

ASF Study Materials for



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Costume Design
Lighting Design

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Charlotte's Web



adapted from
E. B. White
by Joseph
Robinette

Characters in the Play

The Narrator

at the Arable farm:

Mr. Arable

Mrs. Arable

Fern, *their daughter*

Avery, *her older brother*

at the Zuckerman farm:

Homer Zuckerman, *the*

Arables' neighbor

Lurvy, *his farm hand*

Wilbur, *a pig*

Charlotte, *a spider*

Templeton, *a rat*

A Gander and Goose

A Sheep

Mr. Carter, *a reporter*

at the County Fair:

Uncle, *a large pig*

Judges

Spectators

President of the Fair

About These Study Materials

The materials cover:

- the author and adaptor
- themes and issues
- characters and species
- teaching resources
- activities and questions
(often in **green** box)

Adapt them to your students'
needs and level.

*Set designer Peter Hicks'
rendering of the farm vista—four
panels that can open to reveal
Charlotte and her spider web.*

*Cover: Amanda Catania
as Charlotte in ASF's 2009
production of Charlotte's Web*

Welcome to *Charlotte's Web* at ASF!

Long one of America's most beloved children's books, E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), recounts one pig's youth and the unlikely friendships that alter his stereotypical pigpen-to-pork chop life cycle. White offers enough reality of farm life—manure piles, broken fences, economics—to keep us recognizably in our world, but also lets our imagination roam with the conversations of the animals and their creative solutions to problems.

Anthropomorphic animals are a sure sell, and White's unlikely choice of a pig, a spider, and a rat as his central characters precedes the curiosity of Roald Dahl and other modern children's writers about anti-heroes and the overlooked sectors of nature. Kittens, puppies, bears, and rabbits already have a large representation in children's lit, but there are other interesting corners of the ecosphere. Moreover, White put "words on the web" long before web-surfing was the common practice!

Friendship, the power of words, an alternate perspective on human habits and mindsets, the dynamics of self and others—many issues arise in the course of this story, and White weaves a thoughtful tale as well as an entrancing one.

The Farmyard as Setting

Once upon a time, most of America was rural and involved with farming. By the late 19th century that demographic was rapidly shifting toward the urban as Americans flocked to cities. Farms still have the appeal of Americana, however, and the farm life is still essential to America's food production. Living closer to the land than city dwellers, farmers are attuned to nature and nature's ways, even to nature's harshness of weather and survival.

In *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White celebrates farm life—the changing seasons, the natural smells (even the smell of manure), the differences in the ways of the various animals. Lilacs give way to apple blossoms, bloom gives way to mowing and harvest, life gives way to death. In a story that seems to dedicate itself to preserving Wilbur, Charlotte's death keeps us rooted in nature and the natural round, just as the hatching of her spiderlings the next spring is cause for great joy.



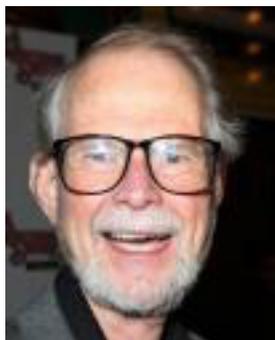
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Charlotte's Web is "the best American children's book of the past two hundred years."

—*Children's Literature Association*



About the Author: E. B. White (1899-1985)

During his life, E. B. [Elwyn Brooks] White was one of America's most famous journalists, writing columns and articles for *The New Yorker* magazine for six decades (1925-1985). His wit, insight, precision, and sagacity were renowned. Now he is increasingly known for his children's fiction, *Stuart Little* (1945), *Charlotte's Web* (1952), and *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970). His most famous book, however, may be his revised edition of Strunk's *The Elements of Style* (1959), still used as a composition handbook across the country. In addition, he published collections of his essays and poems.

Born in New York state, White graduated from Cornell University and worked as a reporter before returning to New York and joining *The New Yorker*. He also wrote for *Harper's* magazine. In 1939 he moved to a farm in Maine, although he continued to write his columns. White's children's fiction, like much work in that genre, was inspired by a child—not his own, but a niece for whom he wrote *Stuart Little*. The premature death of a pig he tried to save on his farm in Maine inspired several essays in *The New Yorker* and may have been the seed of *Charlotte's Web*.

E.B. White on the Genesis of the Novel

"I like animals and my barn is a very pleasant place to be at all hours. One day when I was on my way to feed the pig, I began feeling sorry for the pig because, like most pigs, he was doomed to die. This made me sad. So I started thinking of ways to save a pig's life. I had been watching a big grey spider at her work and was impressed by how clever she was at weaving. Gradually I worked the spider into the story that you know, a story of friendship and salvation on a farm."

"...Although my stories are imaginary, I like to think that there is some truth in them, too—truth about the way people and animals feel and think and act."



E.B White writing, with animal helper

About Dramatist Joseph Robinette

Joseph Robinette is an award-winning adapter of literature for the stage as well as being Emeritus Professor of Theatre at Rowan University in New Jersey. He has written over 50 plays, musicals, and dramatic adaptations, including *Anne of*

Green Gables, *The Lion*, *the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Paper Chase*, and *A Rose for Emily*. Among his many awards and honors, in 1976 he was honored by the Children's Theatre Association of America for his outstanding achievement in writing.

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The Runt: Fairy Tale Elements in the Story

Much children's literature consciously or subconsciously uses fairy-tale patterns as its basis because fairy tales are formative stories of maturation and discovery, the shaping of values and meeting of challenges that are inherent to individual growth.

