

## **Harry Potter: A Link to the Fantasy Genre**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Writer Jim Trelease has described the advent of the Harry Potter books as the “biggest impact on publishing since the invention of the paperback [book].” In 1997, the Harry Potter series by author J. K. Rowling burst onto the publishing scene in England with the somewhat surprising and phenomenal success of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, a tale about an orphaned boy who enrolls at a school for budding witches and wizards. In that setting, Harry Potter is taught the lessons of a beginner wizard: how to fly on a broom, how to cast spells, and how to become invisible. The boarding school setting is also quite extraordinary. For example, clothing never seems to wear out or have to be laundered. Harry encounters people and animals of immense proportions, both good and evil. He has many adventures with his two best friends, Ron and Hermione. Harry returns to the real world of the “Muggles” to spend his vacation breaks and summers with his mother’s unloving and uncaring relatives. The book has achieved such enormous fame that on June 3, 2003, an anonymous bidder paid \$16,000 at a London auction for a first edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

The plot is not original. There are many children’s books with similar supernatural happenings and characters. Yet, according to *School Library Journal* (January 2000), the success of this best-selling British fantasy series about the boarding school experiences of a teenaged wizard has generated an unprecedented level of excitement in both children and adults. In this day and age of media blitz, when the general public’s enthusiasm tends to focus on the debut of a new video game system, it has been unbelievably refreshing to find children who are thrilled about reading books. Even more surprising is the unusual length of these books that our children are reading, with over 800 pages contained in some of the novels. The bidding for the initial U.S. publishing rights was extremely fierce with Scholastic shelling out a whopping \$105,000 as the winning offer. This was considered an enormous sum to gamble on an unknown children’s author. Scholastic renamed the book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and the rest is history. Eighty million copies of the four Harry Potter books have been sold in the United States since the series’ debut. What makes it even more astonishing is that these four titles represent less than one hundredth of one percent of all of the children’s titles in print.

### **THE HARRY POTTER PHENOMENON**

Since Harry Potter began stomping all of its competitors, what has this done for the publishing industry? Have these books caused children to abandon reading with the thought that nothing could live up to the Potter expectations? On the contrary, according

to Weinberg (45), “The Potter books have made children’s literature more visible, the market more receptive to hardcover editions of new children’s fiction and reviewers more willing to tackle juvenile titles in their columns.” There has been a three-year hiatus between the fourth and fifth books in the Potter series caused by events and changes in the author’s lifestyle. During this time, other publishers have taken advantage of the lull to publish their own copycat series. Many of these books have been successfully riding the wave, for example, the Lemony Snicket series published in 1999 and the Artemis Fowl series published in 2001. These series have established themselves as bona fide hits, usurping even the Harry Potter books on children’s bestseller lists worldwide.

Weinberg goes on to state that the strangest truth of the Harry Potter phenomenon is the way it has benefited reluctant adult readers. Scholastic has released statistics to support their claim that fifty percent of the books in the series have been bought by readers thirty-five years or older. Brenda Bowen, executive vice president and publisher of Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing and twenty-one year publishing veteran, confirms this surprising information. She explains that the surge in adult consumption of children’s books reflects a hunger for the plot-heavy escapism that they offer. She says,

There’s not a particle of me that’s troubled by the idea that adults might be reading children’s books. They jolly well should be. Thank you, J. K. Rowling, for making it cool to read children’s books. (Weinberg 45)

Philip Pullman won the 2001 Whitbread Award for “best book” for his mystery novel, *The Amber Spyglass*. This is the first time a children’s book surpassed titles considered the finest among serious adult literature. Pullman humbly contributed this statement to his triumph:

If anything good has come out of me getting the Whitbread and the attendant publicity, and Harry Potter being a mass seller all over the world, it is that it’s drawing the attention of adults to the work of other children’s writers, which it thoroughly deserves. (Weinberg 45)

It was a foregone conclusion that the books would be made into movies, and when they were, the movies became instant box office successes. The commercial aspect could not be entirely suppressed, but the happy news is that the movies are well done. The theme of good guys (Harry and friends) vs. bad guys has always been universally appealing. The casting for the young actors is truly outstanding, and the friendship that develops between the three main characters is heartwarming. At the end of each Harry Potter book and movie, good temporarily triumphs over evil. However, it always appears to be an uneasy victory. These dangling endings provide fodder for future books in the series, some of which are not yet written.

