

# Once Upon a Life Science Book

12 Interdisciplinary  
Activities to Create  
Confident Readers





# Once Upon a Life Science Book

## 12 Interdisciplinary Activities to Create Confident Readers

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	vii
Chapter 1: Getting Started .....	1
Chapter 2: The Reading Strategies .....	9
Chapter 3: How Do You Know That? Helping Students With Claims and Evidence .....	21
Chapter 4: A-Maze-ing Worms .....	27
Topics: scientific method, controlling variables	
Reading Strategies: comprehension coding, reading in groups	
Chapter 5: Cells R Us .....	41
Topics: plant, animal, and bacteria cells; cell parts; prokaryotes and eukaryotes	
Reading Strategy: using context clues to find the meaning of new words	
Chapter 6: Healing Powers .....	53
Topics: cell cycle, mitosis	
Reading Strategy: previewing diagrams and illustrations	
Chapter 7: No Bones About It .....	61
Topics: characteristics of arthropods, invertebrates, skeletal and muscular systems	
Reading Strategy: identifying text signals for examples and lists	
Chapter 8: The Case of the Tree Hit Man .....	71
Topics: plant structure and function (roots, stems, and leaves), vascular tissue in plants (xylem and phloem)	
Reading Strategy: previewing diagrams and illustrations	
Chapter 9: A Gene for Drunkenness? .....	81
Topics: genetics, gene and environment interactions, human disease	
Reading Strategy: chunking	

# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 10: Oh! I Gotta Pee!</b> .....	<b>93</b>
Topics: urinary system, homeostasis	
Reading Strategy: pause, retell, and compare	
<b>Chapter 11: A Crisis of Crabs</b> .....	<b>103</b>
Topics: food chains and webs, biotic and abiotic factors, interconnections in ecology	
Reading Strategy: pause, retell, and compare	
<b>Chapter 12: The Outsiders</b> .....	<b>113</b>
Topics: classification, tentative nature of science, protists	
Reading Strategy: chunking	
<b>Chapter 13: Some Like It Hot</b> .....	<b>123</b>
Topics: adaptation, natural selection, penguins	
Reading Strategy: identifying text signals for comparisons and contrasts	
<b>Chapter 14: Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly</b> .....	<b>135</b>
Topics: bacteria structure, bacteria diversity, bacteria culturing	
Reading Strategy: using context clues to find the meaning of new words	
<b>Chapter 15: Hunting the Ancient Whales</b> .....	<b>145</b>
Topics: macroevolution, evidence for evolution, characteristics of mammals	
Reading Strategy: recognizing and reading scientific names	
<b>Index</b> .....	<b>157</b>
<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>161</b>

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## Chapter 8

# The Case of the Tree Hit Man



### Topics

- Plant structure and function (roots, stems, and leaves)
- Vascular tissue in plants (xylem and phloem)

### NSES Content Standards (For Grades 5–8, Life Science)

- Living systems at all levels of organization demonstrate the complementary nature of structure and function. Important levels of organization for structure and function include cells, organs, tissues, organ systems, whole organisms, and ecosystems.
- Specialized cells perform specialized functions in multicellular organisms. Groups of specialized cells cooperate to form a tissue, such as a muscle. Different tissues are in turn grouped together to form larger functional units, called organs. Each type of cell, tissue, and organ has a distinct structure and set of functions that serve the organism as a whole. (NRC 1996, p. 156)

# The Case of the Tree Hit Man

## Reading Strategy

Previewing diagrams and illustrations

## Background

The topic of plants does not excite many middle school students. Learning about the inner workings of xylem and phloem feels far removed from any practical applications in their lives. This chapter uses a (true life!) crime scenario to frame the study of water and sugar movement in plants.

First, students will do a few basic explorations to make sure that they have an underlying understanding of water and sugar movement in plants. Although it may seem like students should know these basic ideas, many students have never observed plants closely and are confused by these topics. However, once students observe water movement in a plant, they will be ready to learn about xylem and phloem.

## Materials

### **SAFETY ALERT!**

- The teacher will demonstrate safe procedures for using a knife.
- Point and push knife away from your body.
- Never use excess force when working with a knife.
- Wipe up any water on the floor when using a spray bottle, as it can be a slip or fall hazard.