W. H. Auden briefly describes the elements of the Quest story, which includes many fairy tales. It usually involves:

- a journey to find a precious Object or Person
- a hero with the right qualities to find it
- Tests to reveal the hero
- Guardians of the Object to be overcome
- Helpers who assist the hero

While not every tale may involve a quest or journey, many of these basic elements appear in children's literature.

The Unlikely Protagonist

One of the basic characters in many fairy tales is the overlooked child, be he the ugly duckling or the scrawny third son often called "Dumpling" in German tales. Only when they grow up or are tested do these characters reveal their inner worth and abilities. Wilbur, the runt of the litter, is definitely such a character. At birth he has no inherent value and seems only a liability best eliminated immediately. That is the practical "farm" view of life—keep the best stock and sell or eliminate the rest, be they weak or too costly. Finally it is about pragmatism and profit. Many of the human characters work from this "farm" profit motive for most of the story: Wilbur is a pig, so Wilbur will eventually be dinner.

But to the extent that fairy tales and animal tales reflect human society, to exclude or eliminate those presumed weak or less valuable at first sight on no basis but assumption or prejudice leaves no room for individual potential, growth, or nurture. Thus the first confrontation between Fern and her father is a basic conflict of values: experience dictates that runts cause problems so the runt should be killed versus giving the pig a chance to prove his worth.

Questions:

- How do we want to be treated—by Mr. Arable's view or by Fern's view?
- What would happen if the world only used Mr. Arable's view?
- Are there examples of "runts" or ugly ducklings or unlikely people who went on to be sports heroes, war heroes, presidents, famous benefactors? On what basis should we judge?
- If the animals are the protagonists/heroes, are the humans the Guardians (the ones with the ax) who must be overcome? Who do we identify with in this story and why?

Who's the Hero?

Using Auden's elements to consider White's story as a quest leads us to ask who is the hero of the tale—Wilbur, who survives, or Charlotte, who masterminds his survival. Usually the hero is the active force in the resolution of the tale, and if survival is the key, then perhaps Fern and then Charlotte are the heroines due not only to Wilbur's survival but also to Charlotte's egg sac, the survival of the species. If life is the positive value and slaughter is the negative, Charlotte is a powerful life force. Wilbur is the precious entity she and Fern want to preserve; the egg sac is also a precious entity to Charlotte.

Or are Charlotte and Templeton better considered as Helpers? Both help preserve Wilbur's life, and Wilbur is certainly the focal character. The issue is action—is Wilbur active, or in our contemporary terms, proactive? Does he lead the action, make the decisions?

Questions:

- Who is the protagonist, the hero, of this story—the one it seems to be about, Wilbur, or the more active character, Charlotte?
- Why did E. B. White focus on Charlotte and her web in the title of the book? Would any other title work as well?
- If we identify with Wilbur, who are the Helpers in *our* lives? What are the challenges we can overcome with help?
- Does Wilbur mature emotionally in the story? Are Charlotte and Templeton always more mature than Wilbur? Why or why not?

W. H. Auden, "The Quest Hero," in *Tolkien and His Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (U of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

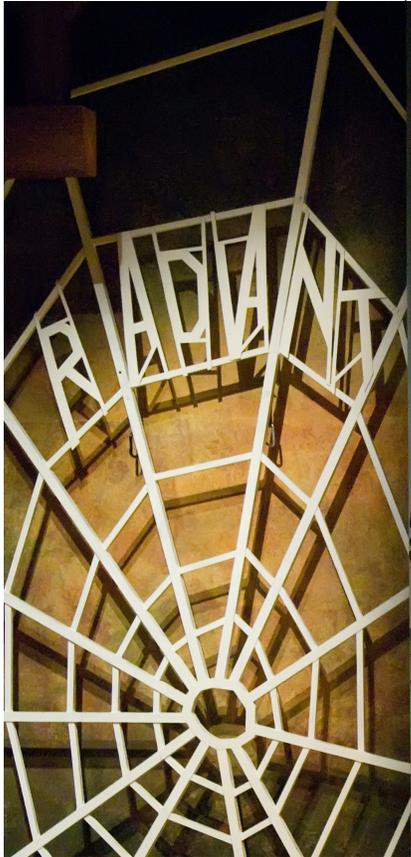


Wilbur—not just any runt

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One of Peter Hicks' designs for ASF's Charlotte's Web in the 2009 production

Great "Web" Sites for Teaching the "Web" Story

- Walden Media in conjunction with the 2006 film
<http://www.walden.com/walden/teach/charlotte/>
Contains a wealth of information, including line drawings for coloring, plus a separate study guide with four-week plan, puzzles, and more
- technospuds projects on Charlotte's Web:
<http://www.technospudprojects.com/Projects/webproject/cwactivities.htm>
Contains links, worksheets, spiderweb template for activities, jigsaw puzzle, newspaper article template, spider info, and more
- abcteach on Charlotte's Web
http://abcteach.com/directory/theme_units/literature/charlottes_web
Contains crosswords, dot-to-dot, unscrambles, word search, work sheet, and writing prompts for elementary students; also more links
- teachnet questions
<http://www.teachnet.com/lesson/langarts/charlotte061799.html>
Contains a list of 52 questions that can be adapted into lesson plans