That leads to another astonishing fact. The Harry Potter books become best sellers before they are written and/or released. According to sources at Amazon.com, Inc., by the beginning of June 2003 they had received more than one million advance orders for the fifth novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which has an astonishing price tag of \$29.99. Eight and one-half million copies have been printed by Scholastic for the U.S. market alone. During the "60 Minutes" television show (aired in the United States on June 15, 2003) the Children's Book Editor of the *The New York Times*, Eden Ross Lipson, remarked: "It's unprecedented in American children's books. It's unprecedented in English children's books. There is nothing that compares to the velocity of the success of Harry Potter."

The excitement of this media blitz is being fueled by the Internet in new and unparalleled directions. It has been reported in newspapers all over the world that an amazing worldwide webcast event will take place on June 26, 2003, at London's Royal Albert Hall. Author J. K. Rowling will read passages from the brand new *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, followed by a live interview with her that will be simultaneously broadcasted on the Internet. British Telecom is sponsoring the webcast, and Microsoft is hosting it at <http://www.msn.co.uk/harrypotter>. The reading will be followed by a question and answer session conducted by the actor host, Stephen Fry, who also does the narrations for the Harry Potter audiotaped books. Ms. Rowling will answer questions from members of the live audience, and questions that have been preselected from a website competition will be addressed to her by Mr. Fry. This amazing Webcast will be archived for seven days so that fans can watch it over and over again. According to Tracy Blacher, MSN marketing manager:

This is what the Web should be about—taking fans to the heart of the action, whether they're in Houston, Harrogate, or Hong Kong. (Houston Chronicle News Services, June 5, 2003)

Thanks to our modern technology, the world of children's literature seems to expand and shrink based upon fleeting trends in the popularity of certain book series. Therefore, it is difficult to explain why the Harry Potter books have so completely dominated the list of the nation's top ten bestsellers for children's literature every week since they were first published. Everyone seems to agree that the books can be interpreted as fantasy (or even science fiction), which is a popular teenage literature genre, and they contain an impressive vocabulary. They are also considered to be highly entertaining. Yet, other children's books possess these same qualities. What exactly is the special magic of Harry Potter?

There can be no question that the power of these books to lure young children away from the computer and television has been a remarkable event in the world of the millennium. In a world dominated by the media, no other book has so quickly become so legendary. The book phenomenon was further enhanced by the release of the two Harry Potter movies, which stimulated book sales to soar even higher. The success of the Harry

Potter series has been unprecedented and has not abated. It has not been an overnight phenomenon or a new fashion that is here one day and gone the next. The popularity of the books has been sustained since they were first published. It remains to be seen if the Harry Potter books will become true “classics.” Such debates, however, are not relevant to my purposes. My initial desire is simply to explore the Harry Potter phenomenon with my students. I want to compare and contrast the Harry Potter series with similar books of fantasy and show how they are linked.

In this curriculum unit, I want to discuss the importance of the Harry Potter books and movies with students. I want to solicit their opinions about why the Potter books and movies are so popular. How and why did this happen so quickly? I want to compare and contrast the Harry Potter book series with similar books and movies. We will also discuss the “science” of Harry Potter. Can any of the magical illusions be explained scientifically? I want to discuss these issues with students by creating a set of classroom lessons to demonstrate the impact that the Harry Potter books have had on the children’s literature genre of fantasy. We will even brainstorm our predictions for the remaining books in the series that have not yet been written. I believe that the immense and enduring popularity of J. K. Rowling’s books provides complete justification for writing and teaching this unit.

### **THE AUTHOR AS A ROLE MODEL**

J. K. Rowling loves to write. She wrote her first book (unpublished) at the age of six. She has said, “I have always written, and I know that I always will: I would be writing even if I hadn’t been published” (Scholastic Literature Guide 4). Even during the long hiatus between the fourth and fifth novels in the Harry Potter series, Ms. Rowling was never idle. She decided to write the two books which appear in the Harry Potter novels, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander, and *Quidditch Through the Ages* by Kennilworthy Whisp, with all proceeds going toward charities. Published in March 2001, both of these “spin-off” books indicate how fully Rowling has designed the magical world of Harry Potter. They display her great gift for satire and give fans something to read until the next installment (Nel 26).

