

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sounder

by  
**William H. Armstrong**

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## Book Information

William H. Armstrong, Sounder  
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116 Pages  
Book Level: 5.3  
Interest Level: MG

Angry and humiliated when his sharecropper father is jailed for stealing food for his family, a young black boy grows in courage and understanding by learning to read and through his relation with his devoted dog, Sounder.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Animals, Dogs; Community Life, Poverty; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 14, 90%; People, African American; People, Family; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Cherish Freedom; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8

## Main Characters

Sounder the father's dog, which makes a distinctive sound when he trees a coon or possum

the boy a young black boy living with his family in a cabin on a farm

the father a sharecropper, who makes extra money by hunting coons and possums

the mother the boy's mother, who takes care of the children while the father is gone

## Vocabulary

**famished** to be very hungry and/or weak from hunger

**perkish** a slang term meaning to be lively and happy

## Synopsis

A young boy's life as the son of a black sharecropper changes one day when his father is arrested for stealing a ham. As the father is taken

away, Sounder, the family's hound dog is shot by a deputy. Sounder disappears after being shot, and the young boy desperately searches for the badly injured dog. He looks under the house, along the road and fence line, and in the woods, but he does not find the dog.

Some time later, at Christmas, the boy is sent to take a cake to his father in jail. The guard is a despicable man who destroys the cake while checking it for a file or saw. The boy visits briefly with his father, who instructs him not to return to the jail to visit. The boy's father says he will send word through the visiting preacher instead.

After time passes and the boy's family does not hear from the father, the boy sets out to find his father among the road work camps. He is ridiculed and teased for watching the work crews. One time a guard even throws a metal bar at the boy, injuring his fingers. On his way home from that journey, the boy meets a schoolteacher who offers to let the boy stay in his cabin and go to school in return for a little housework. The boy's mother agrees to let him go to school, but the boy must return each summer to do his father's field work.

Many years pass, and one day the father returns dragging one side of his body. He explains that he survived a dynamite blast in a prison quarry. Since he is no longer useful to the work crew, he is released by the jailer. Sounder once again barks his great bark at having his master home again. The man lives only a few months longer. Distraught by his master's death, Sounder dies, too.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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## Initial Understanding

As the boy traveled around looking for his father, he tried to follow the railroad tracks from town to town. Why did he prefer to walk along the railroad instead of the roads?

*The boy was fearful of being hassled or hurt by strangers he met along the way. When he traveled along the tracks, he did not run into as many people.*

## Literary Analysis

Early in the story it is mentioned that the white man who owned the fields put the cabins of the black sharecroppers far apart on his land. Why do you think he did this?

*There may be different explanations, including that they could help guard all his land that way. More likely, he wanted to keep the blacks from meeting often and organizing against him.*

## Inferential Comprehension

At one point the reader learns that the boy dislikes curtained windows. How did he explain his feeling, and what did the curtains represent to the boy?

*The curtains were clearly symbolic to the boy. He explained feeling that there were eyes behind them watching him. One could argue that the curtains represented his fear of the unknown since the curtains concealed the person(s) behind them.*

## Constructing Meaning

One of the first things the boy read in the book he found in the garbage was about cruelty. It said that "cowardice is the mother of cruelty." Explain what that passage means and how it applies to the boy's experiences.

*Essentially it is referring to the idea that weak or cowardly people (or animals) pick on those things or people who are weaker than themselves. The author includes this to explain the actions of the prison and jail guards who hurt and insult the helpless young boy.*

**Understanding Characterization** The boy is the central character in this story. As the oldest child, he must help his mother take care of his family. In this role, he finds he must deal with people, places, and events he does not want to deal with. Have the students make a list of the characters he encounters in the story (including his mother). Have them add to this list what effect each person had on the boy or what the boy may have learned from each character.

**Comparing and Contrasting** This story is set in the southern part of the United States in the late 1800s. Many different stories have been written with this same setting. Have the students request a list of books from the librarian that deal with the lives of blacks in the South during or before this time. Have the students divide into groups to read the books and share them. As a class, create a list of similarities and differences between the stories and things the students learned about the lives of free blacks at this time.

**Recognizing Feelings** Most readers would agree that the overwhelmingly strongest emotion the boy has in this story is fear. Have the students list the things he fears. Ask the students to share how they would feel if they were in the character's place. This activity could be expanded to a creative writing experience by having the class write poems expressing how the boy feels or what they may feel for the boy.

**Responding to Literature** Sounder is described and treated as a member of the family. Human qualities, such as loneliness, are attributed to him. Many people can recall times when their pets have taken on human qualities. Have a class discussion and ask students to share personal experiences with pets or animals that made them feel as if the animal had human qualities, habits, or feelings. Discuss how a person's health or happiness can be influenced by their pets.

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## Teachable Skills