- 4 small plants per class, such as geraniums, bean seedlings, pansies, or young radishes
- Dried potting soil (see Teaching Note on p. 73)
- Plastic wrap or plastic bags (or other materials requested by students)
- Watering can or spray bottle
- Celery stalks, preferably with leaves attached
- Food coloring
- Plastic cups (1 per group, plus 4 per class to use as pots for the mini-experiment)
- Knives to trim the celery (Note: Some schools do not allow students to use knives. If this is the case, the teacher should prepare the celery in advance.)
- Indirectly vented chemical splash goggles, aprons, vinyl gloves

## Student Pages

- “The Case of the Tree Hit Man”
- Plant Police Academy
- Structure and Function in Plants

## Exploration/Pre-Reading

In this exploration, students will begin with a mini-experiment to decide if roots or leaves absorb water for plants. Then they will observe the movement of water through a celery stem and compare how water and sugar move through a plant. These explorations require several days to complete, so you will need to plan ahead.

Begin by telling students that a terrible crime has occurred. Over the next few days, they will be participating in Plant Police Academy to learn more about it. As their first task, students need to design an experiment that will show which part of the plant absorbs water. Show students the four



Topic: What Are the Parts of a Plant?

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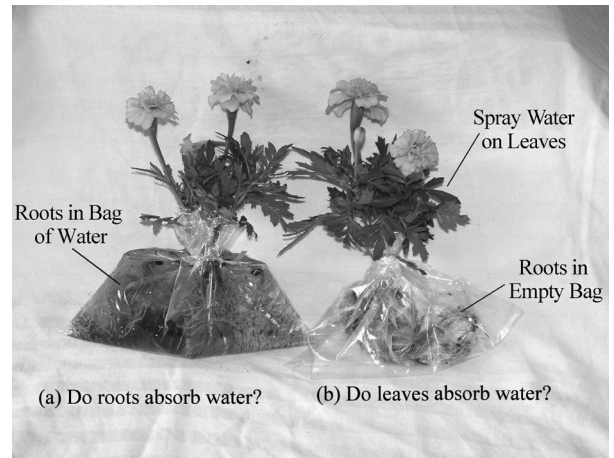
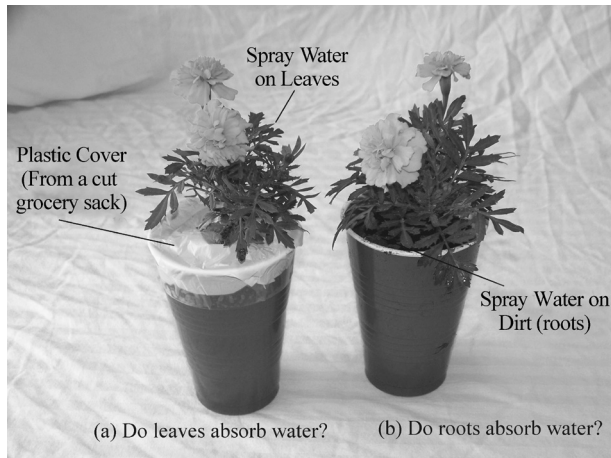
Code: LSB012

Topic: Plant Growth

Go to: [www.scilinks.org](http://www.scilinks.org)

Code: LSB013

Two Possible Designs for the Mini-Experiment



plants for their class, and ask the class to design an experiment that would let them show whether leaves or roots absorb the water. After a little brainstorming, most classes will come up with something similar to one of the two experimental designs shown in the figure above. (Note that each picture shows only one plant in each condition; your classes will have two plants in each group.)

Give students the handout Plant Police Academy, and have them draw the class's experimental design. Ask, "What happens to a plant when it runs out of water?" and make sure students understand that the plant will

### TEACHING NOTE

If you purchase mature plants that have been well watered at the nursery, it can take up to three weeks for the plant with covered roots to wilt. You can shorten the time by using potting soil that has been thoroughly dried before planting. Place the soil on a cookie sheet and bake it at 250 degrees for two to four hours to remove the water. When you are ready to start the experiment, gently loosen the existing soil from the roots of your plants, rinse the remaining soil away with water, and then plant them in the dry soil. The plant with covered roots should then wilt in just two to four days.

# The Case of the Tree Hit Man

wilt. They should then be able to fill in the prediction section for each experimental group.

The second activity, allowing celery to soak up colored water, may be familiar to students. This version, though, asks them to pay careful attention to where the color change takes place. The process requires at least one hour but works best when allowed to sit overnight.

**Introduce the Reading.** Tell students that they are now ready to read and investigate the crime. Give out the “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” and lead students to study the diagrams as described in the reading strategy section below.