Ms. Rowling began writing the first Harry Potter novel in a café in Edinburgh, Scotland while she was supporting her infant daughter on welfare. Five years later, the Bloomsbury House agreed to publish it. About two months before *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was released in Great Britain, it is interesting to note that Bloomsbury’s marketing team requested that Ms. Rowling use only her initials on the cover. Initially she was told that “J. K. Rowling” would look more striking than Joanne Rowling. According to the National Press Club, her publisher finally confessed, “We think that boys will like this book, but we’re not sure they’ll pick it up if a woman wrote it” (Nel 23). Obviously, the author’s gender did not remain a secret for long! The rest is history. Rowling moved rapidly from being “discovered” to successes of unparalleled proportions. She received an OBE (Order of the British Empire) from the Queen of

England in June 2003. A month later she was awarded a Doctor of Letters from her alma mater, the University of Exeter, because according to her former professor, “what she writes makes the world a better place” (Nel 25). Clearly, Ms. Rowling has become an outstanding role model for both male and female students, and for anyone who has a dream to write his/her own book and to see it get published

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

If you have students between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, you already know that Harry Potter is a presence in your classroom based upon the excitement generated by movie and book releases. I plan to enhance my students’ and your students’ academic knowledge of the literary content of the Harry Potter books with a curriculum unit that can be used for any of these grades. I want to incorporate Harry Potter books into the classic literature genre of fantasy. Let us begin with a definition of the fantasy genre and its place in children’s literature.

### **What is a Genre?**

The vast array of children's literature has to be divided according to some format (picture books, chapter books, illustrated books) as well as by topics or issues (death, race, family matters, friendship, etc.). The most common method of studying children's literature, however, is according to genre. Grouping books together because they have similar content allows us to discuss the available literature in an organized manner. Being aware of the different genres helps librarians and media specialists provide a variety of literature for students and teachers. It also provides an organization of cultural literacy to students and a method for explaining it. For the purposes of this curriculum unit, only one genre is being evaluated: the fantasy genre.

### ***The Fantasy Genre***

At this point, a discussion of the particular components of fantasy becomes an important prelude to my curriculum unit. A simple definition of fantasy describes it as imaginative fiction that features especially strange settings and characters. The following characteristics or components of fantasy should be taught as part of the unit:

- Events in the story could not happen in real life.
- The story being set in a place that doesn’t actually exist.
- The characters use of special powers or fanciful strategies to solve problems.

As students are reading or listening to the Harry Potter stories, they should be identifying ways in which the Harry Potter books fit the definition of fantasy. (See the *Scholastic Literature Guide(s)* for the first four Potter books which were published in 2000.)

Fantasy has frequently been divided into the following subheadings:

Animal fantasy, Epics, Fables, Fairy tales, Folklore, Modern fantasy, Myths, Science fiction, and Traditional fantasy.

How do the Harry Potter books fit into these categories?

I believe that the Harry Potter books represent modern fantasy. The reading level for these books has been estimated for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. If we set aside for a moment the wizardry and magic tricks, we see problems that are familiar to ordinary teens and preteens. These are everyday issues such as family situations, peer relationships, growth and maturity, and acceptance of cultural differences. Children enjoy the modern fantasy genre because it gives them a sense of community, a sense that someone else is having similar life experiences. As the age of the reader increases, the focus of the story broadens from home life to address problems in society such as the child abuse experienced by Harry Potter. Modern fantasy remains enjoyable because the serious subplots are tempered with the magical experiences. According to Kyleene Beers, Clinical Assistant Professor of Reading at the University of Houston, Texas:

While the fun of fantasy might be its otherworldliness, its power lies in the truths it reveals about the real world. So the magical world of Harry Potter, a world of flying cars and dragons, unicorns and magic potions, invisibility cloaks and evil powers, becomes real as readers discover truths about bravery, loyalty, choice, and the power of love. (from Scholastic's Harry Potter website)

Another point to emphasize is that a good portion of the success of the Harry Potter novels has been credited to the intricate plot structure and to the strength and bonding of the three teenage characters. The stress on personal courage and problem solving is very effective and influential for readers in this age range.

