

**FOCUS ON** **Reading Strategies**



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Lesson 3

from  
**Sarah, Plain  
and Tall**

• *Novel Excerpt*

**Heads Up**

You are about to read Chapter 1 from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. As you read, look for details about the characters or events provided by the author. Sometimes authors don't tell you all you want to know about the characters and events. When this happens, you can combine the facts from the author with information that you already know. This is called *drawing conclusions* or *making inferences*.

Quickly skim through Chapter 1 of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, without reading it, and choose ten words that you predict will be key words. Record those words on the next page. Then, based on those words, predict what the story is going to be about. Write your prediction on the next page.



My Key Words



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My Prediction



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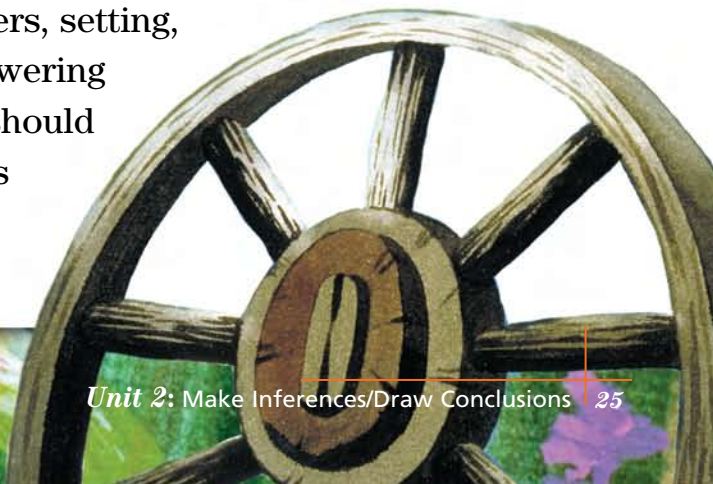
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Practice active reading by asking yourself questions about the characters, setting, and events as you read. Answering the Think-Along Questions should help you get started. Also, as you read, circle or highlight any words you don't know.



*from*  
**Sarah, Plain and Tall**

by Patricia MacLachlan

- 1 “Did Mama sing every day?” asked Caleb.  
“Every-single-day?” He sat close to the fire, his chin in his hand. It was dusk, and the dogs lay beside him on the warm hearthstones.
- 2 “Every-single-day,” I told him for the second time this week. For the twentieth time this month. The hundredth time this year? And the past few years?

Who do you think the person who uses “I” is?

- 3 “And did Papa sing, too?”
- 4 “Yes. Papa sang, too. Don’t get so close, Caleb. You’ll heat up.”
- 5 He pushed his chair back. It made a hollow scraping sound on the hearthstones, and the dogs stirred. Lottie, small and black, wagged her tail and lifted her head. Nick slept on.
- 6 I turned the bread dough over and over on the marble slab on the kitchen table.
- 7 “Well, Papa doesn’t sing anymore,” said Caleb very softly. A log broke apart and crackled in the fireplace. He looked up at me. “What did I look like when I was born?”
- 8 “You didn’t have any clothes on,” I told him.
- 9 “I know that,” he said.

10 “You looked like this.” I held the bread dough up in a round pale ball.

11 “I had hair,” said Caleb seriously.

12 “Not enough to talk about,” I said.

13 “And she named me Caleb,” he went on, filling in the old familiar story.

Who is “she”?

14 “I would have named you Troublesome,” I said, making Caleb smile.

Draw a conclusion as to why the narrator would call Caleb “Troublesome.”

15 “And Mama handed me to you in the yellow blanket and said . . .” He waited for me to finish the story. “And said . . . ?”

16 I sighed. “And Mama said, ‘Isn’t he beautiful, Anna?’ ”

17 “And I was,” Caleb finished.

18 Caleb thought the story was over, and I didn’t tell him what I had really thought. He was homely and plain, and he had a terrible holler and a horrid smell. But these were not the worst of him. Mama died the next morning. That was the worst thing about Caleb.

19 “Isn’t he beautiful, Anna?” Her last words to me. I had gone to bed thinking how **wretched** he looked. And I forgot to say good night.

