



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **Watership Down**

Richard Adams

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

# Watership Down

Richard Adams

## 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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**ISBN 978-1-50204-305-4**

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Characterization,  
brainstorming, predicting,

### Writing

Poetry, eulogy,  
characterization, research

### Literary Elements

Similes, allusion, metaphors,  
adages, allegory

### Listening/Speaking

Dialects, quotes, music

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, sequencing,  
compare/contrast

### Other

Fables, symbolism, collage,  
mythology, drawing,  
painting, current events

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## Summary of *Watership Down*

**Genre:** Fiction Novel (Animal Fantasy)

**Setting:** Southern England (note map in front of book.) The places mentioned, including Nuthanger Farm, are real.

**Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

**Themes:** Survival, courage

**Conflict:** Survival against nature, enemies (including man), and their own species

**Summary:** In *Watership Down* a complex society of rabbits employs logic, experience, and emotions, and have their own religion and social structure. The book is divided into four parts, each relating part of the rabbits' quest for survival and their desire to create an ideal society. The tale is interspersed with rabbit folktales.

### About the Author

Richard Adams was born on May 9, 1920, in Newbury, Berkshire, England. He married Barbara Elizabeth Acland in 1949, and they have two children, Juliet Vera Lucy and Rosamond Beatrice Elizabeth. He served in the British Army from 1940-46. He graduated with an M.A. from Worcester College, Oxford, in 1948 and served in different capacities in Britain's Department of Environment for several years. He became a full-time writer in 1974 and was a writer-in-residence at the University of Florida in 1975 and at Hollins College in 1976. He worked as editor and contributor for *Occasional Poets* in 1986. Memberships include the Royal Society of Literature (Fellow), Royal Society of Arts (Fellow), and Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. *Watership Down* was first published in 1972. Other works by Adams include fiction: *Shardik*, *The Plague Dogs*, *The Girl in a Swing*, *Traveler*, *Maia*, *The Unbroken Web*, *Tales from Watership Down*, and nonfiction: *Nature Through the Seasons*, *Our Wonderful Solar System*, *Our Amazing Sun*, and *The Day Gone By* (Adams' autobiography).

### Background Information

The title, *Watership Down*, is taken from the name of the warren the rabbits reach on their quest; the word "watership" could also indicate crossing water to arrive at their destination; a "down" is a hill. Hampshire/Berkenshire, the Watership Down region, is located west of London and north of Southampton.

Adams originally told the story of *Watership Down* to entertain his daughters, and they insisted he write it down. After working on the manuscript for two years, it was rejected by four publishers before being printed by Rex Collings, Ltd. Later reprinted by Penguin and Macmillan, it has been marketed as both a juvenile and an adult novel. The book received the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal, and over two million copies have been sold. In 1996 Adams wrote *Tales from Watership Down*.