Fantasy allows children to live in an imaginary world where anything is possible. They love this. Fantasy cannot be successful, however, unless it is grounded in logic. The author must provide strong characters and explain the fantastical world in great detail so that the reader is willing to suspend his or her disbelief and actually believe in the magic. Author E.B. White expanded on this idea in a charming letter he wrote to his readers before his death, which explains this unusual concept. He uses three of his own books as examples:

Are my stories true, you ask? No, they are imaginary tales, containing fantastic characters and events. In real life, a family doesn't have a child who looks like a mouse (*Stuart Little*); in real life, a spider doesn't spin words in her web (*Charlotte's Web*). In real life, a swan doesn't blow a trumpet (*The Trumpet of the Swan*). But real life is only one kind of life—there is also the life of the imagination. And although my stories are imaginary, I like to think that there is

some truth in them, too—truth about the way people and animals feel and think and act. (from teachervision.com)

Believing in fantasy exacts a toll. Perhaps it is being pulled into a magical world that opens fantasy up to controversy. Usually, the controversy concerns a small facet of the story. The best fantasy books cast light on the realities of life by allowing the reader to contemplate realistic dilemmas within the realm of a magical world. When fantasy and the everyday coexist, the characters do not need to travel to another land to have magical experiences. Rowling’s witches and wizards share the same world with Muggles. Just as characters in fairy tales are not surprised when a frog turns into a prince, the Harry Potter books are a “matter-of-fact fantasy” in which magic is so thoroughly a part of the landscape that it is taken for granted. Other classic works of fantasy that share this characteristic include titles like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *Tuck Everlasting*, and *Matilda*. The popularity of fantasy is tremendous, with students demanding sequel after sequel from their favorite authors.

There is no lack of materials for this curriculum unit. There is a wealth of fantasy children’s literature for our use in addition to the Harry Potter series. There are even plenty of great books out there that feature flying brooms, mysterious wizards, and brave young adventurers! The Harry Potter novels might serve as an introduction to classic fantasy series like J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which features a young Hobbit named Frodo who tries to save Middle Earth from the evils of the Ring. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is another famous adventure about a group of kids who discover a whole new universe hiding behind their closet. *Alice in Wonderland* found her new universe down a rabbit hole. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is an amazing book about a breed of super intelligent mice and their attempt to save themselves from an evil farmer. *The Indian in the Cupboard* comes alive when a boy is given a key to the magical cupboard. The list goes on. The long-term effects and similarities between these works of fantasy surpass their imagined differences. Author John Granger in his new book, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter*, has this comment to make:

It is not sloppy thinking or failed memory that has led so many critics and casual readers to remark that while reading about Harry, they experienced again the feelings and challenges they remembered from Narnia and Middle Earth. These books are trying to do the same thing and use many of the same tools, which together produce effects of remarkable resemblance. (336)

A common theme in many fantasy novels and fairy tales is for the central character to be on a quest, fighting the forces of evil. The Harry Potter novels feed right into this concept, with each novel featuring a different quest. It is interesting to note that Author Philip Nel has classified the Harry Potter book series as an epic fantasy for this reason: “By featuring more than 100 characters, the Harry Potter series is an epic fantasy” (36).

In conclusion, although J. K. Rowling has proclaimed fantasy to be her least favorite genre, her books contribute substantially to its traditions. Harry Potter can even be considered a classic fantasy hero: the apparently ordinary and even oppressed child who turns out to be special.

### ***Science Fiction as Part of the Fantasy Genre***

Some say that science fiction is not really a genre but is actually a type of modern fantasy. A plausible argument can be made for this ruling. Others say that science fiction needs to be classified as its own genre, based upon the strength of its following and the strength of its components. The magic of science fiction comes from the exploration of scientific fact. It is assumed that fans of science fiction stories are not usually attracted to the fantasy genre because they demand more grounding in concrete realities. They say that true science fiction must pose ethical questions about current scientific trends and predictions. I believe that science fiction in children's literature does not make such demands. It can be contained within the boundaries of the fantasy genre.

Science fiction for children focuses on the adventure of exploring the unknown and the wonder of discovering new worlds and peoples. Perhaps because it is purposely written for children, their science fiction is often less bleak than science fiction that is written for adults. We know there are real limits to scientific thinking and prediction, but young children love using their imagination and they love believing in magic. To them, magic will never be made extinct by the advances of science. Adults become believers as well because even as existing mysteries are solved, it seems inevitable that new questions and puzzles will arise.

Following this line of thought, one might ask: are the Harry Potter books based upon scientific facts or are they purely science fiction? This provides an interesting new avenue for conjecture. It follows that readers of science fiction will be attracted to the Harry Potter books because there is so much of the story that can be explained with logic, proven to be real scientific fact, and verified through scientific experiments. Yet there is a blurry line where it seems that magic has somehow been merged with scientific fact. This is the grey area that needs to be explored with students.