"What If" Exercises

- We know what Wilbur eats at the Zuckerman farm—leftovers—so we know what the family eats as a result. **WHAT IF** Wilbur got leftovers from your school lunchroom today? What would he be eating? Fill Lurvy's pail with a description. **WHAT IF** Wilbur got your leftovers from your dinner last night? What would he be eating? Fill Lurvy's pail with a description. Do all humans eat the same things? Find out what pigs need to eat to grow up strong and healthy. Check your pails against that list. What do you need to grow up strong and healthy? What should be in *your* pail?
- Compare what Wilbur eats, what Charlotte eats, what Templeton eats (and how much), and what you eat. Are their meals appetizing to you? Would yours be to them? How does different food work to fuel different animals? How much do different animals need to eat (start with birds—the answer is surprising!)? **WHAT IF** you had to buy or have lunch with one of the characters? Which one would you pick?
- **WHAT IF** Charlotte and Wilbur lived in France? How would they say "good morning" [*bon jour*]? What if they lived in Germany [*guten morgen*]? in Mexico [*buenos dias*]? in other lands?
- **WHAT IF** you had to sing Wilbur to sleep? What thoughts and images help someone go to sleep? Compose a lullaby for him, for your pet, for a sibling or friend.
- **WHAT IF** you were a reporter on the *Weekly Chronicle*? What would you say about words in a spider web? **WHAT IF** you had to write a *Weekly Chronicle* column about your own life or events in your classroom? What would you report and how is such a column written?
- **WHAT IF** you lived in Wilbur's barn and had to introduce everyone to the newborn animals? What are they called? The story says newborn pigs are piglets, newborn spiders spiderlings, newborn geese goslings—do all animals in the barn have a special name for their young? How long does it take them to "grow up"? How long will it take you?

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James and the Giant Peach (ASF, 2007): (l to r) Centipede (David Dortch), Spider (Sarah Thornton), Earthworm (Jerry Ferraccio), James (Greg Foro), Ladybug (Alison Frederick), and Grasshopper (Nathan Lange). Notice how the costumes suggest that some of the insects have more arms and legs than humans have.

Critters on Stage in ASF's Children's Theatre

Charlotte's Web combines animals and humans, but animals are the focus. ASF's Children's Theatre production of Roald Dahl's **James and the Giant Peach** had the same combination of people and creatures—insects in this case—a spider, a grasshopper, an earthworm, a ladybug, and a centipede. Though some of these insects might be considered pests, all of them became James' friends, and they helped each other sail and fly the giant peach to New York City.

In 2009 ASF Children's Theatre staged **Winnie the Pooh**, which also combines a human and animals. There was an important piglet in that play, too, but the array of animals went far beyond the barnyard to include a bear and a kangaroo.

Like or Unlike?: How is Piglet like Wilbur? What seem to be piglet qualities in the two stories? How is Wilbur different from Piglet—do they live in similar places? Do they have the same friends? Do they have the same hopes/fears? Do they relate to others the same way? Who in *Winnie the Pooh* is most like Charlotte? Is anyone like Templeton? Which set of animals behaves more like real animals? Why? Both works stress getting along and overcoming differences—how do they do that?

The 2005 ASF Children's Theatre show, **Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse**, had mice as its main characters. We met Lilly and her friends, her school and teacher, and her family, including her new baby brother. Lilly proclaimed herself Queen, but learned several lessons about her emotions in the course of the story.

Like or Unlike?: Are Kevin Henkes' mice at all like E.B. White's rat Templeton?

What is Lilly's self-image? How does she view herself and others? How does Templeton? Is either of them a Helper? How and why? Are babies challenges in each story?



Ears make actors into mice in *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (ASF, 2005): Chester (Tim Gittings) and Lilly (Ebony Witcher)



Like or Unlike?: Are the spiders in the two stories alike? How does the Spider help the group of insects and James? How does Charlotte help Wilbur? What does the Spider become in New York City? What happens to Charlotte? Which spider seems more real?



Ears and tails, plus Piglet's pink clothing, distinguish animal characters in *Winnie the Pooh* (ASF, 2008): (l to r) Piglet (Chris Roe), Pooh (Jarrod Yuskas), Christopher Robin (Greg Spradlin)

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Charlotte's Answer: The Power of Words

Charlotte is able to save Wilbur because she thinks humans are not as smart as bugs, and if she can fool and trap bugs, surely she can fool humans. What does she use to fool a bug? A web. What does she use to fool humans? Words in her web. How can words "fool" us? Do words shape our ideas and perceptions?

Words are indeed powerful. They are supposed to be accurate and precise, but they can also be used to help or hurt others. They carry emotions and shades of meaning (connotations) just as they carry precise information (denotation). We know not to call other people "names" because those names can carry potentially hurtful emotional connotations, such as when Mr. Arable calls Wilbur a "runt." *Runt*

can mean "small," but its meaning also shades into "stunted" or "weakest" or even "contemptible" (the *Random House College Dictionary*). That's a great range of possible meaning as "small" quickly becomes negative. For Mr. Arable, *runt* means troublesome and he wants none of it, so he picks up his ax to destroy the small, contemptible creature.

Later, when Wilbur's life is once again threatened, Charlotte wants to find words that will change Mr. Zuckerman's view of Wilbur from potential dinner to valuable animal

who deserves to live. Charlotte asks the animals for suggestions for her second word, and together they evaluate the effect of the proposed words. "Pig supreme," a lamb suggests, but that sounds like a rich dessert, Charlotte says, and she does not want anyone thinking of food in connection with Wilbur. So when the goose suggests "terrific," that seems very positive. It makes Wilbur seem exceptional, which is what Charlotte wants.

