

INSIGHT HUMANITIES™

Author Study: Ezra Jack Keats

Rising Grade 1

An Author Study Unit Adapted from Lavinia Group's
Insight Humanities™ Curriculum

Lessons 1-20



Purpose: Why engage in an Author Study?

Through this Author Study unit, students will understand the importance of reading, not only as readers but as writers, too. They will listen to, discuss, read, and enjoy Ezra Jack Keats's books, study them, and analyze his writing style.

Why study Ezra Jack Keats? Keats is an author of more than twenty-two children's books and an illustrator of many more: His most famous story, *The Snowy Day*, is widely considered one of the most important books of the 20th century. In Keats's *Neighborhood*, Anita Silvey writes, "By bringing multicultural publishing to the forefront of consciousness, Keats has influenced children's books for four decades. Hence his achievements proved even greater than his books." Not only do Keats's books feature diverse characters, but they also portray an urban setting, both of which were uncommon for the era in which they were published. He changed the face of children's literature and led an important shift. Silvey writes, "Keats altered children's books forever...he simply wanted to see children of different races represented in books." In her book, *A Poem for Peter*, Andrea Davis Pinkney states, "His books celebrated the beauties of New York City's neighborhoods. They featured street corners, front stoops, graffiti, man-holes, and storefronts. They included black and Latino children and families, homeless people, and colorful construction workers."

His books provide rich content full of vibrant illustrations. This is especially important in kindergarten writing when sketching is such a big part of students' storytelling. Keats began his career as an artist and illustrated all of his own books. The pictures in his stories are just as important as the words, providing our youngest writers with a critical lesson in understanding the significance found in illustrations.

Keats is also an ideal author to study for this unit because many of his stories were born out of life experiences. For example, Keats once ran away from home, as Peter does in *Peter's Chair*. His books were inspired by his life and in turn will inspire students as they study his books. Keats's works and life provide a wealth of opportunities for a rich Author Study. As a result of this unit, students will invest in thinking about what compels authors and illustrators to create the stories they enjoy and internalize important ideas about author's purpose.

Connection to the Insight Humanities™ Scope and Sequence

The books in this unit connect to the Insight Humanities™ yearlong content focus for kindergarteners: Empathy & Identity. Students will examine their own life experiences and look inward as they consider how these stories relate to important moments in their own lives. They will also experience empathy for others as they read some of the texts within this unit.

The books introduce characters who display a wide range of emotions that students will connect with, such as:

- Nervous Peter, who invites Amy to his birthday party in *A Letter to Amy*
- Frustrated Peter, who struggles to learn how to whistle in *Whistle for Willie*
- The lonely and talented blind man in Apt. 3, who forms a friendship with his neighbors
- Louie, who gets made fun of in *Regards to the Man in the Moon*, struggles to speak in *Louie* and searches for a father in *Louie's Search*
- Unhappy Peter in *Peter's Chair*, who wrestles with the idea of sharing his old baby toys and furniture with his new sister
- Peter and Archie, who anticipate a great escape as they run away from bullies in *Goggles!*

The books in this unit and the lessons themselves encourage students to feel empathy for the characters they are reading about and to examine their own identities as they grapple with the conflicts and character development in these stories.

Goal: Essential Knowledge and Habits

Standards-Based Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading™

The lesson within this unit is designed to reinforce Insight Humanities' Seven Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading™.

Seven Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading™

1. Fiction readers make mind movies to visualize what they're reading.
2. Fiction readers think deeply about how language and structure support the big ideas in the text.
3. Fiction readers develop big ideas and support them with evidence from the text.
4. Fiction readers use context to figure out the meaning of unknown words.
5. Fiction readers think deeply about the characters in their books and how they are developed.
6. Fiction readers develop ideas across books.
7. Fiction readers consider how a story connects to their own lives and experiences or gives them a window into the lives and experiences of people different from themselves.

Each lesson is designed to help your students develop as readers and writers while deepening their understanding of the content in this unit.

Reinforcing the Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading™ Through Independent Reading

You may use this criteria list of Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading™ to assess whether students are attempting, emerging, or independently able to complete the reading work in this unit.

As students read independently, talk with them about their reading and the ideas they are developing. You may find the following questions helpful as you do so:

- How does the illustration on this page add to your understanding of the story?
- What is the effect of the words the author has chosen here?
- How is the character feeling? How do you know?
- How would you describe the main character? What's your evidence?
- What kind of world do the characters live in? Make a mind movie. What do you see?
- What kind of challenges is the main character facing, and how are they responding? What does this tell you about the kind of person that the character is?
- What does the main character want, above all? Why is this significant?
- What ideas are you developing about the journey the author has created for the main character? What's your evidence?
- How are the main character's relationships with secondary characters developing?
- In what ways has the main character changed?
- What has the main character learned? In what ways has this affected them?
- What have you learned from reading this book? What big message can you take from this and use in your own life?
- What are you visualizing in this part?



Lesson 1



Read Aloud

Materials: [“Ezra Jack Keats: A Life Creating Books for Children”](#); [“Ezra Jack Keats”](#) video (optional)



Launch

*Today we are starting an exciting new unit! For the next several weeks, we are going to be learning all about an author named Ezra Jack Keats. He was a very important author and illustrator, and he wrote and illustrated many wonderful books. An author and illustrator work together to tell a story — the **author** writes the words, and the **illustrator** draws the pictures. Ezra Jack Keats did both!*

You may choose to display some pictures of the author from one of your classroom books or choose a few examples from the internet to share.

