setting, we were reading *The Iliad*, and I had the class perform a five-minute version of *The Iliad*. The whole book had to be collapsed. Pages got condensed into single words or lines. It was hilarious, but the planning forced the students to think deeply about each section of the book, to decide what to say in the few words that were available.

I have asked students to consider such questions as, “If you were going to be on a three-day bus trip to another state, who would you rather sit beside, Ratty or Badger?”

These questions are outside the normal academic line of questioning, but they are a catalyst for deep and meaningful thinking and caring about the book. They take the characters seriously. They make the child think about the character as a real individual, rather than as a distant fictional entity. I will provide some model creative activities and questions, and I encourage you to develop your own.

You will notice that in addition to creative options that I am isolating out in this level, I have also put creative questions in the lists of questions for essays. Look especially for divergent thinking questions that ask students to think of more ways, more options, more choices, and so forth. Traditional school questions are convergent, asking students to find the right answer, but we will feature divergent questions—the exact opposite. Convergent questions focus on what the teacher thinks, but divergent questions are brainstorms; they generate ideas that the student thinks.

4. Writing

Literature is the perfect backboard for serious writing practice. In a traditional school setting, writing about

books is always graded. In the homeschool setting, this is usually not the case.

Some homeschool parents do not incorporate grades or tests, and some do. The homeschool setting makes it easy for the child to write an essay that is not graded but is discussed. It can then be revised any number of times until it is polished and both child and parent like it. I am not aware of any loss of instructional quality that this entails, compared to a graded situation. At no point does the child need to be told that he or she received a D or a B. You do not make a poor writer better by telling him that you think he is a poor writer. My experience with teaching students to write academic essays shows that the worse the student's writing, the nicer you have to be. You must be honest, but nice about it.

I adamantly oppose deceiving a student by saying that bad writing is good. If it needs work, we must say that it needs work. We can say that there are some problems to work on, but that the writing shows promise.

Even though much homeschooling is not graded, some homeschool parents may wish to incorporate elements of academic rigor that a child will eventually face in higher academics, including grades. That is a

choice that you as the parent can make. This literature program does not provide or promote a grading method; my own feeling is that students are often overgraded and undertaught. I would say that I would not wish my own child to arrive at college never before having been graded. You can find some of my thoughts about grading in *Advanced Academic Writing*.

In this program, particularly if a child is of lower elementary age, you may not wish to have formal literature tests, but to follow up reading with quality writing practice. If you do use tests, then I recommend the steps below, and if you do not and would rather just have a child practice writing in a more peaceful context, I would still recommend the steps described below; students can write, whether or not they get grades.

I like to ask a student to write about a book and to use this writing not only as a way to generate deeper insights into the book but as a way to practice serious academic writing. This writing should follow the completion of the book, rather than interrupt the reading.

I think it is a gross mistake in pedagogy to follow the reading of a wonderful book with a worksheet-style activity with true/false, matching, multiple-choice, and

fill-in-the-blank questions. In my traditional classroom setting, I do not include those or any other form of concrete, objective questions on a literature test. I prefer to deal with plot and character details in discussion. This lets me commit more time to writing practice.

Older students: for students of upper elementary ages and higher, you can assign one or more essays, as described in *Essay Voyage*. In a one-hour space of time, I like for the student to write two essays, and I think that two essays are sufficient. I like to provide four or five thought-provoking study questions several days in advance, and the actual writing practice narrows to three of those. One of the three is mandatory, and the student may choose one of the remaining two. By making one question mandatory, I force the student to think about all of the study questions, creating an exceptionally deep exploration of the book. The student therefore writes two essays, and emphasis is on quality. I allow the student to have the book or books in hand in order to quote from the text. I expect quotations to be used as evidence in both essays; we are doing analysis, not opinion.

Younger students: for a younger child, talk together about several of the most interesting questions, and

decide together which one question would be best or most fun to write about. Even a child who does not yet know what an essay is can write about his or her favorite character or favorite scene. A fourth grade child can explain which of several books he or she likes best or thinks is most important.

This is academic writing practice, and we must tell the student that practicing the academic style is part of our purpose. We want to practice the conventions of academic writing, of school writing. For older students, these should be formal essays written in academic English with good grammar and punctuation. I do expect an introduction, body, and conclusion. For younger students, they should at least write what we once called school writing. The often-used non-standard English, with first person, contractions, and colloquial expressions, is banished utterly. Even in the creative writing activities, it is better to learn to avoid contractions, and good creative writing is never sloppy.

In addition to no contractions or first person, spelling counts, and a dictionary should be available. Children will benefit from looking words up in the dictionary.

I like to use open-ended interpretive questions, so

I do not care as much what the answer is as I do the quality of the English, the structure of the essay, and the quality of the case that the student makes.

The content of the writing practice questions I provide in this manual remains within the internal scope of the story, rather than extending out to the biography of the author or the history of the century or the elements of the literary movement. We may, if we wish, address those things in preliminary research or in subsequent writing. In these essays we are still drilling down into the story. The essays cause the students to reread deeply and to think sensitively about the characters and their lives.

We should avoid rigid formulas and automated steps. Neither good writing nor good teaching is ever robotic. I do not always assign essays at the end of a novel. Usually, however, I do assign essays. I want the child to reread, rethink, and write with care. I want the child to learn the beauty and power of the essay form. If the child is little and does not yet know what an essay is, this is a perfect moment to begin introducing the idea of an essay with a thesis, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. A nine-year-old can certainly begin learning that.

In the spirit of what you have seen in *Sentence Island*,

Paragraph Town, and *Essay Voyage*, my instructions to the older student include that each essay:

1. Must be a true essay with introduction, body, and a conclusion that ties the argument together. The essay must have a thesis. In other words, it cannot be a retelling of the plot; it must present an idea. There must be proper paragraphing. The standard teaching model for the essay is a five-paragraph model, but this is only a beginner's model. Real essays usually have more paragraphs than five.

2. Must be in standard English with correct spelling and punctuation. The style must be academic with no contractions and no first person. By forbidding first person, we force the child to write directly about the content itself.

3. Must contain short and long quotations that provide evidence and make a case. We want a text-based interpretation, not a spontaneous opinion.

To give you some idea of what I expect students to write, I will provide a sample essay on the following page, about an invented book. If you have seen my *Advanced Academic Writing* text, you will note that the essay

resembles a handwritten MLA paper; we want to seize every possible opportunity to give the student practice in writing academic English.

For a younger child, we need not mention MLA; we can simply use the sample essay as a model and ask the student to imitate it. This writing practice can be used beautifully in conjunction with *Paragraph Town* and *Essay Voyage*; both of those books provide recommendations and instructions for how to write such assignments. We might also use some of the question that I have provided as the basis of good discussions rather than of writing practice.

2. Why does Mildred Moose distrust Mango the Mongoose?

In James Merriwether's novel, The Spruce Moose, Mildred Moose comes to distrust Mango the Mongoose, and she does this for good reason. Mango repeats what she tells him in confidence, he eats grass from her swamp when she is not looking, and he pretends to be
