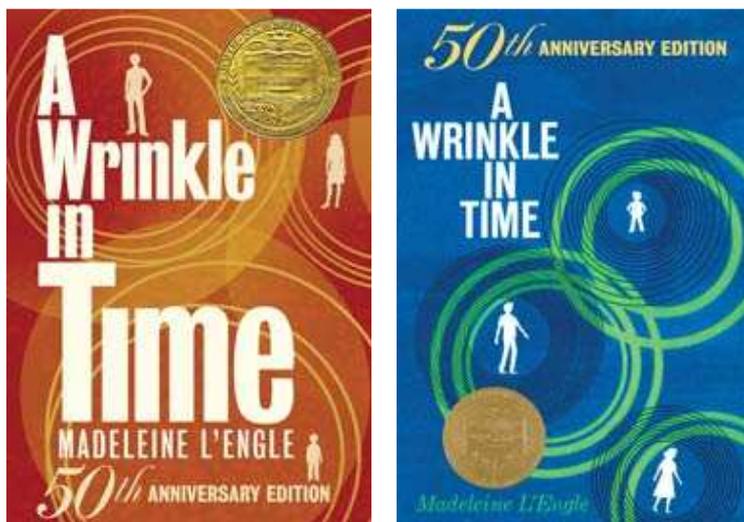


## *A Wrinkle in Time* Discussion and Activity Guide



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### INTRODUCTION

Imagine 1962.

- John F. Kennedy was the president of the United States.
- The manned space program was in its infancy (John Glenn orbited the earth four times); the first commercially sponsored communication satellite, Telstar, was launched; and the unmanned space probe, Mariner II, flew past Venus.
- James D. Watson, Maurice H. F. Wilkins, and Francis H. Crick won the Nobel Prize for determining the structure of DNA.
- The Cuban Missile Crisis brought the U.S. and Russia to the brink of war.
- James Meredith was escorted by U.S. marshals into the University of Mississippi as he registered for classes.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Manchurian Candidate* were playing in movie theaters. The Yankees won the World Series again, and a first-class postage stamp was \$.04.

These are the scientific, political, and social landscapes that existed when *A Wrinkle in Time* was first read by young people in America. Many things have changed since then, but the book remains a favorite of students and teachers alike, because, one hand, it is a work of science fiction and fantasy that transcends the everyday to illuminate large themes and concerns, and on the other, it deals with the small and large realities of young people's lives: relationships among friends and family, courage, conformity, and growing up. On top of that, it's a great adventure story with characters kids care about. *A Wrinkle in Time* is, in short, a classic, a part of young people's heritage and culture.

In this guide, we've provided questions for contemplation and discussion, activities for exploration, and teaching connections to science, social studies, history, and literature.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. The opening sentence of Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Paul Clifford*, published in 1830, begins with the phrase: "It was a dark and stormy night...." Often considered the worst opening line in literature, writers, including the beagle Snoopy, have attempted in jest to begin their stories with the same line. When Madeleine L'Engle's children would ask her to tell a story, she would always begin with "It was a dark and stormy night...." So it was no surprise that she would use it to begin her novel and send you on the journey to *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Now it's your turn to take a stab at it. Write a story of your own that begins with "It was a dark and stormy night...." See who in your class can write the best of the worst. And have fun doing it!

The fun doesn't have to stop there. Since 1982, the English department at San Jose State University has sponsored the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest that challenges entrants to compose the opening sentence to the worst novel. Anyone can enter, so why not give it a chance? You can get all the information at: <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>.

2. Meg and Charles Wallace meet Calvin O'Keefe by chance on their way to see Mrs Whatsit. Calvin says: "*Maybe we weren't meant to meet before this, I mean I knew who you were in school and everything, but I didn't know you.*"

Calvin believes that they were fated to meet this way. What about you? Do you believe in fate? Do you have a friend about whom you feel this way—someone you feel is just supposed to be in your life? Do people meet for the first time because they are fated to? Discuss the development of Meg's and Calvin's fate throughout *A Wrinkle in Time*.

3. The relationship between Meg and Charles Wallace is a very special one. He can sense what she is feeling, and she knows that whatever her faults are, at least he loves her dearly. It was Meg's love for her brother that rescued him from the powers of IT. Is this like sibling relationships in other books you've read? What kind of relationships do you have with your siblings?

4. Meg and her mother discuss Charles Wallace:

Meg: "*Charles Wallace understand more than the rest of us, doesn't he?*"

Mrs. Murry: "*Yes...I suppose because he's—well, because he's different, Meg....Charles Wallace is what he is. Different. New ... Charles Wallace's difference isn't physical. It's in his essence.*"

What does their mother mean that his essence is different? What are the characteristics that make him different? Everyone has their own uniqueness. Do you and your friends see this as a negative characteristic or a positive one? Every class has a kid like Charles Wallace. How is he/she treated by the others? Is there a little bit of Charles in you?

A Wrinkle in Time Discussion and Activity Guide

5. The people who live in Meg's town have a dim view of her and Charles Wallace. *"I've heard that clever people of often have subnormal children," Meg had once overheard. "The two boys seem to be nice, regular children, but that unattractive girl and the baby boy certainly aren't all there."*

Were these observations justified? Is it right for people to judge others that way? How did their perceptions of Meg affect the way she felt and acted? How did it affect Charles Wallace? How are you affected by others' perceptions of you?

6. *It [her father's hair] was pushed back from his shoulders, so that he looked like someone from another century or a shipwrecked sailor.*

*She [Meg] had been so certain that the moment she found her father everything would be all right...all the problems would be taken out of her hands.... Instead...Her adored father was bearded and thin and white and not omnipotent after all.*

Why is Meg disappointed? Were her expectations about her father reasonable? What has she realized about him?