## ***Reading Strategy: Previewing Diagrams and Illustrations***

Note that this strategy was first introduced in Chapter 6. If you have not used Chapter 6 with your class, tell students that in some books that they read, the pictures are extras. In science writing, however, the pictures and diagrams often carry a lot of important information. Looking at the pictures and making predictions about what they mean before reading can help make the text easier to understand.

If you have already introduced this strategy, remind students about the importance of pictures in science text. Then tell them that they are going to practice three questions that they can use to help them preview diagrams and illustrations.

Place students into their reading groups, and direct them to look at Figure 1 (p. 76). The Leaders should describe what they see in the diagram, without worrying about whether they know the correct terms. Then the Flag Flyers should predict what the diagram illustrates. Finally, the Interpreters should come up with at least one question about the diagram that might be answered in the text. Have one group share its responses with the class.

Continue to Figure 2 (p. 77), but this time the Interpreter should describe the diagram, the Leader should make the prediction, and the Flag Flyer should come up with a question. Continue this pattern until the students have discussed each diagram. Then have them proceed to reading the text as usual.

## **Journal Questions**

When you looked at the diagrams before reading, your group discussed three questions:

- What do you see in the diagram?
- What might the diagram be illustrating?
- What question do you think the text will answer about the diagram?

Which of these three questions was most helpful for understanding the text? Why?

## Application/Post-Reading

- Graphic Organizer: Structure and Function in Plants
- Pulling It Together in Writing: Give students the following prompt:  
*The town of Magnolia Springs has decided to prosecute the tree hit man. You are the police detective called in to explain the case to the jury. Explain how the hit man killed the tree, and include a diagram to help them understand.*
- Pulling-It-Together Focus Point: Phloem cells carry food and sugars through the plant. In a tree, the cells are located in a ring just beneath the bark. The tree hit man cut through the phloem cells and, therefore, starved the base of the tree.

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# The Case of the Tree Hit Man

## REMEMBER YOUR CODES

- ! This is important.
- ✓ I knew that.
- X This is different from what I thought.
- ? I don't understand.

## The Case of the Tree Hit Man

The assassin crept across the lawn in the dead of night. He worked quietly and efficiently. There were only a few hours until morning, and his work would need to be completed by the time the sun came up. He had been hired to kill one of Magnolia Springs' oldest and most respected residents: a 500-year-old oak tree.

The tree, named Inspiration Oak, had been growing since before the time of Christopher Columbus. It had survived the birth of the small town and the invention of the automobile. By 1990, it stood 65 feet tall, with a trunk that was almost 30 feet in diameter.

The owner of the land had decided to chop down the tree and build a gas station. The people of Magnolia Springs loved that tree, so county officials denied the permit for a gas station and collected money to buy the land instead.

The owner's plans were foiled, and all because of that tree. But what if something happened to the tree? The owner got on the phone and called a hit man.

It's not easy to kill a big tree in a hurry. Chopping it down would take time and be noisy. Neighbors would be sure to notice. Poison might work, but it would take massive amounts of poison and could take years to finish the job. But the tree hit man had a plan because he knew how trees were organized.

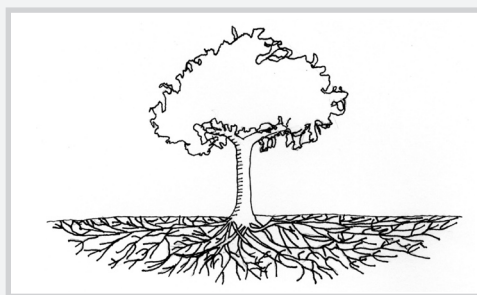
### What the Hit Man Knew

Trees, like most plants, have three main parts: the roots, leaves, and stem. The roots hold the tree firmly in the ground so that even a strong wind will not knock it over. They grow deep into the soil and can stretch for hundreds of feet in all directions. As shown in Figure 1, the root network is as big as the trunk and the branches combined. Trees need this vast network of roots to absorb water and minerals for growth.

At the other end of a tree, you find the leaves. Leaves make food for the plant in a process called *photosynthesis*. The leaves get carbon dioxide from the air and water from the roots. Then they use energy from sunlight to convert the water and carbon dioxide into sugars.

The stem, or tree trunk, holds the leaves high in the air so they can get enough sunlight. The trunk also connects the roots and leaves. Inside the trunk, tubes carry water and minerals from the roots up to the

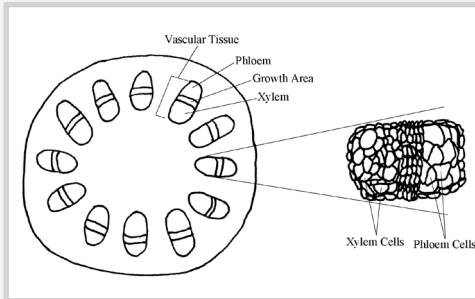
Figure 1. Tree Roots



Roots make up about half of the total size of a tree.



