



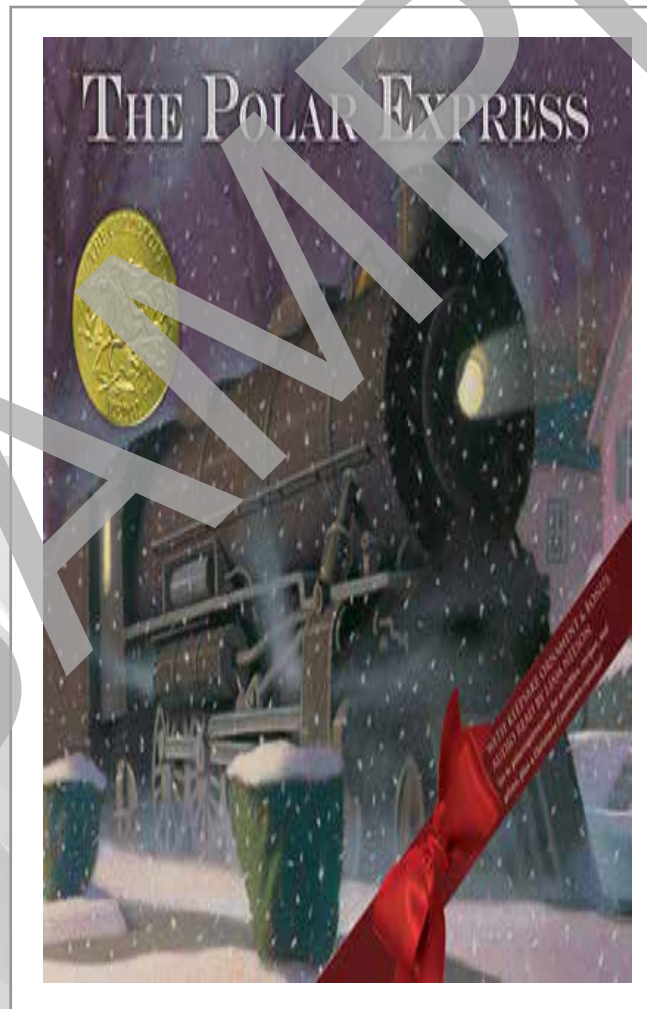
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES K-3**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Polar Express

Chris Van Allsburg



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Polar Express

Chris Van Allsburg

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Brainstorming, research

### Vocabulary

Synonyms, word mapping

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, sounds, music, pantomime, drama

### Comprehension

Predicting, inference

### Literary Elements

Characterization, story elements, setting

### Writing

Narrative, letter writing

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## Summary of *The Polar Express*

This Christmas story won the Caldecott Medal for its mysterious, softly luminous illustrations. The narrator begins his story “on Christmas Eve, many years ago” during his boyhood. Upon hearing sounds of steam and metal, he got out of bed to find a mysterious train in front of his house. He boarded the train, bound for the North Pole, and found that it was filled with children singing Christmas carols and eating candies.

The train sped through forests, up mountains, across plains, and finally stopped at the North Pole, which turned out to be a huge city filled with toy factories. At the center of the city, hundreds of elves had gathered for the presentation of the first gift of Christmas. Santa pointed to the narrator, who was handed up by the conductor. When asked what he would like, the narrator asked for a silver bell from Santa’s sleigh, which an elf cut from a reindeer’s harness. A clock struck 12, the conductor helped the boy down from the sleigh, and Santa disappeared off in the air with his reindeer.

Back in the train the boy discovered, to his dismay, that the bell had fallen out of a hole in his pocket. The boy was downhearted when the train dropped him off at home, but his spirits revived on Christmas morning when his sister found a small box behind the tree, for in the box was the bell with a note from “Mr. C.” Oddly, the boy’s parents could not hear the beautiful music the bell made, but the boy and his sister enjoyed the beautiful sound. Over the years, the narrator tells us, his friends and even his sister lost their ability to hear the bell, “but the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.”

### Prior to Reading

You may wish to choose one or more of the following pre-reading discussion questions/activities. Each is designed to help students draw from their store of background knowledge about the events and themes they will meet in the story they are about to read.

### Pre-reading Discussion Questions

**On Christmas:** What happens on Christmas Eve? What goes on at the North Pole? What job do the elves have? What do the reindeer do? Do you celebrate Christmas? If so, what is your favorite thing about Christmas? If Santa offered to give you any present you wanted, what would you ask for?

**On Trains:** Have you ever ridden on a train? What was it like? What did you see? How was it different from riding in a car or bus?

**On Losing Precious Things:** Have you ever lost anything special? How did you lose it? How did you feel? Where did you look for it? Did you ever get it back again?

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## Section 2

(from "Soon there were no more lights..." to "There," said the conductor, "is the North Pole.")