The words Templeton fetches from the dump for Charlotte's third web-word undergo similar scrutiny. He returns with "crunchy," but Charlotte again rejects a word that sounds like it describes food, especially bacon. "We must advertise Wilbur's noble qualities, not his tastiness," she says and asks for another word. She also rejects "pre-shrunk" as being potentially negative in reference to Wilbur.

When Templeton brings a phrase from a box of soap flakes, "with new radiant action," Charlotte does not quite understand the phrase because she does not know soap flakes, so she tests the word for accuracy. She has Wilbur run and jump to see if he is "radiant." She's not convinced he is, since the primary meaning of the word refers to light ("shining, bright") but it also means "bright with joy, hope," which might be relevant. She thinks it's a stretch, but she tries it, and Wilbur also tries to sell the word in his demeanor and action, having spent the previous day trying to be "terrific."

We have a great writer, E.B. White, giving us lessons in word choice and connotation by means of Charlotte, who calls her words a means to "advertise" Wilbur's qualities. Charlotte's web, once a trap, is now a billboard—is there a connection between these functions? Advertisements on television or on billboards can show us how such words work to suggest or lead us as well as to give simple, accurate information. Why is Charlotte so successful?



Peter Hicks' design for Charlotte's web (ASF, 2009)—and a statement about Wilbur and the play

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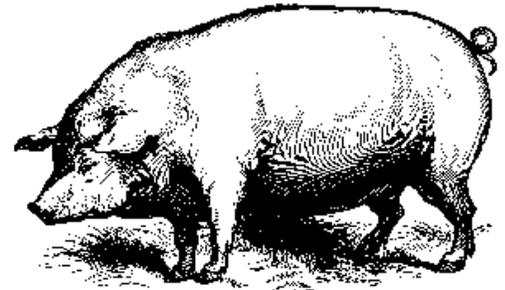
Did You Know...?

- that DeSoto and other Spanish explorers brought the first pigs to North America
- despite the fact that eating pork is prohibited by Judaism and Islam, pork is the most widely eaten meat in the world
- the largest pig every recorded weighed 2552 pounds
- a pig can run a mile in 7 minutes
- the old saying "a pig brings luck" may be part of the genesis of piggy banks (or the fact that a piggy bank can "eat" our "leftover" money and help it grow large)
- pigs have four toes, but only walk on the longer two in the middle
- not all pigs' tails are curly
- pigs are very social
- pigs use their grunts to communicate
- a pig squeal has roughly the same decibel count as a Concorde jet
- the "pigskin" or football is actually made of cow leather
- pigs have served as mine sniffers during wartime
- a pork packer named Uncle Sam Wilson sent hundreds of barrels of pork to troops during the War of 1812. The barrels were labeled "U.S." and soldiers said that stood for "Uncle Sam," who thereafter emblemized the

Ask Wilbur about Pigs: They're Smart!

Wilbur tries hard to become a "terrific" pig, but in many ways pigs are already pretty terrific. They have been domesticated for thousands of years and are considered to be the fourth smartest animal, ranking just behind chimpanzees, dolphins, and elephants. They are apparently way ahead of our domestic dogs and cats in learning tricks and in cleanliness. Yes, cleanliness; pigs are by nature very clean animals.

But Wilbur lives in a manure pile; how can he be considered clean? Because pigs cannot sweat, they need some other way to stay cool. If they have access to a body of water, pigs will swim—they're great swimmers—and stay very clean. But if water is not available, they use mud (or, in Wilbur's case, manure) to cover themselves and release heat; the mud also keeps off insects.



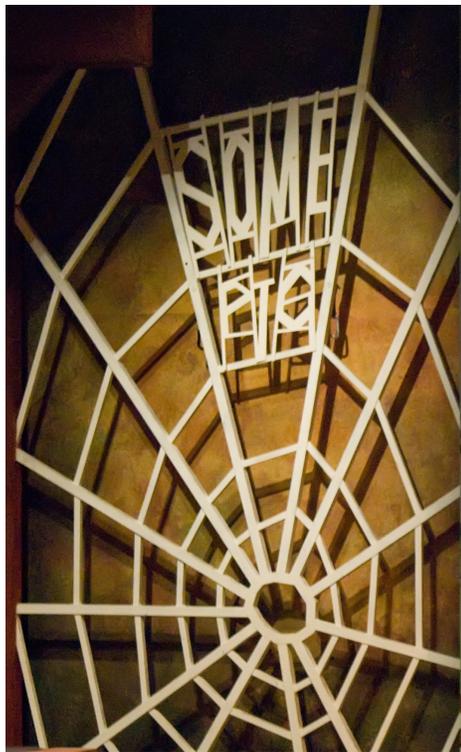
Pigs have a very sensitive sense of smell and are used in Europe to find truffles, a delicacy. All their senses are keen except their sight; they do have a wide range of vision, however, since their eyes are on the sides of their head.

How Smart is Wilbur?

Wilbur may be a pig, but his sensibility seems to stay at piglet stage for most of the story. In White's story he is more dependent than independent; he bewails his problems but does not pursue solutions about his own life. Charlotte and Templeton seem more mature, the sheep more experienced and wary. Wilbur tends to listen to others and do what they say.

Only at the end when he realizes he needs to preserve Charlotte's egg sac does he employ some of the skills the other animals have been using—he assesses what must be done and who has the skills to do it, then negotiates with Templeton to make sure it happens. Here he takes on the role of preserver that Charlotte has always embodied for him, and he does a good job of guarding the egg sac and greeting the hatched spiderlings. In the course of the story, therefore, we watch Wilbur grow up; he gains understanding and the ability to think of and act for others where earlier his only concerns were for himself.