*Today we will read an article about Ezra Jack Keats’s life, and get to know a lot more about him. Ezra Jack Keats was very influential to many people, and we’ll learn more about why today. It is important to understand the time period when Ezra Jack Keats was born and when he wrote many of his books. At that time, there were many laws in the United States that **discriminated** against people of color. That means they were treated differently and unfairly because of the color of their skin. It will be important to keep this in mind as we learn more about Ezra Jack Keats and his books.*

If time allows, you can show Brainpop Jr.'s “Ezra Jack Keats” video to provide additional context about Ezra Jack Keats before reading the article in this lesson.



Read Aloud and Discuss

Read pages 1, 2, and 6 of “Ezra Jack Keats: A Life Creating Books for Children” by the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

Read to “...where Ezra grew up in Brooklyn, NY.”

*Wow, look at all of these characters created by Ezra Jack Keats! This is interesting, Ezra grew up in a city, or an **urban** setting, and that is also the setting for most of his books! Remember, the setting is where the story takes place.*

*What kind of neighborhood do you live in? Is it a city, or an **urban** area, like these characters, or a different type of neighborhood?*

Give students a moment to talk with their partners. Call on one or two students to share their ideas. Encourage them to describe their neighborhood, and help them use **urban**, **rural**, or **suburban** as they do. Sample responses include:

- I live in a city/urban environment with lots of apartment buildings, taxis, and public transportation.
- I live in the country/a rural community with lots of trees, forests, deserts, farms, etc.
- I live in a suburban neighborhood with lots of individual houses, cars, and driveways.

Read to “...and a sister named Mae.”

*Ezra Jack Keats’s parents emigrated to the United States from Poland, which means they left Poland to settle permanently in the United States. Poland is a country in Europe. His parents faced a lot of **discrimination** in Poland because they were Jewish, and this is why his parents left Poland to come to the United States of America. **Discrimination** is when someone is treated poorly, typically based on some aspect of their identity, such as the color of their skin, their religion, or their*

*gender. Both Black people and Jewish people faced a lot of **discrimination** at this time. I wonder if that helped inspire Ezra Jack Keats to want to write books featuring children of many diverse backgrounds.*

Read to “...an oil painting of out-of-work men around a fire.”

Ezra Jack Keats was passionate about art for most of his life, including when he was a little boy. Can you imagine he drew all over the kitchen table? I wonder what his parents thought of that! But he stuck with practicing his artwork no matter what, and he got better and better over time. He even started winning awards as a child!

Teacher’s Note: This lesson skips pages 4 and 5 to allow ample time for discussion, but you may choose to revisit this content later as time allows.

Skip pages 4 and 5. Resume reading on page 6 to “...characters in books that looked like them.”

This feels really important. What did we just learn about Ezra Jack Keats, and why might this be important in understanding him as an author? Turn and talk with your partners.

Listen in to partnerships as students discuss, and select a few students to share their ideas. Sample responses include:

- At that time, all of the characters in the books that Keats was paid to illustrate were white.
- Keats didn’t think it was right that there were only white characters featured in books.
- Keats thought that books should feature characters of many different cultures, races, and backgrounds so that everyone could see themselves reflected in books.

Read to “...greatest honor given for picture books at that time.”

I’m going to reread a part of this article: He decided that Peter would be the hero of the story because “he should have been there all along.” What do you think this phrase means?

Call on students to share ideas, such as:

- It wasn't fair that only white characters were featured in books, and a character like Peter should have already been in books.
- Kids should be able to read about characters that look like them.
- Ezra Jack Keats wanted to make a difference by writing a book with Peter, a Black boy, as the main character. He didn't think it was right that characters like Peter didn't already exist in books.



Whole-Class Discussion

Final Question: What have we learned so far about Ezra Jack Keats?

KEY IDEAS

- Keats's family emigrated from Poland.
- Keats grew up in Brooklyn.
- Keats and his family were Jewish.
- Keats and his family faced discrimination due to their Jewish culture and religion.
- Keats wrote books featuring many different characters, including characters that lived in an urban setting like the one where he grew up.
- Keats thought it was wrong that picture books only featured white characters and decided to change this when he was inspired to make Peter the main character of *The Snowy Day*.

BACK-POCKET QUESTIONS

- Where were Keats and his family from? Why is this important?
- What was it like for Keats growing up in Brooklyn?
- What did Keats love to do as a child?

- What was the setting of many of Keats’s books? Why was this significant?
- Why was Keats inspired to make Peter the hero of his story?



Quick Write

Prompt: Ezra Jack Keats created many books that readers have enjoyed for over 50 years! Sketch, label, and write about yourself as a reader.

Have students write their response to the question so that it can be easily shared and collected. For this first response, model routines and expectations for written assignments in your classroom. Make it clear that students can sketch, label, and write sentences, model what this would look like, and share that you expect to see students responding in different ways (reflective of their individual writing development).

Ensure students have access to paper that allows for both drawing and labeling as well as writing sentences. This initial writing prompt can be used to help you understand the strengths and opportunities for growth for each of your students as readers and writers, and to help you set goals for their growth throughout summer school.