**Figure 2. One Way That Vascular Bundles Can Be Arranged in a Stem**



leaves. Another set of tubes carries sugars from the leaves to the roots.

These tubes are made of specialized plant cells that connect end to end. The cells that carry water up are called *xylem*. The cells that carry sugar down are called *phloem*. Together, the xylem and phloem are called the *vascular tissue*. Vascular tissue carries water and sugars throughout the roots, leaves, and stems.

In most plants, xylem and phloem are found in bundles throughout the stem. But in trees, the xylem grows in the center of the trunk and all of the phloem lie just below the bark on the outside.

### ***Quick and Dirty Business***

The hit man worked quickly to chisel into the tree. He made a perfect ring, six inches wide and six inches deep. With each cut, he removed the bark and the phloem layer.

### ***THE BIG QUESTION***

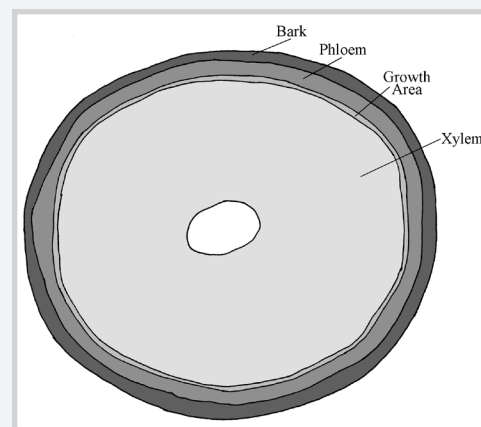
How do water and food (sugars) move through a plant?

Thick, sticky liquid oozed from the wounds. Soon the tree had no way to get sugar from its leaves to its roots. It was only a matter of time until the root cells died of starvation.

In the morning, the townspeople were horrified. They brought in tree experts from around the country, who built an elaborate intensive care unit to try to reconnect the phloem tubes. But it was too late. The tree could not be saved.

No charges were ever brought in the case of the tree hit man, but the town of Magnolia Springs came together in its effort to save the tree. They went through with their plans to buy the land and build a park. It is a beautiful, quiet picnic spot that is marked with the giant stump of Inspiration Oak.

**Figure 3. Xylem and Phloem in a Tree Trunk**



# The Case of the Tree Hit Man

## ***Plant Police Academy***

A terrible crime has occurred. In a few days, you will learn more about it. But first, you need to come to plant police academy to find out more about plants.

### ***Part 1: Which part of a plant absorbs water: roots or leaves? (mini-experiment)***

Draw a diagram of your two experimental groups.

#### **Prediction**

If roots absorb water, this plant will (circle one):   wilt   not wilt.

If leaves absorb water, this plant will (circle one):   wilt   not wilt.

**Results:** Did the plant wilt? \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Prediction**

If roots absorb water, this plant will (circle one):   wilt   not wilt.

If leaves absorb water, this plant will (circle one):   wilt   not wilt.

**Results:** Did the plant wilt? \_\_\_\_\_

**Claims and Evidence:** Which part of the plant absorbs water? What evidence do you have from your experiment?



**Part 2: Water Movement in the Stem of a Plant**

Fill a cup halfway with water and add 8 to 10 drops of food coloring. Get a stalk of celery from your teacher. Cut about 2 cm from the bottom and top of the celery stalk to get rid of any dried parts. Then place the stalk in the colored water, leaf side up. Let it sit in the water for at least an hour.

- What happened to the celery?
- Based on these results, does water move up or down the stem of the celery plant?
- Chop the celery stalk in half and look at the inside with a hand lens.

Draw what you see here, and label the areas where you can see food coloring.

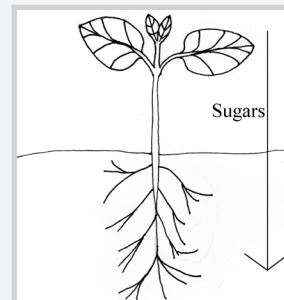
- Did the water move everywhere in the celery, or just in certain places?

**Part 3: How Water and Sugars Move in a Plant**

Sugar is made in the leaves of a plant and then travels to all the cells of the plant. In the diagram to the right, the arrow shows the direction that sugar moves.

Draw a second arrow to show the direction that water moves in the plant.