*continued*





28 “Maybe,” he said, his voice low, “if you remember the songs, then I might remember her, too.”

29 My eyes widened and tears came. Then the door opened and wind blew in with Papa, and I went to stir the stew. Papa put his arms around me and put his nose in my hair.

Where do you suppose Anna learned to make stew and bread?

30 “Nice soapy smell, that stew,” he said.

31 I laughed. “That’s my hair.”

32 Caleb came over and threw his arms around Papa’s neck and hung down as Papa swung him back and forth, and the dogs sat up.

33 “Cold in town,” said Papa. “And Jack was **feisty**.” Jack was Papa’s horse that he’d raised from a colt. “Rascal,” murmured Papa, smiling, because no matter what Jack did Papa loved him.

34 I spooned up the stew and lighted the oil lamp and we ate with the dogs crowding under the table, hoping for spills or handouts.

35 Papa might not have told us about Sarah that night if Caleb hadn’t asked him the question. After the dishes were cleared and washed and Papa was filling the tin pail with ashes, Caleb spoke up. It wasn’t a question, really.

Draw a conclusion about where Papa got the ashes to put in the tin pail.

*continued*

*from Sarah, Plain and Tall continued*

36 “You don’t sing anymore,” he said. He said it harshly. Not because he meant to, but because he had been thinking of it for so long. “Why?” he asked more gently.

37 Slowly Papa straightened up. There was a long silence, and the dogs looked up, wondering at it.

38 “I’ve forgotten the old songs,” said Papa quietly. He sat down. “But maybe there’s a way to remember them.” He looked up at us.

Why do you think Papa forgot the songs?

39 “How?” asked Caleb eagerly.

40 Papa leaned back in the chair. “I’ve placed an advertisement in the newspapers. For help.”

41 “You mean a housekeeper?” I asked, surprised.

42 Caleb and I looked at each other and burst out laughing, remembering Hilly, our old housekeeper. She was round and slow and shuffling. She snored in a high whistle at night, like a teakettle, and let the fire go out.

Why would it be bad to let the fire go out?

43 “No,” said Papa slowly. “Not a housekeeper.” He paused. “A wife.”

44 Caleb stared at Papa. “A wife? You mean a mother?”

45 Nick slid his face onto Papa’s lap and Papa stroked his ears.

46 “That, too,” said Papa. “Like Maggie.”

47 Matthew, our neighbor to the south, had written to ask for a wife and mother for his children. And Maggie had come from Tennessee. Her hair was the color of turnips and she laughed.

What color do you think turnips are?

48 Papa reached into his pocket and unfolded a letter written on white paper. "And I have received an answer." Papa read to us:

49 Dear Mr. Jacob Witting,

I am Sarah Wheaton from Maine as you will see from my letter. I am answering your advertisement. I have never been married, though I have been asked. I have lived with an older brother, William, who is about to be married. His wife-to-be is young and energetic.

I have always loved to live by the sea, but at this time I feel a move is necessary. And the truth is, the sea is as far east as I can go. My choice, as you can see, is limited. This should not be taken as an insult. I am strong and I work hard, and I am willing to travel. But I am not mild mannered. If you should still care to write, I would be interested in your children and about where you live. And you.

Very truly yours,

Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton

P.S. Do you have opinions on cats? I have one.

*continued*



My Thoughts

*from Sarah, Plain and Tall continued*

Why do you think Sarah writes that she has been asked to marry in the past?

50 No one spoke when Papa finished the letter. He kept on looking at it in his hands, reading it over to himself. Finally I turned my head a bit to sneak a look at Caleb. He was smiling. I smiled, too.

51 “One thing,” I said in the quiet of the room.

52 “What’s that?” asked Papa, looking up.

53 I put my arm around Caleb.

54 “Ask her if she sings,” I said.

Why do you suppose Anna wants to know if Sarah sings?



## Make Sense of Words

When you come across an unknown word, you can try to understand the meaning by:

- rereading the sentence and using the *context clues*. This means paying attention to the other words in the sentence and the paragraph.
- breaking the word into parts. A *base word* is the main part of a word. A *prefix* is added to the beginning of a base word to change its meaning. A *suffix* is added to the end of a base word to change its meaning.
- using the dictionary or asking an adult.