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## Attribute Web

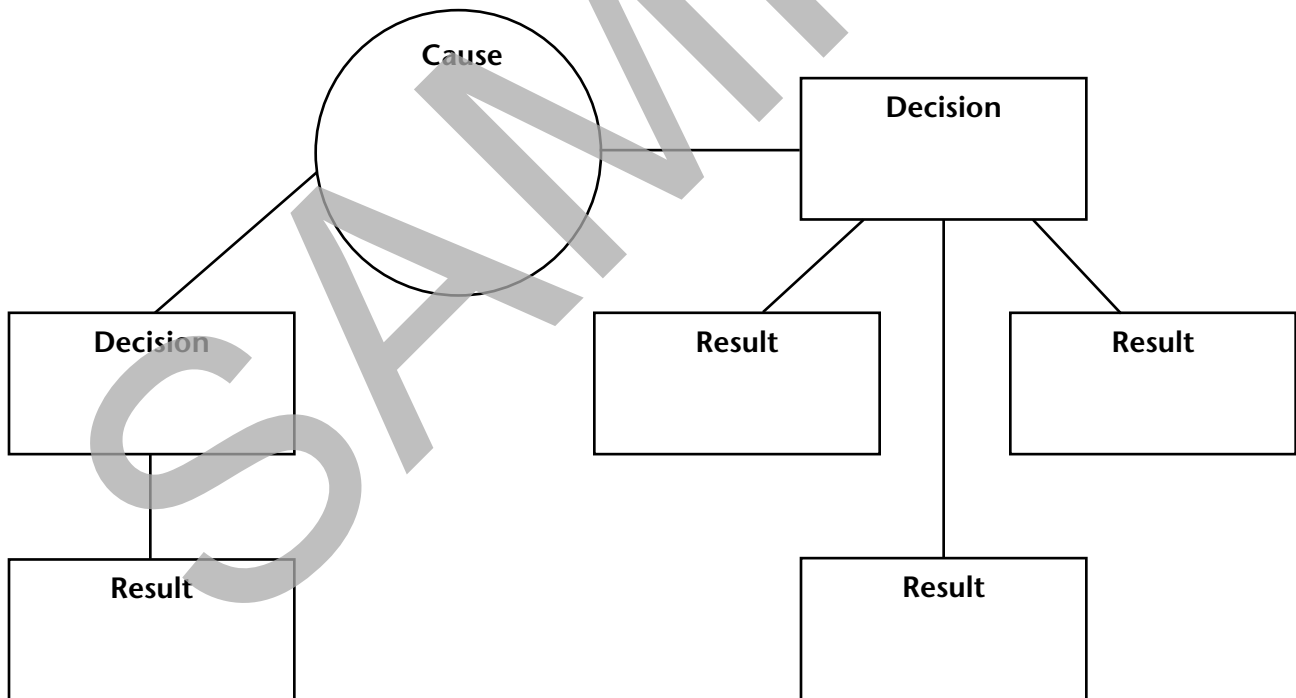
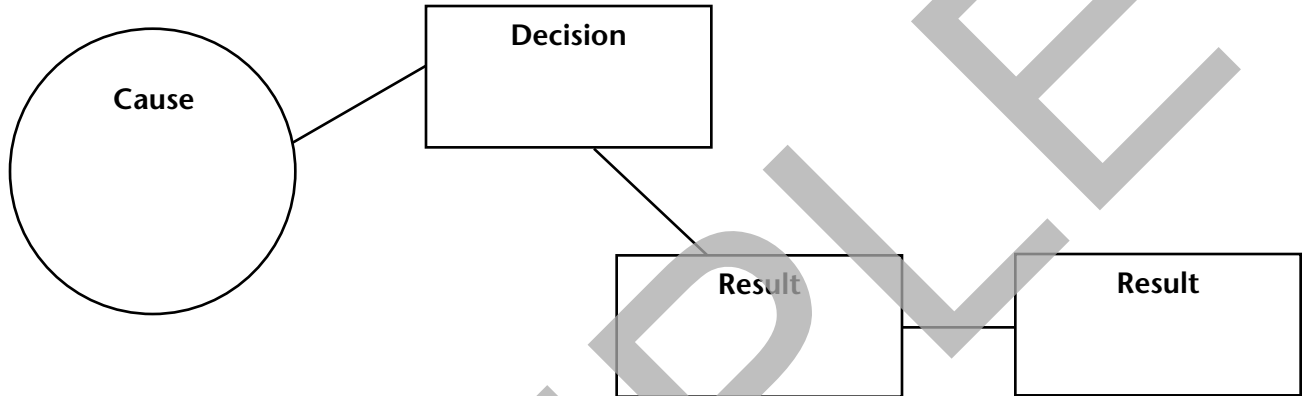
**Directions:** Select a character from the book to tell about using the blocks below.

<i>Who is the character?</i>			
<i>What did the character do?</i>		<i>Why did s/he do it?</i>	
<i>Why is the character's name well chosen?</i>	<i>What is the nature of this character's actions? (reactive, active, important, consequential, secondary)</i>	<i>What is the significance of the book's time and place to the character?</i>	
<i>What is unusual or important about the character?</i>	<i>How does the character change in the story?</i>	<i>Does the character remind you of another character from another book? Who?</i>	<i>Do you know anyone similar to this character?</i>

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## Cause/Effect Chart

Directions: Make a flow chart to show decisions the characters made, the decisions he or she could have made, and the result(s) of each. (Use your imagination to speculate on the results of the decisions that the character could have made.)



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## Section-by-Section Questions and Activities

**Notes:** (1) See Student Packet for study questions. (2) Read and analyze quotes at beginning of each chapter, then reread and apply after completing chapter. This guide includes translation of quotes before Chapters 7, 15, and 32. (3) Introduce types of government to students and analyze type of government and leader in each warren. Democracy: government by the people with an elected leader; autocracy: governed by one absolute ruler; theocracy: governed by God. Related words include *dictator*: one with absolute authority; *dictatorial*: despotic, overbearing; *tyrant*: oppressive or cruel ruler; *tyranny*: absolute ruler.