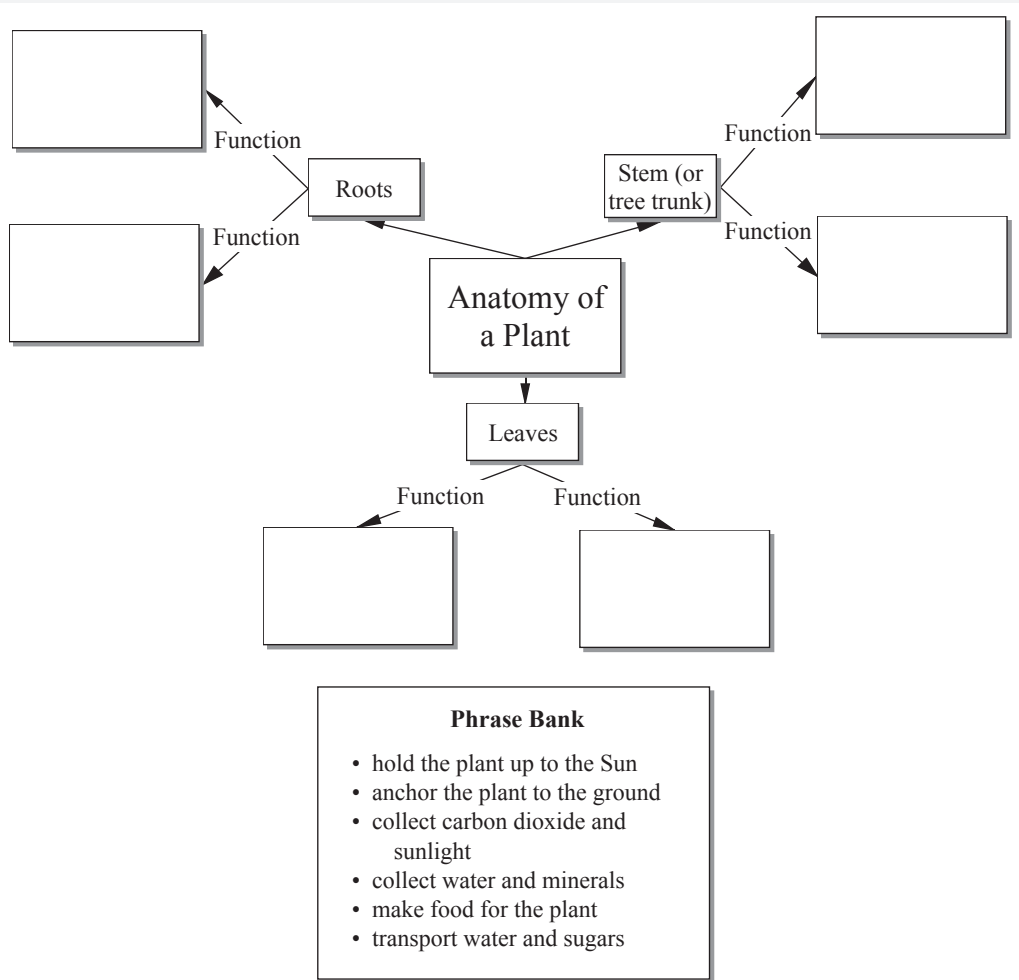
Think about the direction of your arrows. Can food and water move in the same tubes inside the plant stem? Why or why not?



***Congratulations! You have completed the Plant Police Academy. Now it is time to find out more about the Case of the Tree Hit Man.***

# The Case of the Tree Hit Man

## Structure and Function in Plants



# Index

Page numbers in **boldface** type refer to tables or figures.

## A

- "A Crisis of Crabs," 103–111
  - application/post-reading for, 106–107
  - background for, 104
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 104–106
  - journal questions for, 106
  - materials for, 104
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 103
  - pause, retell, and compare strategy for, 106
  - safety alert for, 104
  - student pages for, 104, 108–111
- "A Gene for Drunkenness?," 81–92
  - application/post-reading for, 86
  - background for, 82
  - chunking strategy for, 84–85
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 83–85
  - journal question for, 85
  - materials for, 83
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 81
  - student pages for, 83, 87–90
- "A-Maze-ing Worms," 27–40
  - application/post-reading for, 31
  - background for, 28
  - comprehension coding for, 30
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 29–30
  - journal questions for, 31
  - materials for, 28
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 27

