

Lesson Plan: The Hero's Journey on the Polar Express

Subject: English Language Arts, Personal Development

Age Group: 12-14

Setting: Homeschool (easily adapted for classroom or small group)

Estimated Time: 60-75 minutes

Materials Needed

- Pajamas and hot chocolate (optional, but encouraged for the theme!)
 - Access to view clips from or read *The Polar Express* (book by Chris Van Allsburg or film)
 - Notebook or paper
 - Pen or pencil
 - "Hero's Journey" graphic organizer (can be a simple chart with two columns: Stage and Description)
 - A "Polar Express Ticket" prop (can be printed or handmade)
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Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. **Identify** the key stages of the Hero's Journey literary structure.
 2. **Analyze** how the main character in *The Polar Express* follows the Hero's Journey pattern.
 3. **Apply** the Hero's Journey framework to outline a personal goal or story.
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Lesson Structure

I. Introduction (10 minutes)

Hook: Your Ticket to Anywhere

Educator: (Hand Madisyn the "Polar Express Ticket") "Happy Polar Express Day! Now, this ticket is special. In the story, it gets the boy to the North Pole. But let's imagine it could take you somewhere different. Not just a place, but to a goal you want to achieve. It could be mastering a new piece on the piano, winning a big game, or even launching a YouTube channel. **If this ticket represented achieving one big goal, what would your 'North Pole' be?**"

(Allow time for thought and discussion. This connects the theme to personal goals from the very beginning.)

Stating the Objectives

Educator: "That's a fantastic goal. Most great stories, from *The Hunger Games* to Marvel movies to *The Polar Express*, are really about a character's journey to reach a goal. They follow a pattern called the 'Hero's Journey.' Today, we're going to become story experts. First, we'll learn the secret code behind this pattern. Then, we'll use it to break down the boy's adventure in *The Polar Express*. Finally, you'll use that same pattern to map out the steps to achieving your own 'North Pole' goal."

II. Body (45-50 minutes)

Part 1: I Do - Unlocking the Code (15 minutes)

Educator: "The Hero's Journey is like a roadmap that most storytellers use. It makes stories feel exciting and meaningful. Let's go over the main stops on that map. I'll explain each one using a movie we all know, like *Star Wars: A New Hope*."

(Use simple, relatable language. Draw the stages or write them down as you explain.)

- **The Ordinary World:** This is the hero's boring home life before the adventure starts. (Luke Skywalker is a bored farm boy on a desert planet.)
- **The Call to Adventure:** Something happens that invites the hero on a quest. (Luke finds R2-D2's secret message from Princess Leia.)
- **Crossing the Threshold:** The hero commits to the journey and leaves their comfort zone. (Luke leaves his home planet with Obi-Wan Kenobi.)
- **Tests, Allies, and Enemies:** The hero faces challenges, makes friends, and identifies the bad guys. (The Cantina scene, meeting Han and Chewie, escaping the Empire.)
- **The Ordeal:** This is the biggest challenge yet, where the hero almost fails. Think of it like the 'boss battle' in a video game. (Getting trapped in the trash compactor.)
- **The Reward:** The hero succeeds and gets something important—*not* always treasure, sometimes it's knowledge or confidence. (They rescue Princess Leia and get the Death Star plans.)
- **The Road Back & Resurrection:** The hero returns, but has one last, massive test that uses everything they've learned. (The final attack on the Death Star, where Luke must use the Force.)
- **Return with the Elixir:** The hero comes home a changed person, and their victory helps their whole community. (Luke is celebrated as a hero of the Rebellion.)

Part 2: We Do - Charting the Polar Express (15 minutes)

Educator: "Alright, now let's be detectives. We're going to see if the boy in *The Polar Express* follows this same roadmap. Let's fill out our Hero's Journey organizer together. I'll start, and then you can help me find the rest."

(Use a graphic organizer. Prompt with questions to guide the analysis. Refer to the book/film.)