1. In paragraph 19, locate the word **wretched**. **Wretched** is an adjective used by Anna to describe Caleb after he was born.
  - a. Make a list of other words in the story Anna uses to describe Caleb. These will be context clues for the meaning of **wretched**.

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- b. What do you think **wretched** means?

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- c. Look up **wretched** in the dictionary, and write the definition.

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*continued*



**Make Sense of Words** *continued*

- d. *Synonyms* are words that have the same, or nearly the same, meaning. Think of synonyms of **wretched** that Anna could also use to describe Caleb. Write them below.

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2. In paragraph 33, find the word **feisty**. **Feisty** is also an adjective. It is used by Papa to describe his horse, Jack.

- a. Look up **feisty** in the dictionary. Write the definition below.

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- b. Draw a picture of Jack being **feisty**.

*My picture of Jack*



Now look back at any words that you circled in the story. Could you use any of these techniques to figure out what those words mean?



## Read with Understanding

You have read Chapter 1 of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* and paid attention to the details. You have combined those details with information that you already know. Read the following four sentences. Draw a *conclusion* about what will be in Chapter 2 of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*.

- ① Anna's father will hire someone to help him with the farmwork.
- ② Anna's family will write back to Sarah.
- ③ Caleb will go to school to learn some songs.
- ④ Anna and Caleb will get a new dog.





## Understand by Seeing It

You have been focusing on *inferences* in this lesson. Remember that an inference is an educated guess. You take details from a story and add them to what you already know to make an inference. Look below at the inference diagram for what you know about Sarah so far from her letter.

What the author says about Sarah

- Sarah is from Maine.
- Sarah is willing to travel.
- Sarah can work hard.
- Sarah has a cat.

What I already know

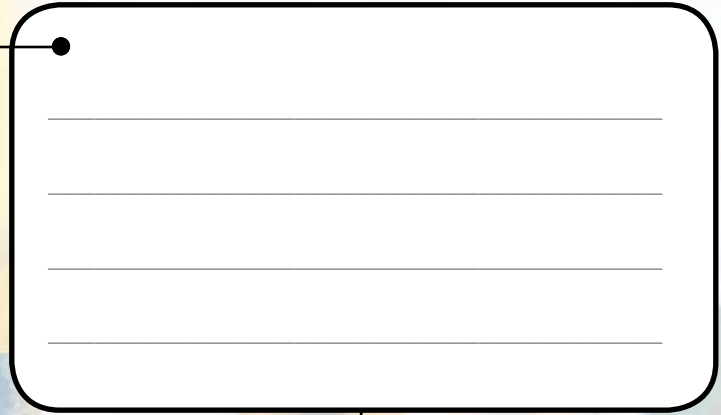
- Maine is on the ocean.
- People who are willing to travel are adventurous.
- People who are hard workers are responsible.
- Pet owners are caring people.

What I can infer about Sarah

- Sarah has probably seen seashells.
- Sarah is probably adventurous.
- Sarah is probably responsible.
- Sarah is probably caring.

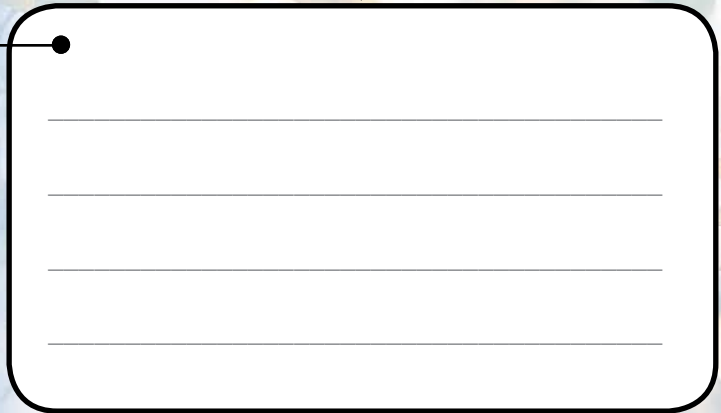
Now make an inference diagram to show what kind of person you think Papa is.

