

# James and the Giant Peach

## Study Guide

### Dear Teacher:

We have created the following study guide to help make your students' theater experience with *James and the Giant Peach* as meaningful as possible. For many, it will be their first time viewing a live theatrical production. We have learned that when teachers discuss the play with their students before and after the production, the experience is more meaningful and long-lasting. Our study guide provides pre and post performance discussion topics, as well as related activity sheets. These are just suggestions... Please feel free to create your own activities and areas for discussion. We hope you and your class enjoy the show!

### About the Author

Roald Dahl (1916 – 1990) was born in Wales to Norwegian parents. In 1939, at the age of 23, he joined the British Royal Air Force and flew fighter biplanes in Africa, and later, Greece. In 1942 he was transferred to the United States, and his first essay was published in *The New Yorker*. For the first fifteen years of his writing career, he concentrated mostly on short stories for adults (with the exception of *The Gremlins*, a 1943 picture book adaptation of Dahl's script written for Walt Disney). It was not until he was a father that he attained his first notable success as an author of children's literature with *James and the Giant Peach*, published in the United States in 1961, and in England in 1969. Other works include *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1986), and *Matilda* (1988). Upon his death in 1990 of a rare blood disorder, *The Independent* wrote that "Roald Dahl is, without question, the most successful children's book author in the world."

### The Story

James, an orphan, lives with his cruel aunts at the top of a steep hill in a rickety house with a barren peach tree in the garden. One day a mysterious man gives James a bag of crocodile tongues – if used properly, amazing, wonderful things will happen to James and he will never be sad or lonely again. James accidentally drops the bag at the roots of the old tree, and the tongues magically burrow into the ground. Soon, a peach starts to grow at the top of the tree, and continues to grow and grow until it becomes larger than the house. One night James crawls inside the peach and reaches the pit, where he meets a gargantuan Old-Green-Grasshopper, a tremendous Ladybird, an enormous Spider, and other huge insects. When the colossal Centipede chews through the stem of the peach, it detaches from the tree, and tumbles down the hill, across the countryside, and into the ocean – and the journey begins! Through shark-infested waters, into the seagull-filled sky, and across the perilous land of the Cloud Men, James and his new friends work together to overcome incredible odds and have the adventure of a lifetime!

## The Characters

There are five actors in this production, who play all the roles in *James and the Giant Peach*. Tell your students to be on the lookout for the same actors playing multiple roles as follows:

- Actor 1: James/Ship Captain
  - Actor 2: James's Mother/Aunt Sponge/Ladybird/First Ship Officer
  - Actor 3: James's Father/Aunt Spiker/Centipede
  - Actor 4: Narrator/Old-Green-Grasshopper
  - Actor 5: Little Old Man/Miss Spider/Second Ship Officer
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## Pre-Performance Discussion

1. Read Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* with your students. Much of the dialogue (and many of the songs' lyrics) are lifted directly from Dahl's writing, and children will enjoy hearing the familiar words and expressions. You may also wish to watch the 1996 animated film of the story (the film is rated PG and may be too frightening for very young or sensitive children).
  2. Explain that they will see a play with songs based on this book. What expectations do they have of a live show? For example, how do they think scenes involving the peach's travels across the countryside will be staged? Or the ascent into the sky and the encounters with the Cloud Men? What do they think the costumes for the various insects will look like?
  3. In our show, there are fewer actors than characters. In fact, "James" is the only actor who plays only one role. Tell your students to keep their eyes peeled to see if they can identify which roles each actor plays.
  4. Review proper theatre etiquette with your class. They may be seeing our show as part of a class trip, with many other schools attending. They should carefully follow their teacher's or group leader's directions. During the show, they should be quiet, so that they do not disturb other audience members (and the actors!) during the performance. However, actors love cheers and applause, especially at the end of songs and when the show is over. This is a great way to thank actors for all their hard work in performing this show for you!
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## Post-Performance Discussion