- **Educator:** "What's the hero boy's **Ordinary World**?" (Lying in bed, feeling skeptical about Santa.)
 - **Educator:** "What's his **Call to Adventure**?" (The sound of the train, the conductor's invitation.)
 - **Educator:** "When does he **Cross the Threshold**? When does he fully commit?" (When he finally runs out and jumps on the train.)
 - **Madisyn's Turn:** "Who are his **Allies** on the journey? What are some of the **Tests** they face?" (The hero girl, the lonely boy; the ticket flying away, the train on the ice.)
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- **Madisyn's Turn:** "What do you think is his biggest **Ordeal**?" (Maybe standing before Santa, having to truly believe to hear the bell.)
- **Madisyn's Turn:** "And the **Reward**? It's not just the bell, is it?" (It's the physical bell, but the real reward is his renewed belief.)
- **Together:** Discuss the final stages—the journey home (Road Back) and how he returns changed (Return with the Elixir).

Part 3: You Do - Mapping Your Own Journey (15-20 minutes)

Educator: "You've successfully analyzed a story like a pro. Now it's your turn to be the hero and the author. Remember that 'North Pole' goal you mentioned at the beginning? I want you to use a blank Hero's Journey organizer to map out your own adventure to achieve it."

"You don't have to fight dragons, but every goal has challenges and allies. Think about it metaphorically."

Success Criteria for This Activity:

- Your organizer clearly states your main goal (your "North Pole").
- You have ideas written for at least 5 of the 8 Hero's Journey stages.
- Your ideas are personal and connect to your specific goal.

Example Prompts:

- "What would be your 'Call to Adventure'? (The moment you decide to really go for this goal.)"
- "Who are your real-life 'Allies'? (Teachers, family, friends, coaches.)"
- "What 'Tests' or obstacles might you face?" (Lack of time, a difficult concept, self-doubt.)"
- "What's the 'Ordeal'—the toughest part of achieving this goal?"
- "And what's the 'Reward' you'll get in the end? What 'Elixir' will you bring back? (Not just the achievement, but the confidence and skills you learned.)"

(Provide quiet time for independent work. Be available to help brainstorm ideas.)

III. Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

Sharing and Recap

Educator: "Let's bring our train into the station. What was the most interesting stage of the Hero's Journey to you, and why?"

(Allow for sharing. Ask Madisyn to share one or two parts of her personal journey map if she feels comfortable.)

Reinforcing the Takeaway

Educator: "Today we learned that great stories—and great accomplishments in real life—share a similar structure. They involve leaving our comfort zone, facing challenges, getting help, and returning changed for the better. The Hero's Journey isn't just in books; it's a map for growth. Every time you set a big goal, you're starting your own hero's journey."

Assessment

- **Formative (During Lesson):** Observe Madisyn's participation and understanding during the "We Do" activity. Are her answers connecting the story to the correct stages?
 - **Summative (End of Lesson):** The completed personal Hero's Journey graphic organizer. This demonstrates her ability to apply the concept creatively and personally, meeting the final learning objective.
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Differentiation & Adaptations

- **For Scaffolding/Support:**
 - Provide a partially completed organizer for *The Polar Express*, asking her to fill in only the missing pieces.
 - For the personal map, reduce the number of required stages to the core four: The Call, The Tests, The Ordeal, The Reward.
 - Offer a list of potential goals to choose from if she has trouble brainstorming.
- **For Extension/Challenge:**
 - Ask her to write the opening paragraph of her personal Hero's Journey as a short story.
 - Challenge her to compare the Hero's Journey in *The Polar Express* with another favorite book or movie, noting the similarities and differences.
- **For a Classroom Setting:**
 - Use "Think-Pair-Share" for the "We Do" activity.
 - Have students share their personal journey maps in small groups for the conclusion.
 - The "Hook" can be a whole-class discussion or a quick journal write.