What the author says about Papa



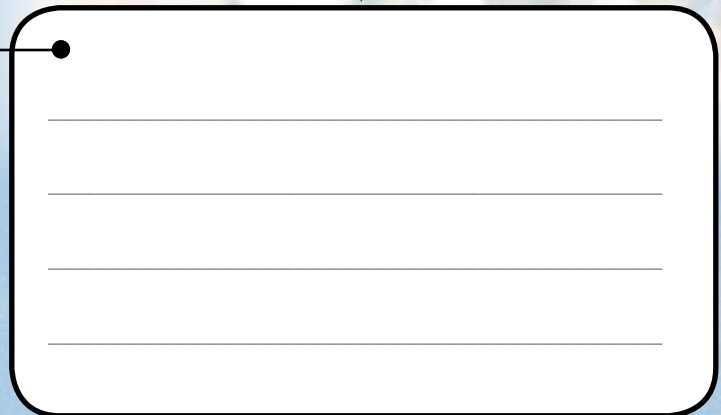
A large rounded rectangular box with a black border, containing five horizontal lines for writing. A small black dot is located at the top left corner of the box, connected to the text 'What the author says about Papa' by a thin black line.

What I already know



A large rounded rectangular box with a black border, containing five horizontal lines for writing. A small black dot is located at the top left corner of the box, connected to the text 'What I already know' by a thin black line. A downward-pointing arrow is positioned above the top edge of this box, pointing from the bottom of the first box.

What I can infer about Papa



A large rounded rectangular box with a black border, containing five horizontal lines for writing. A small black dot is located at the top left corner of the box, connected to the text 'What I can infer about Papa' by a thin black line. A downward-pointing arrow is positioned above the top edge of this box, pointing from the bottom of the second box.

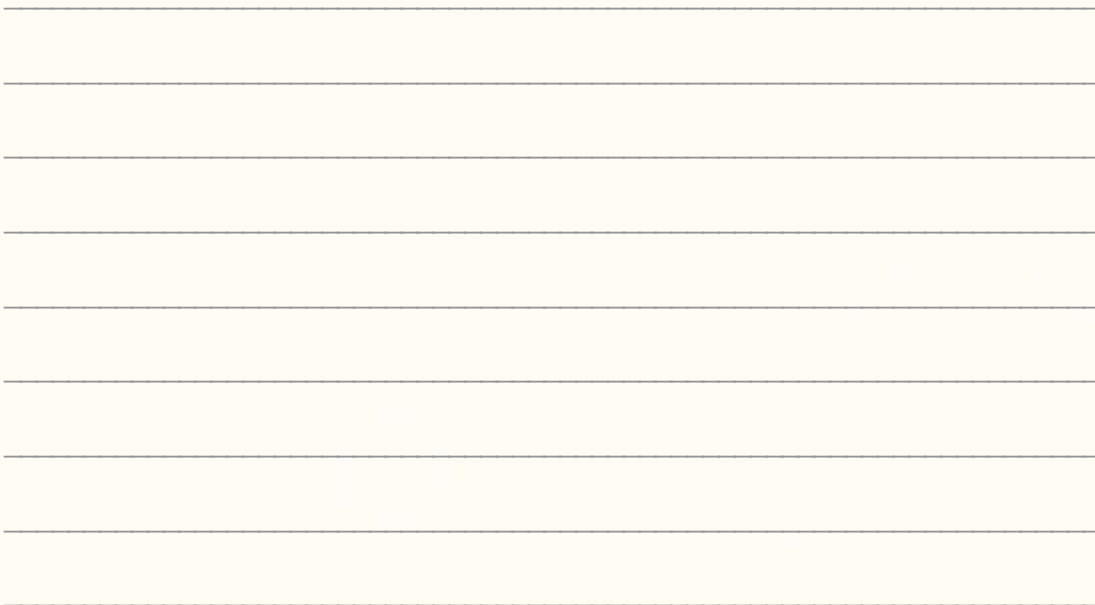
**Write to Learn**

Imagine that you are Caleb. Use the author's descriptions of Caleb and your own knowledge to *infer* some questions that Caleb would have for Sarah. Make a list of questions you think Caleb would ask her. Then organize your list into a letter from Caleb to Sarah.

*My Questions*



Dear Sarah,



Caleb Witting

