



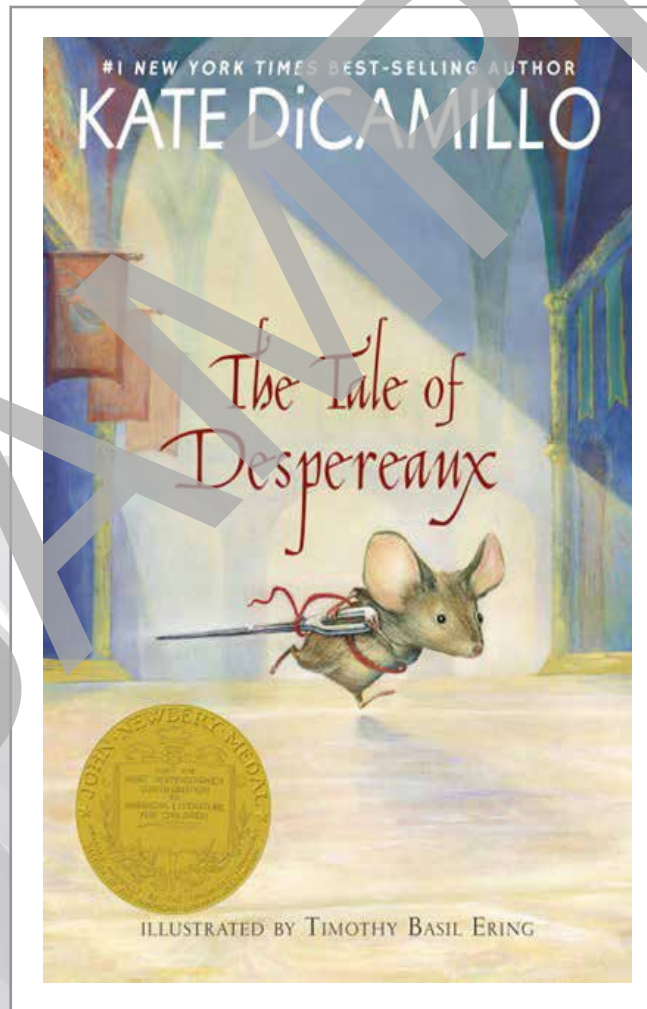
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 3-5**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Tale of Despereaux

Kate DiCamillo



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

# The Tale of Despereaux

Kate DiCamillo

## 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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3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

[sales@novelunits.com](mailto:sales@novelunits.com)

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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Identifying attributes, compare/contrast, creative and critical thinking, predicting, evaluating, supporting judgments, noting important details

### Writing

Glossary, poetry, journal, riddle

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, role-playing, dramatic reading, interview, TV/film

### Vocabulary

Synonym, antonym, context clues, definition, target words

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, story map, plot, setting, theme, character analysis

### Across the Curriculum

Social Studies—research, recipes; Science—research; Art—illustration, puppets

**Genre:** fantasy

**Setting:** a castle in an imaginary kingdom

**Point of View:** third person

**Themes:** impossible love, light vs. dark, determination, loyalty

**Conflict:** person/animal vs. society, person vs. animal, person vs. person, animal vs. animal

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** initially bright, but darkening as events unfold