- student pages for, 28, 33–40
- Adaptation. *See* "Some Like It Hot"
- Alcoholism. *See* "A Gene for Drunkenness?"
- Aquatic ecosystems. *See* "A Crisis of Crabs"
- Arthropods. *See* "No Bones About It"
- Assessment of student learning, 5–7
  - Big Question, 5–6
  - claims and evidence, 6, 24–25, **25**
  - graphic organizers, 6
  - Pulling It Together in Writing, 6
  - self-assessment, 6, **18**, 18–19
  - teaching based on, 6–7

## B

- Backings, 22, **22**, 23. *See also* Claims and evidence
- "Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly," 135–144
  - application/post-reading for, 138
  - background for, 136
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 136–138
  - finding the meaning of new words in, 138
  - journal questions for, 138
  - materials for, 136
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 135
  - safety alert for, 136

- student pages for, 136, 140–144
- Big Question, 5–6, 13

## C

- Cell cycle. *See* "Healing Powers"
- "Cells R Us," 41–52
  - application/post-reading for, 45
  - background for, 42
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 42–44
  - finding the meaning of new words in, 44
  - journal question for, 44
  - materials for, 42
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 41
  - student pages for, 42, 46–52
- Chunking strategy, 16–17
  - for "A Gene for Drunkenness?," 84–85
  - for "The Outsiders," 115–116
- Claims and evidence, 6, 21–26
  - argument in the classroom, 23
  - assessment of, 24–25, **25**
  - introduction of, 23–24
  - Toulmin's model of scientific argumentation, 22, **22**
- Classification. *See* "The Outsiders"
- Comprehension coding, 12
  - for "A-Maze-ing Worms," 30
- Concept application phase of learning cycle, 3
- Concept introduction phase of learning cycle, 2–3
- Constructivism, 3
- Controlled experiments, 30, 37–38
- Crabs. *See* "A Crisis of Crabs"

**D**

Diagrams and illustrations,  
   previewing of, 15  
   for "Healing Powers," 55–56  
   for "The Case of the Tree Hit  
   Man," 74  
 Dictionary use, 15

**E**

Environment-gene interactions.  
   *See* "A Gene for Drunkenness?"  
*Euglena*. *See* "The Outsiders"  
 Evolution. *See* "Hunting the  
   Ancient Whales"  
 Exploration phase of learning  
   cycle, 2, 3  
   for "A Crisis of Crabs," 104–106  
   for "A Gene for Drunkenness?",  
     83–85  
   for "A-Maze-ing Worms,"  
     29–30  
   for "Bacteria: The Good, the  
     Bad, and Getting Rid of the  
     Ugly," 136–138  
   for "Cells R Us," 42–44  
   for "Healing Powers," 54–56  
   for "Hunting the Ancient  
     Whales," 146–148  
   for "No Bones About It," 62–64  
   for "Oh! I Gotta Peel!," 94–96  
   for "Some Like It Hot,"  
     125–127  
   for "The Case of the Tree Hit  
     Man," 73–74  
   for "The Outsiders," 114–116  
 Expository text, 10, 15

**F**

Finding the meaning of new  
   words, 14, 14–15  
   in "Bacteria: The Good, the  
     Bad, and Getting Rid of the  
     Ugly," 138  
   in "Cells R Us," 44  
 Food chains and food webs. *See* "A  
   Crisis of Crabs"

**G**

Genetics. *See* "A Gene for  
   Drunkenness?"

Graphic organizers, 6  
   for "A Crisis of Crabs," 106  
   for "A Gene for Drunkenness?",  
     86  
   for "A-Maze-ing Worms," 31  
   for "Bacteria: The Good, the  
     Bad, and Getting Rid of the  
     Ugly," 138  
   for "Cells R Us," 45  
   for "Healing Powers," 56  
   for "Hunting the Ancient  
     Whales," 148  
   for "No Bones About It," 64  
   for "Oh! I Gotta Peel!," 97  
   for "Some Like It Hot," 127  
   for "The Case of the Tree Hit  
     Man," 75  
   for "The Outsiders," 117  
 Grasshoppers. *See* "No Bones  
   About It"