1. As soon as possible after the performance, engage your class in discussion about the show. Who were their favorite characters and why? Which were their favorite moments in the play? Compare and contrast the book and live performance, as well as other adaptations of the story they may have seen. Did the show meet their expectations? Why or why not?
2. The mysterious little man gives James explicit instructions on how to use the magic crystals, but James accidentally drops them, and they burrow into the ground, eventually affecting the insects and the peach. What do your students think would have happened if James had been able to follow these directions? Remember, the old man told James to put them in a large jug of water, add ten of his own hairs, and drink it all down. How might have these additional directives have affected the outcome? Discuss what happens when you skip an ingredient in a recipe – how would sugar-less cookies turn out? Or spaghetti sauce without spices? Or lasagna without cheese? To further illustrate the importance of following directions, you may wish to play "Mother May I" or "Simon Says" with your young students.

3. James is initially frightened of the large insects, but he soon realizes that they are friendly, and most of them are very useful to people. Review the creatures featured in *James and the Giant Peach*, and their duties:

Grasshopper an elderly insect who is also an acclaimed musician

Miss Spider catches pests in her web

Ladybird eats pests in farms and gardens

Can your students think of any other insects that are useful to humans?

Your students may be surprised to learn that by listening to crickets, they can estimate the temperature in degrees Fahrenheit. They can count the number of cricket chirps they hear in 15 seconds and add 40 to this number. For example, if they hear 30 chirps in 15 seconds, the temperature is approximately 70 degrees.

4. *James and the Giant Peach* takes a few liberties with animal habits. In particular, it is noted that his parents were eaten by a rhinoceros. In fact, rhinos are **herbivores**: they eat only plant life – they would not have eaten human beings. Also, the insects are afraid that the sharks would eat the peach while it was floating in the ocean – sharks are actually **carnivores**: they eat only meat, and would not have eaten a peach (in addition, the position of their mouth in relation to their snout would forbid them from biting the rounded peach). With your class, brainstorm a list of animals and discuss whether they are herbivores or carnivores. Are some animals **omnivores**: do they eat both plants and animals? You may wish to assign a different animal to each member of your class to do research on.

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## Cross-Curriculum Activities

### Geography

1. The Peach's Travels. James travels from England to New York City in the United States in this story. On a globe, locate England, and then find New York City. Trace James's path from Britain to the United States – what body of water did the peach cross over? With your students, plan other voyages for the peach – from England to Germany, Germany to India, India to China, China to Australia, etc. What countries, continents, and bodies of water are between the originating location and the final destination? Have your students describe the view from overhead – do they see deserts? Rain forests? Any physical landmarks like the Great Wall of China?

### Math

1. A Centi-what??? (introducing the metric system) The Centipede brags that he has one hundred legs (even though centipedes really only have 42). Your students may have heard of the prefix “centi” – as in “centimeter,” which is 1/100 of a meter.

Your students' rulers are likely marked with feet/inches, as well as centimeters/millimeters. Have them measure classroom objects in feet/inches. And then in centimeters/millimeters – they should note both sets of measurements. After a while, they may be able to estimate how many centimeters something is, based on its measurement in inches, and vice versa.

## Language Arts

1. **Postcards from a Peach.** Have your students pretend that they are riding on top of the peach with James and his friends. Tell them to write a letter to their family or best friends about their experiences. They should describe how they felt when they met the creatures, the sensation of bobbing in the sea or flying through the sky. You may wish to have them create a postcard, with an illustration of their favorite scene from the play on the back. On the front they should be sure to use proper letter-writing skills (salutation, address format, etc.)
2. **Bugs in a Peach Tree.** Later in this study guide you'll find a crossword puzzle featuring the various bugs that rode inside the peach, as well as several other creepy-crawlies. Distribute this to your students. If you wish, you can assign each student, or group of students, a different creature to do research on – students should report on the duties of these bugs, as well as their physical characteristics as well as other interesting facts about them.
3. **The five senses.** When James crawls inside the peach, he uses his five senses to describe the experience: the silence of the night outside, the pink-orange massiveness of the peach itself, the soft mouse-like fuzz on the outside and the stickiness of the inside, the sweet smell of the juice, and the luscious taste of it. Review the five senses: sound, sight, touch, smell and taste. Have your students divide a piece of paper into five sections, one for each sense. Assign them an object to describe according to each of the five senses, using adjectives. Food would probably work best – for sound they can describe the sensation of unwrapping it, or the sound that happens when they bite into it. Students should be as descriptive as they can – how would they describe a chocolate candy to someone who's never experienced it?