**Date of First Publication:** 2003

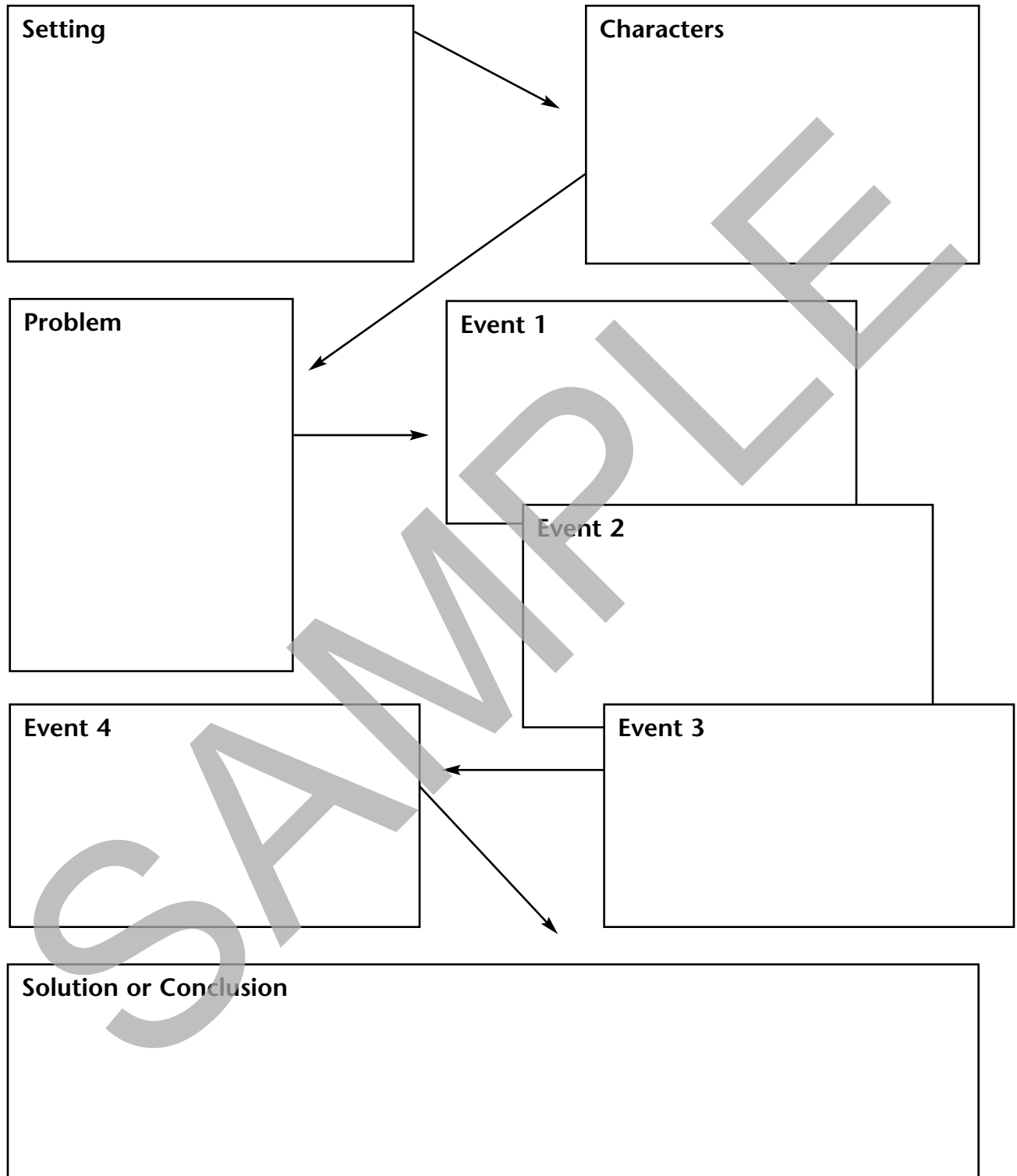
## Summary

Despereaux Tilling is a castle mouse and unlike any other mouse. First, there is his unusually small physique and large ears. Then there is his desire to read books rather than nibble on their pages. In this way, he becomes inspired by a story of courtly love and becomes enamored of the Princess Pea. To his joy, she also takes notice of him. However, this very unmouse-like behavior puts Despereaux's life in danger. The other mice banish him to the castle dungeon, where fierce rats lurk, eager to devour Despereaux. Among them is Chiaroscuro—Roscuro for short—a rat with an uncharacteristic love of light. This attraction leads him to explore the upper levels of the castle, including the banquet hall. His accidental landing in the queen's soup, though, is too much for her, and she dies of shock. Into this situation comes Miggery Sow, a kitchen helper whose life of mistreatment has left her nearly deaf but not without a dream—to take Pea's place as princess. Roscuro, believing himself slighted by Princess Pea, takes advantage of Mig's fantasy to get revenge on the princess. With Mig's help, he leads Pea deep into the dungeon. Despereaux, meanwhile, has escaped his expected fate because of a friendly jailer eager to hear the stories that he recalls from his reading. Despereaux is determined to do what any faithful knight would do for his lady—rescue her from danger.

## About the Author

For much of her life, Kate DiCamillo lived in the South. After graduating from the University of Florida, she took various jobs, including working at Circus World and Disney World. She began telling people that she was a writer even before she actually wrote anything. When DiCamillo moved to Minnesota, a chilly winter kept her indoors, and she began to write. Her first novel, the best-selling *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000), was a Newbery Honor book. Her second novel, *The Tiger Rising* (2001), was a National Book Award Finalist. *The Tale of Despereaux* won the 2004 Newbery Medal. DiCamillo says she wrote this book because a friend's son asked for a book with an unlikely hero with large ears.

# Story Map



## Book the First, Chapters 1–7, pp. 11–41

Despereaux Tilling is a castle mouse that is very unlike other mice. His siblings try to “educate him in the ways of being a mouse,” but Despereaux enjoys being different. When he reads a story of courtly love, Despereaux quickly falls in love with Princess Pea. To his surprise and joy, she also takes notice of him. Even though he knows that a mouse should never allow a human to see him, Despereaux can’t help but speak to the princess. However, his brother Furlough sees him and tells their father.