### **What is the Science and what is the Magic?**

In the Harry Potter books, "Muggles" are defined as ordinary human beings who have been untrained as wizards. The indications are that they possess no magical powers of any kind. Therefore, it is interesting to note that even the magically gifted characters in the Harry Potter books acknowledge that Muggle scientists and technologists are able to perform certain kinds of "magic" on their own. For example, the mighty Hagrid is clearly puzzled by the workings of a simple parking meter!

In his new book, *The Science of Harry Potter*, Roger Highfield points out in great detail that the advances of modern technology created by today's scientists (i.e. traveling at the speed of sound, wireless telephones, etc.) may seem like sorcery to many people, whereas the more pragmatic among us will take it for granted. Years ago we would not have imagined cloning animals or creating human babies from test tubes. Yet these events are all part of the new technology of the millennium. The cloned sheep named Dolly survived the initial hoopla and lived for many years until she developed complications from arthritis. In vitro fertilization techniques and surrogate pregnancies are still very expensive options, but they have become available to the average couple. Highfield strongly believes that Harry's magical world can "help illuminate rather than undermine science, casting a fascinating light on some of the most interesting issues that researchers struggle with today" (xv).

Highfield also reveals that much of what strikes us as supremely strange in the Potter books can actually be explained by the "conjurations of the scientific mind." He believes that the boundary between natural and supernatural lies in the human mind. He does not see a conflict because he finds common ground between science and magic and is able to scientifically explain away many of the magical phenomena depicted in the Harry Potter books. I want to further explore this arena because it is uncharted territory in the Harry Potter teaching literature. I think my students will be intrigued by such an approach. One of the lesson plans in my curriculum unit will be devoted to investigating this topic.

## **HOW TO HANDLE CRITICISM**

It is inevitable that student readers, teachers, and/or scholars studying the Harry Potter book series will encounter strong criticism of the books, movies, and the author who wrote them. This criticism can even become hostile. All of the huge success garnered by the Potter books and movies has not come without controversy. The American Library Association reports that the Potter series ranks seventh on its list of the most frequently challenged books, surpassing even such perennials as *The Catcher in the Rye*. Critics of the book complain that the focus on witchcraft is objectionable and subversive. It is important to note that ALL of the classic fantasy titles named earlier in this unit have been considered controversial. It is part and parcel of the genre. Ms. Rowling has even commented that, "If you ban all books with witchcraft and the supernatural, you'll ban three-quarters of children's literature" (Nel 58).

In my opinion, most criticisms are simply to be ignored. Do not challenge the censors because you will never convince them that they are wrong or convert them to your side of the issue. Decide for yourself that the Harry Potter books are an extremely worthwhile addition to the fantasy genre. Harry Potter book defenders point out that there has not been any corresponding wave of witchcraft among student readers, and that there are serious and useful lessons to be found in the books. The power of friendship is one very important lesson. Another very universal and very poignant lesson is that even powerful wizards are not immune to loss and grief.

According to the latest information from author J. K. Rowling, the key to the rest of the Harry Potter series can be gleaned from the middle book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore provides a glimpse of the future when he delivers to his students a warning that, "...you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy" (Rowling 724). The author follows through when she tells us, "This is the setup for the next three books. All of [the characters] are going to have to choose, because what is easy is often not right" (Weinberg 38). In my opinion, these lessons in ethics and morality are entirely suitable for students of any age.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

### **Begin with Discussion**

Begin the curriculum unit by letting your students explain why *they* think the books are so popular. Furthermore, let us ask them why they are willing to read books that are eight times longer than their favorite Goosebumps. Is it because these are the best fantasies ever written? Can they also explain why so many adults are reading and enjoying them without a child interpreter? It is the question that author J. K. Rowling gets asked most frequently. Author Philip Nel in his new book, *J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Novels*, explains that Rowling once gave the National Press Club the following reply to endless questions about her books' popularity:

I don't want to analyze that. I don't want to decide that there's a formula [...] because I want to carry on writing them the way I want to write them and not, you know, have to put Ingredient X in there. It's for other people to decide that, not me. (27)

According to Nel, the Harry Potter novels represent a "creative synthesis of a lifetime of reading, and Rowling is very widely read" (27). Rowling's knowledge of classic Greek and Roman literature appears to be very comprehensive, and related symbolism is found extensively in her novels. Adult readers enjoy locating these subtle references and comparing the characters in Greek mythology with similar creatures found at Hogwarts School of Wizardry. Adult readers also are interested in the ways and means fantasy authors introduce and intertwine the lives of their characters with reality issues.