**H**

"Healing Powers," 53–60  
   application/post-reading for,  
     56  
   background for, 54  
   exploration/pre-reading for,  
     54–56  
   journal questions for, 56  
   material for, 54  
   NSES content standards  
     addressed by, 53  
   previewing diagrams and  
     illustrations for, 55–56  
   student pages for, 54, 57–60  
 Homeostasis. *See* "Oh! I Gotta  
   Peel!"  
 "Hunting the Ancient Whales,"  
   145–156  
   application/post-reading for,  
     148  
   background for, 145  
   exploration/pre-reading for,  
     146–148  
   journal questions for, 148  
   materials for, 145  
   NSES content standards  
     addressed by, 145  
   reading scientific names for,  
     147–148

student pages for, 145, 150–155

**I**

Integration of science and  
   reading, 2, 4  
 Interruption construction, 17

**J**

Journal questions, 5  
   for "A Crisis of Crabs," 106  
   for "A Gene for Drunkenness?",  
     85  
   for "A-Maze-ing Worms," 31  
   for "Bacteria: The Good, the  
     Bad, and Getting Rid of the  
     Ugly," 138  
   for "Cells R Us," 44  
   for "Healing Powers," 56  
   for "Hunting the Ancient  
     Whales," 148  
   for "No Bones About It," 64  
   for "Oh! I Gotta Peel!," 96  
   for "Some Like It Hot," 127  
   for "The Case of the Tree Hit  
     Man," 74–75  
   for "The Outsiders," 117

**L**

Learning cycle, 2–3

**M**

Macroevolution. *See* "Hunting the  
   Ancient Whales"  
 Mammal characteristics. *See*  
   "Hunting the Ancient Whales"  
 Mealworms. *See* "A-Maze-ing  
   Worms"  
 Mitosis. *See* "Healing Powers"

**N**

Narrative text, 10  
 National Science Education  
   Standards (NSES), 2  
 Natural selection. *See* "Some Like  
   It Hot"  
 "No Bones About It," 61–70  
   application/post-reading for, 64  
   background for, 62  
   exploration/pre-reading for,  
     62–64

- journal question for, 64  
materials for, 62  
NSES content standards  
  addressed by, 61  
safety alerts for, 62, 63  
student pages for, 62, 65–70  
text signals—examples and lists  
  for, 63–64
- O**
- “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 93–101  
  application/post-reading for, 97  
  background for, 94  
  exploration/pre-reading for, 94–96  
  journal questions for, 96  
  materials for, 94  
  NSES content standards  
    addressed by, 93  
  pause, retell, and compare  
    strategy for, 95–96  
  student pages for, 94, 98–101
- P**
- Pause, retell, and compare  
  strategy, 17  
  for “A Crisis of Crabs,” 106  
  for “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 95–96
- Peer conversations about reading, 11
- Penguins. *See* “Some Like It Hot”
- Plant structure and function. *See* “The Case of the Tree Hit Man”
- Post-reading, 4  
  for “A Crisis of Crabs,” 106–107  
  for “A Gene for Drunkenness?”, 86  
  for “A-Maze-ing Worms,” 31  
  for “Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly,” 138  
  for “Cells R Us,” 45  
  for “Healing Powers,” 56  
  for “Hunting the Ancient Whales,” 148  
  for “No Bones About It,” 64  
  for “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 97  
  for “Some Like It Hot,” 127
- for “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 75  
for “The Outsiders,” 117
- Pre-reading, 3–4  
  for “A Crisis of Crabs,” 104–106  
  for “A Gene for Drunkenness?”, 83–85  
  for “A-Maze-ing Worms,” 29–30  
  for “Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly,” 136–138  
  for “Cells R Us,” 42–44  
  for “Healing Powers,” 54–56  
  for “Hunting the Ancient Whales,” 146–148  
  for “No Bones About It,” 62–64  
  for “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 94–96  
  for “Some Like It Hot,” 125–127  
  for “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 73–74  
  for “The Outsiders,” 114–116
- Previewing diagrams and illustrations, 15  
  for “Healing Powers,” 55–56  
  for “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 74
- Protists. *See* “The Outsiders”
- Pulling It Together in Writing, 6  
  for “A Crisis of Crabs,” 106–107  
  for “A Gene for Drunkenness?”, 86  
  for “A-Maze-ing Worms,” 31  
  for “Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly,” 138  
  for “Cells R Us,” 45  
  for “Healing Powers,” 56  
  for “Hunting the Ancient Whales,” 148  
  for “No Bones About It,” 64  
  for “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 97  
  rubric for evaluating responses to, 7  
  for “Some Like It Hot,” 127  
  for “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 75  
  for “The Outsiders,” 117
- R**
- Reading activities  
  “A Crisis of Crabs,” 103–111  
  “A Gene for Drunkenness?”, 81–92  
  “A-Maze-ing Worms,” 27–40  
  “Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly,” 135–144  
  “Cells R Us,” 41–52  
  “Healing Powers,” 53–60  
  “Hunting the Ancient Whales,” 145–156  
  “No Bones About It,” 61–70  
  “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”, 93–102  
  “Some Like It Hot,” 123–134  
  “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 71–80  
  “The Outsiders,” 113–122
- Reading conferences, 5
- Reading groups, 5, 12–13  
  flag flyers for, 12–13, 39  
  interpreters in, 13, 39  
  leaders of, 12, 39  
  organization of, 5, 12–13  
  peer conversations in, 11  
  procedure for, 13, 13, 39, 39  
  teacher’s role with, 7
- Reading skills  
  assessment of, 6  
  development of, 3–4
- Reading strategies, 9–18  
  chunking, 16–17  
  comprehension coding, 12  
  finding the meaning of new words, 14, 14–17  
  introduction of, 5  
  pause, retell, and compare, 17  
  peer conversations about reading, 11  
  previewing diagrams and illustrations, 15  
  for problem-solving, 14–17  
  reading groups, 12–13  
  reading scientific names, 17  
  self-assessment of, 6, 18, 18–19  
  starting conversation about, 10  
  students’ view of reading, 10–11  
  text signals, 15–16, 16