### PART I—The Journey

#### Summary

The rabbits about whom the novel revolves are introduced: Hazel, Fiver, Bigwig, Silver, Dandelion, Blackberry, and some secondary characters. Fiver senses impending doom and believes they must leave their home, Sandleford warren, but the Chief Rabbit, Threarah, refuses to listen to him. Following Fiver's premonition, the group leaves. They encounter danger, challenge, and adventure in search of a safe home. They find a warren that seems to be a safe refuge, but the rabbits there act strangely. Hazel's group discovers these rabbits are protected and fed by a man, but he also sets traps to catch a rabbit when he needs one. They leave, joined by a rabbit from the warren.

#### Vocabulary words, pp. 17-132

warren (18)	yearling (18)	myxomatosis (25)	stoat (25)
telepathic (31)	bracken (38)	wily (45)	propitious (55)
raucous (56)	ubiquitous (57)	furtive (64)	copse (66)
lassitude (77)	candid (77)	opulent (86)	redolent (99)
gregarious (105)	flaccid (126)	impiety (128)	acquiescence (129)

#### Chapters 1, pp. 17-22

##### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss life in Sandleford warren: location, type of government, rabbits' morale. (*throughout chapter; location: approximately one mile from Newton (see map in novel); government: autocracy, but competent and benevolent rather than tyrannical, no advisory council, rabbits controlled by Owsla; morale: low among outskirters, some discontent among others; spiritual life: belief in Frith as expressed in stories, lack of understanding for Fiver's visions.*)
2. Discuss rabbits' "caste" system. (*p. 18, outskirters: lowest, ordinary rabbits of first year, live on edge of warren, struggle to survive; regular: large enough or of aristocratic parentage, not intimidated by others; Owsla: second year or older, surround Chief Rabbit, exercise authority, often take advantage of position; Chief Rabbit: ruler.*)
3. Discuss Fiver's "gift"; apply other terms. (*p. 19-22, ability to sense what is about to happen; ESP, sixth sense, prophecy, premonition, mental telepathy.*)
4. **Prediction:** What will the land development mean for the rabbit warren?

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### Supplementary Activity

Analyze importance of birth order, referring to Fiver, footnote, p. 19. (*Suggestions: Fiver is small, dependent on older brother, and not respected by many. Ask students to discuss human birth order.*)

## Chapter 2, pp. 23-27

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss definition of myxomatosis [later referred to as “white blindness” (p.163)] and why the rabbits fear it. (p. 25; *definition: a fatal virus disease that affects only rabbits, introduced as pest control; inevitably means death and can destroy entire warren.*)
2. Discuss how Chief Threarah reacts to Fiver’s advice; apply to leaders in general. (pp. 25-27; *discredits, makes light of premonition; suggestions to application: do not want to listen to subordinates, think they know the answers, no respect for “visions.”*)
3. **Prediction:** What will happen after the rabbits leave Threarah?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Correlate rabbits’ fear of “white blindness” with past human paranoia about diseases such as bubonic plague, polio, and AIDS. Responses will vary.
2. Note simile, p. 27, “I can feel the danger like a wire round my neck.”

## Chapters 3-5, pp. 28-40

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the rabbits and why they choose to leave the warren. (*throughout chapters; Hazel: strong, confident, believes Fiver; Fiver: gifted, timid, has vision of destruction; Bigwig: strong, confident, disillusioned with Owsla; Blackberry: unhappy, dissatisfied; Dandelion: believes Fiver; Buckthorn: tough, sturdy, impatient, discontented; Hawkbit: slow, dull, outskirter, dissatisfied; Speedwell and Acorn: outskirters, unhappy; Silver: quiet, straightforward, insecure in Owsla position; Pipkin: small, timid, Fiver’s friend.*)
2. Begin a list of leadership qualities Hazel exhibits. Add to the list as other attributes become evident. (pp. 36, 38; *takes authority and makes decisions; willing to take risks for his group.*)
3. Introduce concept of El-ahairah. Discuss what qualities he has compared to Robin Hood, John Henry, and Odysseus. (p. 38; *Suggestions: cares for the underdog, strong and able to save his people, adventurous.*)
4. Discuss things that come unnaturally to rabbits. Correlate with things humans do that are unnatural to them. (p. 39; *moving in a group, maintaining steady pace, living in severe anxiety; suggestions for humans: fighting in a war, enduring extreme heat or cold, surviving in wilderness.*)

### Supplementary Activity

Analyze allusion: the angel which drove the First Crusade into Antioch and drives the lemmings into the sea. (p. 32; *Suggestions: a driving force that bonds animals or people together to face a common foe or accomplish a mutual purpose, even at the risk of death.*)