In the stage adaptation Wilbur is more decisive; for instance, when told about his likely death, he instantly tries to escape, and the other animals stop him rather than instigating the action. What other changes to Wilbur's character do you notice in the play? What effect do they have on our view of Wilbur?



Peter Hicks' design for part of Charlotte's spider web (2009)

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a native American dream catcher

Did You Know...?

- Charlotte is not the only spider who has saved a life. Spiders have often acted as saviors in spiritual literature and in the same way that Charlotte can save Wilbur—by weaving a web. For instance, David in the *Bible* needed to hide in a cave and was saved when a spider wove its web over the cave's opening so his enemies thought no one could be inside. The prophet Mohammed was also once saved in much the same way.
- that there really was a Miss Muffet whose father experimented by using spiders as cures, with his daughter Patience as his test case
- spiders are some of the earliest land-dwelling creatures, appearing long before dinosaurs
- that some people in Asia and South America eat spiders as part of their diet, and that many animals also eat spiders

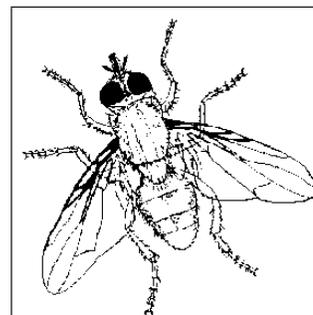
Ask Charlotte about Spiders: They're Skillful

Charlotte gives spiders a good name—and they need it in literature. Spiderman may help a bit, but it will take a lot to overcome the effect of J.K. Rowling's Aragog and his spider colony in Hogwarts' Forbidden Forest in the *Harry Potter* novels and the threat of Shelob in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Spiders the size of King Kong terrorize fantasy literature and many people's nightmares. But Charlotte is the kind of friend we dream of having, a spider with a big heart.

We often hear about the menace of spiders' venomous bites, although actually very few pose any risk to humans, partly because they do not consider humans to be "prey." Recent films have fed arachnophobia (fear of spiders), but spiders can also be portrayed as patient and skillful for their web-weaving. Notice that the dream catchers of the native Americans are shaped like spider webs.

Charlotte gives Wilbur and all of us good information about spiders; they do help control insect population by trapping and devouring insects. Many spiders, like Charlotte, have poor eyesight, but some see well, and jumping spiders even see in color. On the other hand, they are masters of disguise, some able to blend in with twigs, bark, or even a manure pile. Most spiders live only one year, as Charlotte and her children seem to, although some tarantulas can live up to 20 years.

Spiders have a variety of lifestyles and ways of catching food—not all spiders weave webs. Some dig burrows, some trap prey in flowers, and some chase their prey. The most familiar spiders, however, weave webs, a process that takes them 30 to 45 minutes. As Charlotte says, they can produce a variety of silks depending on their need, but their dragline silk is strongest; it has a tensile strength greater than mild steel. In fact, it's stronger than all artificial fibers except kevlar. The dragline is not only the spider's anchor for the web but its means of escape as well.



INSECTS (such as this hornfly)

- have **six** legs
- have **composite** eyes
- have **three** body segments
- have **antennae**
- **chew** their food
- many **can fly**



SPIDERS are not insects because they...

- have **eight** legs
- have **single** eyes
- have **two** body segments
- have **no antennae**
- cannot chew their food; they **drink** it in liquid form
- **cannot fly**

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Did You Know...?

- that a group of rats is called a *mischief* of rats
- that rats can live without water longer than camels
- that a rat can jump or fall over 15 yards without being hurt
- most rats are right-handed
- rats got the reputation for being suspicious and dangerous creatures due to their association with the bubonic plague during the Middle Ages, though scholars now believe it was actually the fleas on the rats that carried the disease (the rats didn't do it!)

Ask Templeton about Rats: Great Teeth!

On the Chinese calendar, one of the years is designated the Year of the Rat, the first of the twelve positions in the Chinese zodiac. The "rat qualities" people born in the Year of the Rat possess are honesty, kindness, ambition, imagination, and intelligence.

Templeton, as a barn rat, is actually part of the species known as Norway rats. They like temperate zones, as opposed to roof or ship rats who like more tropical areas. Norway rats burrow and live in basements; they like to swim but not to climb (a fact that makes Templeton's effort to get the egg sac seem more heroic). Rats live two or three years.

Rats are nocturnal creatures. They have good senses of hearing (in fact, their hearing is ultrasonic), smell, touch, and taste, but not very good vision, plus they are colorblind. Yet their teeth can nibble through cinder blocks and uncured concrete, not to mention wood, bone, brick, and metal.

Rats play together, groom each other, sleep together, and are very social animals. They communicate by using high-frequency sounds, touch, and even body postures.

Like pigs, rats have to find their own way to regulate their body temperature, and rats' tails are part of their regulatory system; they lie on their backs to sweat since they have glands on the bottom of their feet.

Templeton's Enlightened Self-Interest

In the animal society of the barn, Templeton seems to be fairly selfish and interested only in himself. Wilbur also shares some of these traits at times, but in him they seem a product of youth; in Templeton, they seem a product of his me-first character.

"What's in it for me?" might be Templeton's favorite question. He has to profit if he is going to help, and the other animals learn to negotiate or make him offers if they need his skills. Wilbur learns this fact, so that when he needs Templeton to retrieve the egg sac at the fair, he immediately offers to share his food.