## Science

1. **Will it float? (The Scientific Method)** James and his friends are surprised (and relieved) to discover that the peach floats in the Atlantic Ocean. You can introduce your class to the scientific method by testing whether other objects sink or float.

The seven parts of the scientific method, as applied to a pencil, are as follows:

Observation:	Examine the pencil
Question:	Will the pencil float?
Hypothesis (Educated guess):	I think the pencil will sink.
Experiment:	Drop the pencil in a bucket of water.
Analysis:	Observe whether the pencil sank or floated.
Conclusion:	The pencil sank.

Your students can keep a chart of various classroom objects, writing down the object's name, the hypothesis, and the decision.

## **Resources**

### Websites:

Going Bug-gy: Facts and Fun about Insects (teacher and student activities)  
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bugs/>

Roald Dahl Fans: Teacher Ideas (more ideas on using “James and the Giant Peach” and other Roald Dahl books in the classroom)  
<http://www.roalddahlfans.com/teachers.php#14>

E-Mints Educational Center (still more teacher ideas)  
<http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00001224.shtml>

Roald Dahl: The Official Website (additional information on Roald Dahl and his books, as well as online games)  
<http://www.roalddahl.com/>

Introduction to the Scientific Method  
[http://teacher.pas.rochester.edu/phy\\_labs/appendix/appendix.html](http://teacher.pas.rochester.edu/phy_labs/appendix/appendix.html)

The Science Spot: Science Classroom (Introducing the Metric System)  
<http://sciencespot.net/Pages/classmetric.html>

Michigan Peach Sponsors (What Will Happen If I Plant a Peach Pit?)  
<http://www.michiganpeach.org/facts/pit.html>

### Other books by Roald Dahl:

For older students (Grades 3-6)

The BFG  
Boy: Tales of Childhood  
Charlie & the Chocolate Factory  
Charlie & the Great Glass Elevator  
Danny the Champion of the World  
George's Marvelous Medicine  
Going Solo  
Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes  
Matilda  
The Twits  
The Witches  
The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar  
and Six More

For younger students (Grades 1-4)

Dirty Beasts  
The Enormous Crocodile  
Esio Trot  
Fantastic Mr. Fox  
The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me  
The Magic Finger  
The Minpins  
The Vicar of Nibbleswicke