### **Introduce Related Websites**

The list of Harry Potter spin-off Internet websites is an awesome phenomenon in itself. I feel obligated to include the best ones in this curriculum unit, even though I won't need all of them for the actual teaching of the unit. It should also be noted that the books I have used to research this curriculum unit are the latest printed materials available (all of them published in 2002) at the time of the publication of this unit.

## **Identify Your Students**

My targeted students will be three fifth grade classes which have been randomly divided into Groups A, B, and C. These class groupings are arranged for the sole purpose of mixing Spanish-speaking bilingual, ESL (English as a Second Language), and special education students with regular students. The class structure works very well for all intents and purposes. My job requirement is to teach all of these students solely in English, which partially fulfills the daily English-speaking requirement for all bilingual transition students. By seating regular English students at tables with bilingual students, peer tutoring naturally occurs. Without my having to ask, the ESL students can be relied upon to translate what I am teaching into Spanish for their friends who are having difficulty understanding the spoken and written English.

## **Tailor the Lesson Plans to Your Student Population**

I see each group for one hour per week; therefore, my curriculum unit will be composed of six brief lessons designed to cover one semester (six weeks). The introductory lesson will be devoted to an explanation of the Fantasy Genre. Lesson #2 will debate the issue of reconciling science and magic. Lesson #3 will compare and contrast similar works of fantasy. Lesson #4 will compare and contrast the first book and movie, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Lesson #5 will compare and contrast the second book and movie, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Lesson #6 will be a review, along with predictions about the plots of the next three unpublished novels in the series. These activities are designed with the intention of cultivating Texas Essential Knowledge Skills as stated in *Library Scope and Sequence* issued by the Bureau of Library Services for the Houston Independent School District.

An objective for one of my lesson plans is for students to compare and contrast the Harry Potter books and movies. A projected problem with this lesson is that the majority of students will have seen the movies, but only a small minority of them will have actually read the books. Since it would be impossible for me to read the books aloud to students during our limited class meetings, I must make a major effort to collaborate with their teachers for this lesson. My plan is to purchase for each 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom several audiotapes of the first two Harry Potter books, in English and in Spanish. These audiotapes could be made available to students in a classroom listening center and in the library.

## **LESSONS PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan 1: What is a Fantasy?**

**Objective:** The student draws conclusions from information gathered from multiple sources. (TEKS 5.13G)

An example of one activity would be the ability to recognize the first point at which a plot becomes a *fantasy*. How do you define “fantasy?” Using simple terms, I have often instructed my students to memorize a trilogy of three little words: *fantasy*, *fiction*, and *fake*. Carol Hurst, on her website, indicates that the most common definition of fantasy stipulates that, “according to the rules of nature as we now know them, this could not have happened. If an owl talks, for instance, even though every other action and reaction that animal or any other creature in the book has is realistic, the work is a fantasy.” An extension of that concept would be a lesson entitled “What is a *fantasy*?” It would include many other books of fantasy, such as the *Animorphs* and the *Redwall Series*. Sometimes the step into fantasy happens early in the book, as in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Other times we stay in the real world much longer as in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, where the point of entry is the wardrobe. Students could identify the moment of entry into magic for many such books and make a graph out of it.

Rowling follows the classic fantasy formula by beginning each book in the real world (the Dursleys’ home), moving into the fantasy world (Hogwarts School), and then returning to the real world (the Dursleys’ again). What other fantasies follow this same pattern? Think about classic fantasies such as *Peter Pan*, *The Indian in the Cupboard* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Compare these with other works that take place entirely in a fantasy world, such as *The Hobbit*. Discuss how the world of Hogwarts is not entirely separated from the everyday “Muggle” world, but is more of a magical world-within-a-world. Hogwarts School is portrayed as part of the real world, although ordinary people (Muggles) are unaware of it. Think about how we could graph this concept.

Another rule of fantasy is “believability.” If the fantasy is well written, there is a departure from reality, but it cannot be too far-fetched or the reader will lose interest. Using *Charlotte’s Web* by E. B. White as an example of a believable fantasy, we can see that the animal characters live and die according to the rules of nature. The fantasy part is that these same animals can read, write, and speak to each other. This can be extended to a Harry Potter lesson where students have to identify what is believable about the book and what is the fantasy.

### ***Instructional Procedure***

Begin this lesson by teaching to the whole group using an experience chart. Divide the chart into two columns, with the word “Believable” written at the top of one column, and the word “Fantasy” written at the top of the second column. Give an example by using the information taken from the book about Harry’s living conditions. In the Believable column write down, “Harry lives during school vacations with his aunt, uncle, and cousin, the Dursleys.” In the Fantasy column write down, “Harry lives during the school year at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

### ***Student Involvement***

Students will divide a lined sheet of notebook paper into the same two columns. Have them continue to do these comparisons including evidence from the book to support their choices.