Once Templeton makes a deal, however, he keeps his part of the bargain, covering a lot of ground for the cause of words to save Wilbur.

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Loss and Legacy

The story engages the issues of loss and legacy important to students of all ages to have a way to consider and discuss.



General Sherman sequoia,
275 feet tall



Posidonia Oceanica Sea Grass #910-0353 (100,000 years old, Balearic Islands, Spain)

Sea grass near islands off
Spain, 100,000 years old

How Long Do Living Things Live?

Species in the play:

- *a common spider*: adults, perhaps over a year (within which time a female may lay up to 4,000 eggs, 250 per egg sac, since many spiderlings do not survive)
- *a Norway rat*: in the wild, less than a year; domesticated, up to 7 years
- *a pig*: usually 6-10 years; can live up to 15-20 years
- *a sheep*: usually 10-12 years; can live 20+ years
- *a goose*: 10-24 years in the wild; can live 30+ years
- *humans*: 80 years +/- is average; oldest modern/recorded human life is 123 years

Other domestic species:

- *cat*: average is 12-15 years; longest lived on record is 38 years
- *dog*: depends on variety (smaller dogs live longer); longest lived was 29 years
- *cow*: natural life is 18-25 years; usually slaughtered after productive life ends (4-5 years maximum)
- *horse*: oldest recorded horse was 62; usually not so long

Other animals and sea creatures:

- *polar bear*: up to 42 years
- *Asian elephant*: up to 86 years
- *alligator*: oldest over 80 years
- *Greenland shark*: oldest on record over 200 years
- *tortoise*: oldest over 190 years
- *eel*: oldest 155 years
- *whale*: oldest over 200 years

The really old: Plants

- Methuselah, a bristle cone pine tree: 4,845 years old (one even older was cut down in the 1960s)
- Pando, an aspen colony in Utah: 80,000 years
- Norway spruce in Sweden: since the last Ice Age
- General Sherman, a giant sequoia tree in California: is in its 3rd millennium

Note: These life span figures cite the longest-lived specimens of each species, not the average life span except as cited

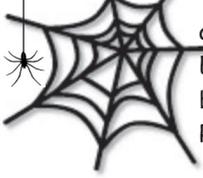


9,550-year-old spruce damaged
by air quality in last 50 years



Asian elephant

Charlotte's Web



adapted from
E. B. White
by Joseph
Robinette

Activity: What Word's in Your Web Today?

The week they see the play, give every student a sheet with a web and let them add one positive word they want to live up to that day, such as:

- prepared
 - curious
 - listening/attentive
 - radiant!
 - helpful
 - sharing
 - _____
- (suggest others)

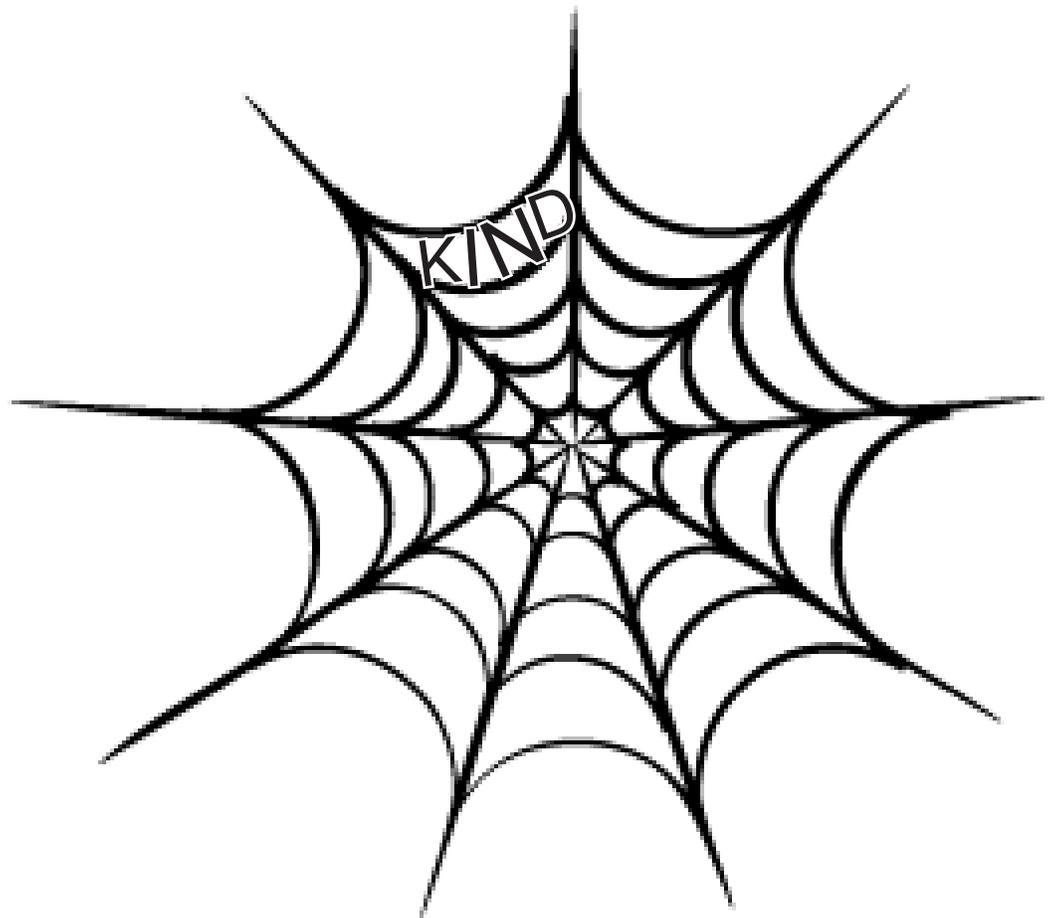
"I think you're beautiful," said Wilbur.