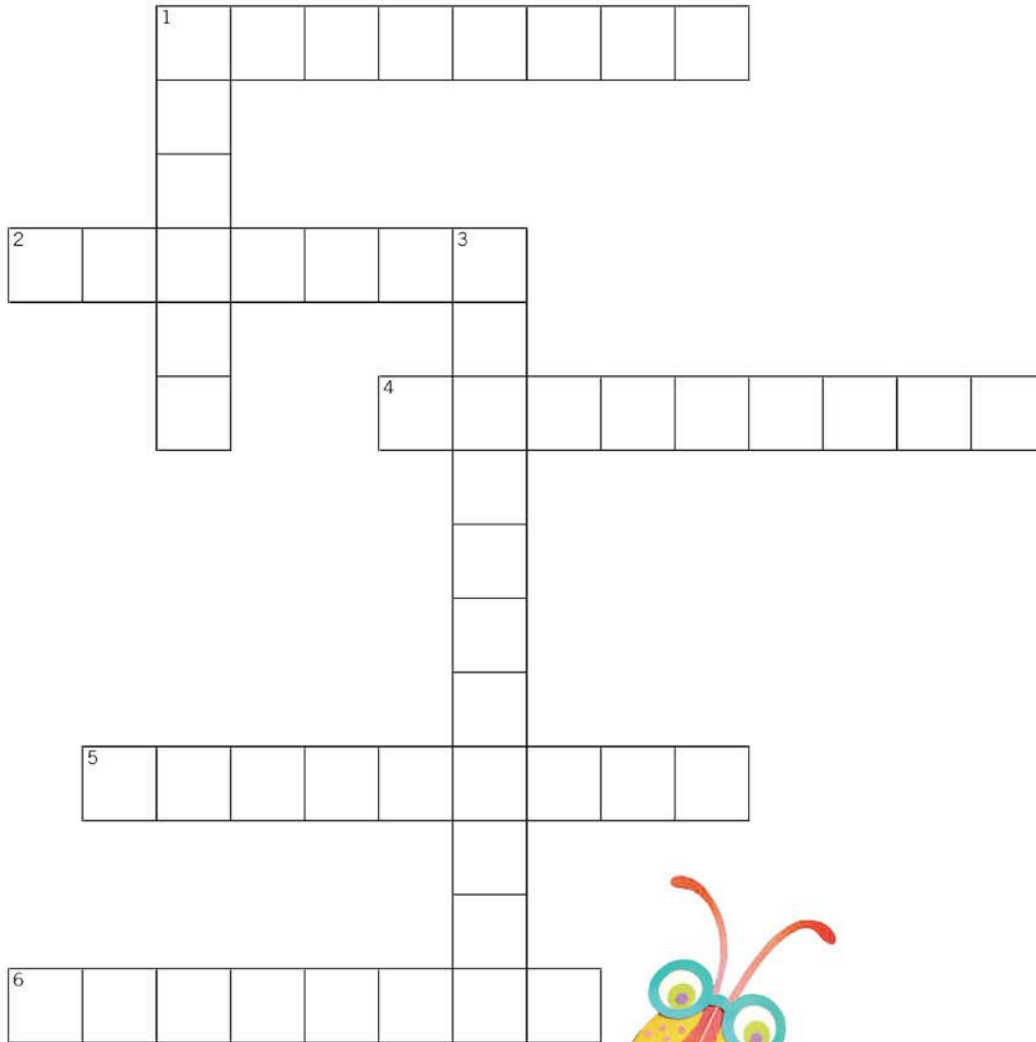
### Films:

You may wish to share several other films with your class that explore the insect world and the relationship between humans and insects, including:

The Ant Bully  
Antz  
Bee Movie  
A Bug's Life  
Honey We Shrunk the Kids  
James and the Giant Peach

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How well do you remember the insect characters in the book *James & the Giant Peach*?  
First, complete the riddles to the right. Using these clues, you can complete the crossword puzzle below.



ACROSS:

1. A tiny little worm is she,  
Well-mannered and well-bred.  
And if you ask her nicely,  
She'll spin her silky thread.  
She is a \_\_\_\_\_

2. A scarlet shell is on her back,  
With several big black spots.  
Is it true that you can tell her age  
By counting all her dots?  
She is a \_\_\_\_\_

4. A very wiggly fellow,  
He's fat and pink and blind.  
But which end is the front of him,  
And which is his behind?  
He is a \_\_\_\_\_

5. He says he has a hundred legs.  
We know that isn't true.  
If you catch him, you can count them:  
He has only forty-two.  
He is a \_\_\_\_\_

6. She has no wings to give her flight,  
And yet she still gets by.  
She is not a worm at all,  
But a lady firefly.  
She is a \_\_\_\_\_

DOWN:

1. You must never kill this creature  
Or any of her ilk.  
She catches lots of nasty pests  
Within her web of silk.  
She is a \_\_\_\_\_

3. An insect and a violinist,  
He pulls out all the stops.  
And when he isn't playing,  
He hops and hops and hops.  
He is a \_\_\_\_\_