### **Lesson Plan 2: Is it Science or Magic?**

***Objective:*** The student forms and revises questions for investigations, including questions arising from interests and units of study. (TEKS 5.13A)

### ***Instructional Procedure***

Suggest to the students that what may seem magical from Harry's childlike viewpoint may have become possible using today's scientific technology. How can we investigate the possibility? For our first topic of investigation, think of the many oversized creatures that appear in Harry Potter's world, including Harry Potter's friend Hagrid, whose mother was a giantess. How did they get to be this way? There is a theory that every living creature from insects to people are built from very similar "assembly kits." The components of the assembly kits are the genes that we inherit from our parents. The development of all body plans is controlled by a small number of these genes throughout creation. Monsters result when the normal process of cell division goes awry. Cell growth and cell division can be manipulated to boost body size. According to Highfield, all of this was proved in the Nobel Prize winning mutant research of a geneticist by the name of Sir Paul Nurse (95).

### ***Student Involvement***

Genetic development is still a relatively new science, and students could surf the Internet for the latest information. Students should also be reminded that stories about genetic "monsters" date back to the 1800's, when Mary Shelley first published her famous novel, *Frankenstein*. Was J. K. Rowling inspired by this story? Is Frankenstein similar to any of the characters found at Hogwarts School?

### ***Instructional Procedure***

Our second topic of investigation is Fluffy, the monstrous three-headed dog with yellow fangs owned by Hagrid. Is it possible to create such an animal? We have heard stories about additional heads having been observed to sprout spontaneously in nature, presumably as the result of a mutation (i.e. rumors of two-headed snakes and cows). Highfield offers this explanation (106). He claims that the Nobel Prize was awarded to the late Hans Spemann for his work on experimental embryology, and that Spemann's assistant, Hilde Mangold, continued their work by grafting tissue from one frog embryo to another. The result was a frog with two heads. He concedes that it is much more difficult to do this with mammals, but it is not inconceivable.

### ***Student Involvement***

Without touching on ethical considerations, it could be an interesting lesson to assign students to do research on grafting and cloning. Such developments were unknown ten years ago although George Orwell introduced the concept of cloning in his eerie novel, *1984*. Students could use print or electronic resources to research this topic.

### ***Instructional Procedure***

Our third topic of investigation is spellbinding apparel. In an earlier paragraph, I mentioned that clothes never seem to wear out in Harry Potter's world. A specific example of magical clothing is the long and silvery Invisibility Cloak given to Harry Potter by his deceased father. How does it work? Students familiar with the workings of television can explain how invisibility is routine, thanks to the use of camera tricks. Another explanation offered by Highfield suggests that the art of concealment was developed by Mother Nature, otherwise known as simple animal camouflage. Harry's cloak might also have been equipped with microscopic layers that would enable it to look different in changing scenes and lighting backgrounds. If the layers are made from a vast number of fiber optics, that would explain why the coat looks silvery.

If students remain skeptical, lead them into a discussion of the magical Sorting Hat, which we read about in the first novel and which was so remarkable in the first movie. How was it able to read the minds of the pupils at Hogwarts? One explanation provided by Highfield is that the Sorting Hat could read thoughts by measuring the rapidly changing magnetic field that results from the electrical activity generated within the conscious brain. This mind reading method is called magneto encephalography, or MEG. Highfield does admit that the brain's staggering complexity has kept this method from being considered foolproof (40).

### ***Student Involvement***

It might be interesting for students to study the workings of the human brain and how brain waves are measured electronically with CAT scans. They can use print or electronic sources to research this topic. Visiting their local doctor's office might also be a source of information for students.

## **Lesson Plan 3: Similar Fantasies**

***Objective:*** The student analyzes characters, including their traits, motivations, conflicts, points of view, relationships, and changes they undergo. (TEKS 5.12H)

### ***Instructional Procedure***

Roald Dahl delights in exposing the hypocrisy of "normal" people who feel threatened by any person unlike themselves. This outlook is clearly shared by J. K. Rowling. For example, in the first paragraph of *James and the Giant Peach*, the following sentence can be found: "It was the perfect life for a small boy" (Dahl 1). Let us compare that sentence to the first sentence of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of

number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much” (Rowling 1). This line would be at home in almost any of Dahl’s novels, whose plots are centered on the lives of innocent orphan children who find themselves suddenly and unexpectedly subjected to the cruelty of their relatives. The “normality” of these same relatives is often repeatedly emphasized with an ironic twist. In my experience, adults often find Dahl’s work too cruel and unsuitable for young readers, but I have noticed that my students seem to really enjoy the spirited lampooning of the “nasty” adults in *James and the Giant Peach* and in *Matilda*. Books that are popular with students were purposely selected for this lesson to make it more enjoyable.