"Well, I am pretty," replied Charlotte. "There's no denying that. Almost all spiders are rather nice-looking."

—*the novel*

"By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle."

—*Charlotte*



Put a Positive Word on Someone Else's Web

Let a small group play Charlotte and Templeton for each other's Wilbur and decide a positive word to go in each other's web each day:

- some _____

(fill in a noun): runner, climber, listener, reader, writer, artist, friend, helper, _____?

- good work, well done, way to go

What other words praise someone's effort and gives them something to strive for? Charlotte uses *terrific* and *radiant*. What specific, positive words could you use?

Keep it going after they see the play!

Charlotte's Web



adapted from
E. B. White
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Kindness Resources

- <http://www.tolerance.org/speaking-kindness>
- <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/lesson-plans-pilot-program>
- <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-kindness-the-kind-campaign-lisa-dabbs>
- Children's Kindness Network @ <http://ckn-usa.org>
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/23/teaching-kindness-in-school_n_6926870.html

Character Responses

- How does Wilbur react to life and challenges? How does Templeton? How does Charlotte? Do we all share some of Wilbur's reactions, Templeton's, Charlotte's? What is the value of each response?

Activities for *Charlotte's Web*

Using Imagination: Becoming a Creature

- Actors will perform all the parts in the play—human, animal, and insect. After all, if we used a real spider, you wouldn't be able to see it.

How can a person act like a pig? How does a pig move? How does a pig look at things or smell things? How does a pig sound? Does a pig sit? Find out some things about pigs or watch some pigs online and then imagine yourself a pig.

How can a person act like a spider? We don't have enough legs! How would we move if we had 8 legs? How can you pretend to have 8 legs? How could you pretend to have a web and walk its ribs? Could you spin one? Could it be on the floor? Find out some things about spiders or watch some spiders online and then imagine yourself a spider.

How can a person act like a rat?

How does a rat move? How does a rat look at things or approach things? Does a rat make sounds? Find out some things about rats or watch them online and then imagine yourself a rat. What about a sheep or a goose? Can you imagine yourself one of those? Fill your imaginary barnyard!

Using Kindness

- In the barnyard and barn, the animals care about each other and give each other advice. How important is it that they help each other? What does each one have to offer? Can any one save Wilbur alone? What can you do to help or care about someone or something in your world?

Using Art

Before you see the play:

- draw the barn scene—who is there?
- draw Charlotte talking to Wilbur or weaving a word about him in her web

After you see the play:

- draw your favorite moment in the play
- draw your favorite character
- draw Wilbur's best moment in the play

Using Your Brain

- The other animals know things that Wilbur hasn't learned yet. After seeing the play, discuss what Wilbur learned from each character and how he changed or grew up during the action.
- How much does Fern do to help Wilbur? Is she an important Helper? Are you an important Helper to an animal? How?

Using "Animal Years"

- If one year for a cat is equivalent to six human years and one year for a dog is equivalent to seven human years, how old are you in "cat years"? in "dog years"?

Draw yourself in "cat years" or "dog years." Are you a kitten or a puppy?

- We measure the age of cats and dogs in human years. How old is a cat or dog you know in real "cat years" or "dog years" (that is, on a maturity scale compared to humans?)



- Once you have become a pig or a spider or a rat, **act out a scene** from *Charlotte's Web* with others using their imaginations to be creatures. Talk to each other as barnyard creatures, not as classmates.

Charlotte's Web



adapted from
E. B. White
by Joseph
Robinette



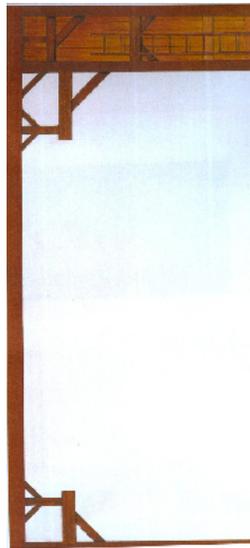
A great environment for a
"terrific" pig

Set Design for *Charlotte's Web*

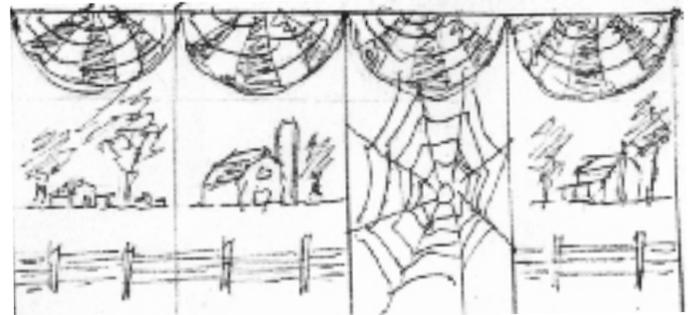
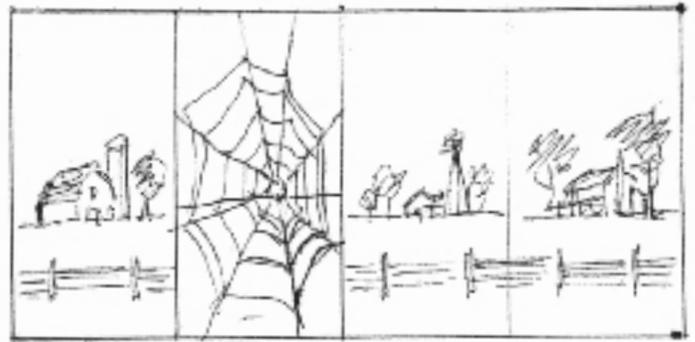
In considering the design for the play, set designer Peter Hicks says, "*Charlotte's Web* is a story written for children, but it is not at all childish. There is a sophistication in both the writing and the subject matter that sets it apart from other children's literature. I'm sure this is one of the reasons it has stood the test of time and has meant so much to so many. I did not approach the design as if I were doing the set for a 'kiddie show.' The script does not condescend to the audience, so neither should the visual elements."

