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# Introduction

This guide is divided into six units of study, and includes the following components:

## Pre-reading Discussion

This is a detailed section on the key elements that readers will encounter in the reading assignment. The Pre-reading Discussion centers on the literary elements of *Old Yeller* and gives suggestions for provoking interest in the chapters ahead. The section ends with ideas for initiating class discussions about the important concepts in the book.

## Study Guide and Vocabulary List

Each unit contains a Study Guide and vocabulary list, along with a corresponding reading assignment. Study Guide pages are designed to be duplicated and distributed when the reading assignment is given. Students should answer the questions and study the vocabulary words. Each Study Guide contains a “Writing Forum” section, in which students are asked to write a brief explication of some textual element. You may want to choose one or all of the questions listed; students may keep the Writing Forum questions in a continuing notebook. The following day’s class session could begin with a review of the written work before proceeding to a discussion of the chapters.

## Discussion Concepts

This section details the important concepts that students have encountered in their reading of *Old Yeller* and may be used to initiate class discussions. Discussions should involve events in the story and their relevance to the characters, important themes, and comparing and contrasting actions and statements. Students should be able to find quotes to support their opinions when necessary. Teachers may want to ask students to practice note-taking periodically during this discussion.

## Tests

Tests of comprehension and vocabulary are included in the *Old Yeller* guide. Varied formats challenge students to think intently and creatively about the material.

## Writing Projects

The Writing Projects at the end of the guide may be used as students progress through *Old Yeller* or after the class has finished Unit 6.

# Background

## Type of Literature

*Old Yeller* is an example of *realistic fiction*. The events of *Old Yeller* did not actually take place, but they could have.

## Setting and Atmosphere

The *setting* of the story, or the time and place in which the events of the story occur, is Texas in the 1860's. The Civil War has just ended, a fact that is significant because the war has left Papa short of money, thereby forcing him to leave his land and family in the care of his elder son while he pursues "cash money."

The reader is given a sense of the setting of the story in many ways. The atmosphere of pathos that pervades the book is evoked immediately in Chapter 1, as the narrator begins to tell a story that will inevitably end with "when I had to kill [Yeller]." There is also an excitement about facing the new frontier that is revealed in dramatic scenes like the bullfight, the attack of the wild hogs, and the final episodes dealing with the danger of hydrophobia (rabies). The colorful language patterns and dialect of the characters help to maintain the text's verisimilitude and contribute to the fabric of the story.

## Character Development

The characters in *Old Yeller* are developed through their words, actions, and feelings. The character of Travis is the only character in *Old Yeller* that goes through change; Mama, Little Arliss, Papa, Bud Searcy, Lisbeth, Burn Sanderson, and Yeller are static characters.

In *Old Yeller*, Travis changes and develops as the plot moves along. At first, he is rigid in his expectations of how Arliss should behave and how he himself should act as he attempts to fill his father's shoes. As he experiences successes and disappointments, he relaxes his need to control each situation and becomes more accepting of himself and others. In a final understanding of how important Yeller was to him, but with equal acceptance of the greater importance of protecting his family, Travis learns to cry for the loss of his dog.

The character of Travis grows out of boyhood and is initiated into young adulthood by confrontations with danger (wild hogs, the she-bear), fear (the fighting bulls), and injustice (the death of Yeller). Travis emerges from these experiences stronger and wiser, and it is clear that this wisdom would influence the decisions with which an adult Travis might be faced. This vision of *Old Yeller* as a continuum invites readers to contemplate these lessons and apply them to their own lives.

## Plot

The plot consists of the series of events that introduce, develop, and resolve the major conflict in the story. Conflict exists in every narrative, and may appear in various forms. Conflict may exist between one person and another, between one person and a group, or between one person and nature or the environment. Several major conflicts may exist within one story; these are subplots. Conflicts are resolved, though not necessarily happily, by the end of the text.

There are two major conflicts in *Old Yeller*. The struggles between Travis and his inner self and Travis and his environment are closely intertwined throughout the story. To survive in his environment, Travis must successfully handle the weather, wild animals, and the scourge of rabies. His successes and failures in coping with these situations bring about his growth toward adulthood.

## **Point of View**

*Old Yeller* is told in the first-person point of view, through the character of Travis. Because Travis' view is necessarily a personal (and therefore, subjective) view, characters and events are revealed through Travis' relationship to his fictional world.

The inherent subjectivity of a story written from the first-person point of view raises an interesting question about the verity of events: is Travis seeing what really happened, or what he thinks happened? To a certain extent, characters' actions reveal much about what happens simply because the action, taken at face value, corresponds closely to what the narrator *says* is happening. For example, for Arliss to approach a bear cub is truly a risky thing to do; because Travis describes it as such, the reader can see that in this case Travis is seeing what really happened.

## **Theme**

The theme of a book may be either directly stated or implicit. In disseminating a text, the theme, or central concept of the story, becomes recognizable as a universally known idea.

One theme of *Old Yeller* can be determined by examining the major conflict of the novel. The theme of growing up characterizes *Old Yeller*, as Travis struggles to maintain the farm and, in the process, understand how to make mature decisions.

There are other closely related themes that become apparent in a discussion of *Old Yeller*. Perseverance, honesty, courage, and loyalty are among the concepts that make up the diverse thematic material of the book. Each of these themes can also be considered as it affects the reader personally: the reader chooses to apply a theme to his or her life, or discard it.