### ***Student Involvement***

Harry Potter’s miserable situation when living among the Muggles (ordinary humans) will bring to mind other similar stories. The real issue of modern day child abuse could be raised, discussed with students, and solutions proposed. Harry’s tasteless and cruel relatives (uncle, aunt and cousin) can then be compared to James and his rotten aunts in Roald Dahl’s classic story, *James and the Giant Peach*. This “compare and contrast” activity could be extended to include the selfish and hedonistic family of Dahl’s equally popular story, *Matilda*. Another interesting similarity with the Harry Potter series is that both of these books by Roald Dahl have also been made into movies. An extension activity would be to compare and contrast Dahl’s movies with Rowling’s movies.

### **Lesson Plans 4 and 5: Books vs. Movies**

**Objective:** The student compares and contrasts print, visual, and electronic media such as film with the written story. (TEKS 5.23B)

It almost goes without saying that there would also have to be a lesson outlining the differences and similarities between the first two Harry Potter books and the movies that were made about them. I would use Venn Diagrams and I would create one for this purpose using the following website: <http://www.venndiagram.com>.

### **Lesson Plan 6: The Unpublished Books**

**Objective:** The student interprets and uses graphic sources of information such as maps, graphs, timelines, tables, and diagrams to address research questions. (TEKS 5.12D)

J. K. Rowling has stated her intention of writing seven books for the Harry Potter series. Four of them have been published to date, with the 5<sup>th</sup> novel due in bookstores on June 21, 2003. A suggested final lesson will be focused on predicting the outcomes and events which will take place in the future Harry Potter books.

### ***Instructional Procedure***

At first glance this seems like an impossible guessing game. However, there are available resources to help us in our quest. We can refer to Chapter 20 in John Granger's book (308), which contains a chart analyzing the progression of each Harry Potter book toward the ultimate redemption. We are free to disagree with this viewpoint and its pro-Christian bias, but it provides an interesting interpretation of events.

### ***Student Involvement***

The chart can also be utilized as a template for a different way to consolidate your students' ideas and predictions about the forthcoming books in the Harry Potter series. In this capacity, I would condense Granger's chart to a chart with five columns as follows:

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*  
**Battlefield:** Quidditch field and other obstacle courses  
**Distraction:** House Cup  
**Key to Victory:** alchemy  
**Goal:** sorcerer's stone

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*  
**Battlefield:** Chamber of Secrets  
**Distraction:** self-image  
**Key to Victory:** loyalty, faith  
**Goal:** Phoenix

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*  
**Battlefield:** Shrieking Shack  
**Distraction:** personal fears  
**Key to Victory:** identification with his father  
**Goal:** Stag and Hippogriff

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*  
**Battlefield:** graveyard  
**Distraction:** opinions of others  
**Key to Victory:** sports  
**Goal:** Goblet and cup

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*  
**Battlefield:** King's Cross Station  
**Distraction:** romance  
**Key to Victory:** love  
**Goal:** Phoenix

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Wounded Unicorn*  
**Battlefield:** Forbidden Forest  
**Distraction:** esotericism  
**Key to Victory:** humility, obedience  
**Goal:** Unicorn

**Book:** *Harry Potter and the Centaur's Choice*  
**Battlefield:** Godric Hollow  
**Distraction:** self-importance  
**Key to Victory:** martial arts  
**Goal:** Centaur

It needs to be emphasized that these are merely discussion ideas and should not be considered permanent solutions. No one is privileged to look into the mind of author J. K. Rowling, and she prefers not to disclose the contents of her unpublished books in the Harry Potter series. Therefore, anyone can guess the books endings, and the secrecy is what makes this lesson fun. The difference provided by this lesson plan is that we are making educated guesses based upon the information provided by the first four published books in the series.

One final idea is to have students pretend to be one of the main characters and write down this person's fortune. Students will enjoy taking turns reading aloud these fortune predictors for the future of each character.

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