As a result, Hicks designed a vista of a farm with a proscenium "arch" of a barn—as if looking out a large barn door, as Wilbur so often does. Moreover, Charlotte's web is in the corner of the barn door, and to facilitate seeing and not seeing the web, Hicks designed the vista on four movable panels, so that any panel can open to reveal the web.

On stage, bales of hay and fence pieces will complete the barnyard setting.



above) Peter Hicks' sketch for the barn door opening that serves as proscenium arch and gives us the sense of being in the barn with the animals looking out at the farm.



Set designer Peter Hicks' sketches for the vista's movable panels with spider web insert (top) and for the Fair scenes with banners (bottom). On stage, the web will appear in an end position.

Charlotte's Web



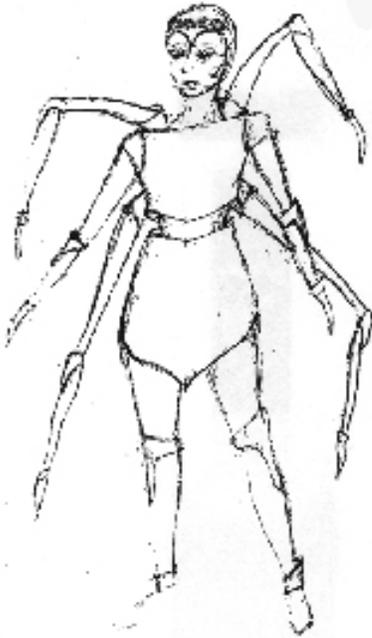
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Costume Design for ASF's *Charlotte's Web*

Charlotte's Web is a period piece from the 1950s, says director Nancy Rominger, and the costume and set designers were asked to use that period, to find its truth for the show, like a Norman Rockwell painting. In addition, the seasonal changes that E.B. White celebrates in the book are reflected in the the humans' costume colors, as Fern goes from pastel colors to bright to autumnal, a natural cycle.

As you can see by comparing Jennifer Ables' costume designs for *Charlotte's Web* with other ASF designs for children's shows involving animal characters, there are many ways of representing an animal. Sometimes only one element, such as ears, are added, and the animals are essentially human. Other designs, such as this one, go further in adapting the human form to animal characterization. Here the particular traits of the animal are emphasized and stylized.

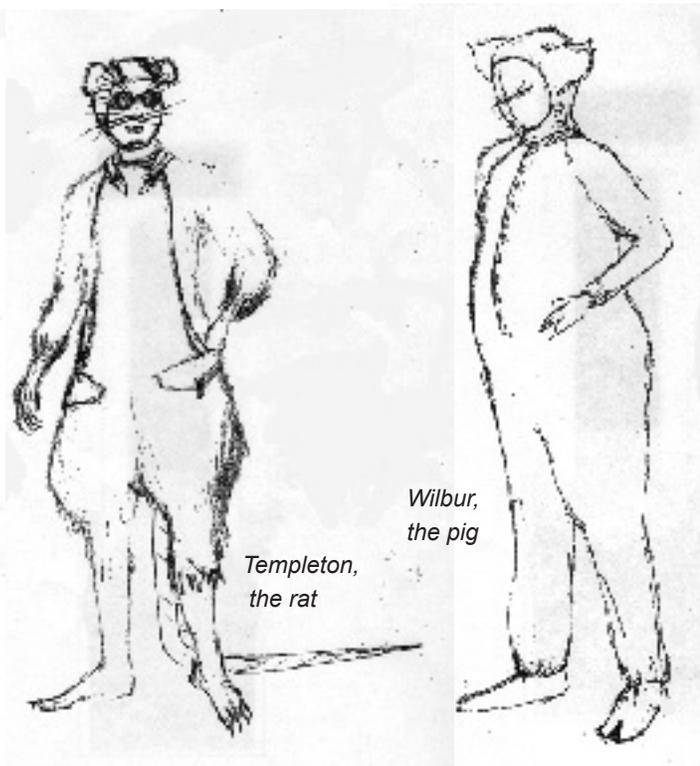
Charlotte definitely needs eight legs, and the human body provides four appendages; four others attach to her back to complete the transformation. The other animals' costumes use shape and texture to suggest the particular character. Wilbur, for instance, wears footed pajamas and has a curly tail attached to the flap in the back. The Goose's downy coat is suggested by row after row of eyelet ruffles. Templeton's overalls have scruffy edges, suiting his scavenger nature. Caps and hats provide places to attach ears, and footwear can simulate animal feet.



Jennifer Ables' design for Charlotte



Goose



Templeton,
the rat

Wilbur,
the pig



Fern

Charlotte's Web



adapted from
E. B. White
by Joseph
Robinette



Photo: Alamy

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