### Vocabulary

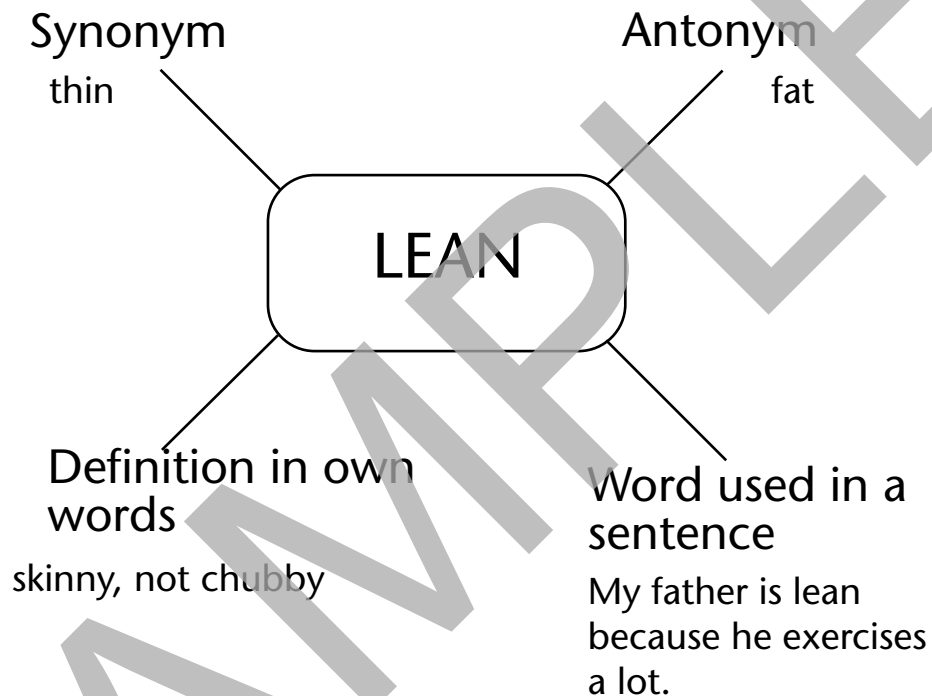
lean  
barren

roller coaster  
ice cap

plains

### Vocabulary Activity

Have students construct word maps for the target words. A sample map for "lean" is shown below:

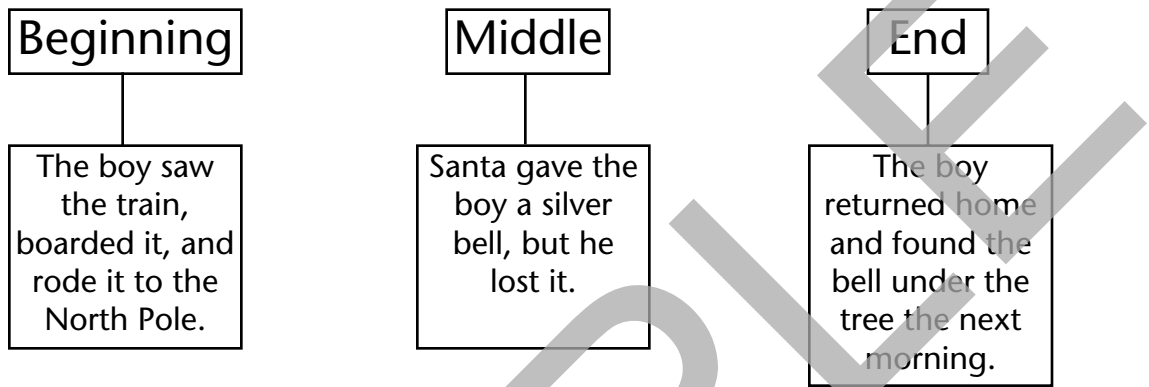


### Discussion Questions

1. Look at the picture with the wolves in it and flip back to the page before. How do your feelings change as you look from one page to the other? Which page feels colder and lonelier? (*The one with the wolves.*) Why? (*It shows thin wolves in the dark, while the page before shows happy children in a well-lit train.*)
2. How can you tell that the train was going fast, and high? (*"It seemed as if we would scrape the moon...faster and faster..."*) Can you think of another way to describe how high the climb into those mountains seemed? How do you think the children on the train felt? (*Probably thrilled, but not really afraid, as when riding a rollercoaster.*)
3. How was the Great Polar Ice Cap different from the high mountains? (*The mountains were very high; they turned into hills which turned into flat plains; the ice cap was very flat and bare.*)
4. **Prediction:** What do you think the lights are from? What will the children see next?

8. An even simpler “story grammar” for students who are just beginning to learn that stories have a “beginning,” “middle,” and “end” might look like this:

### *The Polar Express*



9. A diagram that might be developed with children who have more proficiency in the use of the terms setting, characters, plot, and resolution, might be:

### *The Polar Express*