- think-alouds, 10–11
- Rubrics
- for assessing claims and evidence, **25**
  - for evaluating responses to Pulling It Together in Writing, 7
- S**
- Safety alerts
- for “A Crisis of Crabs,” 104
  - for “Bacteria: The Good, the Bad, and Getting Rid of the Ugly,” 136
  - for “No Bones About It,” 62, 63
  - for “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 72
  - for “The Outsiders,” 114
- Scientific argumentation, 22
- in the classroom, 23
  - definition of, 22
  - Toulmin’s model of, 22, **22**
- Scientific names, reading of, 17
- for “Hunting the Ancient Whales,” 147–148
- SciLinks
- alcoholism, 82
  - animal adaptations, 124
  - aquatic ecosystems, 108
  - bacteria, 42, 135
  - behaviors and adaptations, 129
  - bones and muscles, 62
  - cell cycle, 58
  - cell structure, 46
  - controlled experiments, 28
  - DNA, 47
  - food chains and food webs, 104
  - genes and traits, 82
  - genetic diseases, screening, counseling, 82
  - history of evolution, 146
  - how do ecosystems change naturally?, 105
  - how do plant and animal cells differ?, 42
  - Huntington disease, 82
  - insects, 63
  - levels of classification, 114
  - mitosis, 54
  - organ transplants, 97
  - organs of excretion, 97
  - plant growth, 73
  - prokaryotic cells, 44
  - urinary system, 94
  - whales, 146
  - what are the parts of a plant?, 73
  - worms, 35
- Self-assessment by students, 6, **18**, 18–19
- “Some Like It Hot,” 123–134
- application/post-reading for, 127
  - background for, 124
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 125–127
  - journal questions for, 127
  - materials for, 124
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 123
  - student pages for, 124, 128–134
  - text signals—compare and contrast for, 126–127
- Students
- assessing learning of, 5–7, 7
  - peer conversations about reading, 11
  - prior knowledge and misconceptions of, 3
  - reading skills of, 3–4, 6
  - self-assessment by, 6, **18**, 18–19
  - views of reading, 10
- T**
- Text signals, 15–16, **16**
- compare and contrast for “Some Like It Hot,” 126–127
  - examples and lists for “No Bones About It,” 63–64
- “The Case of the Tree Hit Man,” 71–80
- application/post-reading for, 75
  - background for, 72
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 73–74
  - journal questions for, 74–75
  - materials for, 72
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 71
  - previewing diagrams and illustrations for, 74–75
  - safety alert for, 72
  - student pages for, 72, 76–80
- “The Outsiders,” 113–122
- application/post-reading for, 117
  - background for, 114
  - chunking strategy for, 115–116
  - exploration/pre-reading for, 114–116
  - journal questions for, 117
  - materials for, 114
  - NSES content standards addressed by, 113
  - safety alert for, 114
  - student pages for, 114, 118–122
- Think-alouds, 10–11
- Toulmin, Stephen, 22
- U**
- Urinary system. *See* “Oh! I Gotta Pee!”
- V**
- Vocabulary
- finding the meaning of new words, **14**, 14–15
  - reading scientific names, 17
  - text signals, 15–16, **16**
- W**
- Warrants, 22, **22**, 23. *See also* Claims and evidence
- Whales. *See* “Hunting the Ancient Whales”
- What’s in the Box?*, 24
- Who Broke Mrs. Garcia’s Bottle of Perfume?*, 24, 26
- Writing activities. *See* Journal questions; Pulling It Together in Writing