### Vocabulary

disappointment (12)  
tragedy (12)  
intent (18)  
siblings (20)  
molding (21)  
indignant (24)  
circumstances (27)  
incredible (30)  
adoringly (32)  
protested (38)  
ancient (39)

### Discussion Questions

1. What unusual circumstances surround Despereaux’s birth? Discuss how those events affect the way the other mice think of Despereaux. (*He is very small with large ears. Strangest of all is the fact that his eyes are wide open, and he can see. The family immediately decides that there is something wrong with him, and therefore he is a disappointment to his parents. Later, whenever he does something that is not typical of a normal mouse, other mice refer to the strangeness of his birth or remind him that he is a disappointment. pp. 11–25*)
2. What does the author mean when she says, “Reader, you must know that an interesting fate (sometimes involving rats, sometimes not) awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform” (p. 25)? (*She is suggesting that it is not just mice but people, too, who need to be aware that not conforming [that is, not doing things the way they are usually done] may cause problems that require courage to overcome.*)
3. What can Despereaux do to convince the other mice that he is not so different from them? Do you think he should do so? Why or why not? (*He can do exactly as his siblings and the other mice do with no variation, especially as they have already made up their minds that he is odd. Answers will vary.*)
4. What “thankless task” do Despereaux’s siblings abandon and why? What would you have done in their place? (*They stop trying to educate him in the ways of being a mouse. They feel as though it is a hopeless waste of time because Despereaux is too strange. Answers will vary. pp. 20–26*)
5. What fear motivates Lester to call the Mouse Council in order to discuss his son’s behavior? (*He fears that Despereaux’s contact with humans might endanger the entire mouse community, that is, that “mice must act like mice or else there is bound to be trouble” p. 35.*)
6. On page 41 of the novel, the author writes, “He was, alas, a mouse deeply in love.” Knowing that the word *alas* means “sadly” or “unfortunately,” predict what you think Despereaux’s future will be like. (*The use of *alas* should, along with other clues, suggest that Despereaux will have problems in the near future.*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Character Analysis: Based on what you have learned about them so far, compare King Phillip’s character and that of his daughter, Princess Pea. Begin by listing the qualities that you admire in each person. Put a plus sign in front of those items. Then list those characteristics you do not think are admirable, putting a minus sign before those. Which person received more plus signs?

2. Literary Devices: Identify the following quotations as using simile, metaphor, or personification, then briefly explain what effect the author is trying to achieve.
  - a. “The April sun, weak but determined, shone through a castle window and from there squeezed itself through a small hole in the wall and placed one golden finger on the little mouse” (p. 13).
  - b. “Get your head out of the clouds and hunt for crumbs” (p. 18).
  - c. “The song was as sweet as light shining through stained-glass windows...” (p. 29).
  - d. “You have lovely ears. They are like small pieces of velvet” (p. 37).
3. Critical Thinking: The reader learns some of the ancient rules of mice. First: Do not ever, under any circumstances, reveal yourself to humans. Second: Never let a human touch you. And finally: Never speak to a human. Add to these at least two other rules you think ought to be on a list of rules a mouse should follow.
4. Poetry: A couplet is a rhymed poem of just two lines. Choose one of the characters you have met in this section and write two descriptive, rhyming lines about him or her.  
**For example:** Born with his eyes open wide,  
 Despereaux had love inside.

## Chapters 8–15, pp. 42–81

Because of his unmouselike behavior, Despereaux must face the Mouse Council. The other mice banish him to the castle dungeon, where fierce rats lurk, eager to devour Despereaux. In the deep dark of the dungeon, Despereaux tells himself to be brave like the knights in the story he read. He begins to recite the story, whereupon he meets Gregory, the castle jailer. Gregory enjoys hearing stories—a fact that saves Despereaux’s life.

### Vocabulary

dismay (43)  
 outrage (43)  
 indisputable (43)  
 renounce (44)  
 perfidy (45)  
 distinctive (51)  
 egregious (52)  
 defiance (56)  
 ominous (57)  
 burly (63)  
 contemplated (69)  
 abyss (69)  
 implications (71)

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so important for Despereaux to read the words “happily ever after”? (*He needs some assurance that what he is feeling and going through will, indeed, have a happy ending. pp. 46–47*)
2. Do you think Despereaux really understands the reasons he was brought before the Mouse Council? Explain your answer. (*Answers will vary. Students may feel that he is gradually beginning to understand what the charges are; he just does not understand why the Council does not appreciate his feelings about them. pp. 47–56*)
3. On page 58 of the novel, the author asks, “Reader, do you believe that there is such a thing as happily ever after? Or, like Despereaux, have you, too, begun to question the possibility of happy endings?” When you read the author’s question, what was your first reaction? Explain how you felt and why. (*Answers will vary. Students should recognize that the author is creating suspense and that fantasy books generally do have a happy ending in store for the main characters.*)
4. In what ways are the threadmaster’s reactions to what Despereaux did different from those of the other mice? (*The threadmaster seems to understand exactly what has happened to inspire Despereaux, and he is not bothered by it. The other mice are intolerant of Despereaux’s lack of conformity to mouse community rules and feel threatened by his actions. pp. 59–61*)