We all put our parents on pedestals when we are young. When did you realize that your parents were "just human?" How did this realization change your relationship with them? How did it change your feelings?

7. Mrs Who has difficulty expressing herself, so she uses quotations from classical literature and expressions in foreign languages to articulate her views. For example, she quotes the Roman philosopher Seneca:

*Ab honesto virum bonum nihil deterret.* Translated from Latin, it means, "Nothing deters a good man from doing what is honorable."

Think about famous phrases that you know from film, music, or literature. Translate them into foreign languages. This way, you can express yourself and confound others. The best way to translate the expression is to find foreign language speakers, because expressions are often idiomatic, and lose their flavor when translated word for word. Or you can try using Web sites that will translate English into other languages. One is <http://babelfish.altavista.com/tr>. It can translate words and phrases from English into almost any language and vice versa.

Make a chart, so you will have easy reference to the expressions.

Have fun and be multilingual.

Sample Chart:

English	French	Spanish
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A Wrinkle in Time Discussion and Activity Guide

"I'll be back"	Je serai de retour	Estares detras
"Make my day"	Faites mon jour	Haga mi dia

8. You can follow Mrs Who's model by creating conversations using quotations. Work with a partner to create a dialogue, or work with several friends and write a whole scene. Pick a subject. Then go to Barlett's Familiar Quotations or to Web pages to find famous quotations on your theme. Some Web sites that will be useful are:

<http://www.coolquotes.com>

[www.quotationspage.com/random.php3](http://www.quotationspage.com/random.php3)

You'll find hundreds of quotes—from speakers as diverse as Homer, Seneca, Nietzsche, Simon Cowell, and Homer Simpson. Virtually every topic is covered.

Put together your dialogue or scene, and perform it for your class.

9. When people band together to accomplish a specific goal, it is helpful for them to bring different talents and abilities. This is surely the case with Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin. Mrs Whatsit points out their differences as she gives each a little talisman:

*"Calvin, your great gift is your ability to communicate, to communicate with all kinds of people....So for you, I will strengthen it. Meg, I give you your faults....I think you'll find they come in very handy on Camazotz....Charles Wallace, I can only give you the resilience of your childhood."*

How do their differences strengthen the "whole?" Could two of them have accomplished what the three of them did? Why or why not? Could any one of them have done it alone? In your own experiences, how have you worked with others to reach a common goal?

10. *"You three children will be on your own. We will be near you; we will be watching you. But you will not be able to see us or to ask us for help, and we will not be able to come to you."*

Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which set the three children off on a quest of dangerous proportions. Why did they send them off alone? Wouldn't it have been better for them to accompany the children and be part of the rescue? What then are the roles that Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Who, and Mrs Which play in the novel?

11. *In front of all the houses children were playing....Meg felt vaguely that something was wrong with their play...."Look!" Charles Wallace said suddenly. They're skipping and bouncing in rhythm! Everyone's doing it at exactly the same moment."*

*A Camazotz mother said, "They're all perfectly trained."  
All up and down the block, heads nodded in agreement.*

## A Wrinkle in Time Discussion and Activity Guide

Compare the behavior of the children of Camzotz with that of children from Meg's hometown. Which way of acting do you think Meg's principal would prefer? Why does the principal want Meg to conform to the other children in the school? Madeleine L'Engle is making a point by creating parallels. What do you think the author's point of view is on this subject? How else does she tell you this?

12. Mrs Whatsit tells the children, "...All through the universe [the Dark Thing is] being fought, all through the cosmos...and maybe it won't seem strange that some of our very best fighters have come right from your very own planet...."

Who are these fighters? What are the "weapons" these fighters have used? Are they violent? What characteristics do they have in common? Who from historical times would you add to the list of enemies of the Dark Thing? Make a list of contemporary people who exhibit the same traits as those mentioned in the book. How have they been fighting the Dark Thing?

13. Why does Meg come to the realization that she is the only one who can save Charles Wallace? Compare this to other stories you know from literature or film where the main character has to complete the quest alone.
14. Madeleine L'Engle built aspects of *A Wrinkle in Time* on science, mythology, and religion. For example, the hymn intoned by the creatures on the planet Uriel. Find references in the novel that illustrate these connections.
15. *A Wrinkle in Time* straddles two literary genres. The quest that Meg, Charles Wallace, and Calvin are on, for example, links the novel to fantasy. Tessering links it to science fiction. Find other aspects of the novel that connect it to one or the other of these forms. Compare *A Wrinkle in Time* to other books, films, and television shows that fall into one or the other category. For fantasy, consider *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. For science fiction, think about *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Talk about how it stands up in comparison.
16. Writers create out of their own experiences. During the time Madeleine L'Engle was writing *A Wrinkle in Time*, the world was a very unsettled place. The United States and the Soviet Union were embroiled in a Cold War where democracy and individual freedom of expression were threatened by totalitarianism and collectivism. Fear pervaded everyone's thinking. This was the backdrop that influenced the writing of the book. Discuss how that atmosphere is expressed in the novel. What elements of political ideology are reflected in how Camazotz is controlled by IT? When the Cold War ended in the 1990s, did its dangers end with it? If Madeleine L'Engle were writing the book today, what political realities would be the major influences on its writing?
17. Mrs Whatsit's explanation of tessering is similar to the concept of wormholes, the favored method of travel in many science fiction movies and literature. Putting it simply, traveling through a wormhole provides a quick way to travel the astronomical distances of space without the passage of time. Is this possible according to modern physics? What would Einstein think of

## A Wrinkle in Time Discussion and Activity Guide

tessering? Can tessering be explained by Einstein's special theory of relativity? Do some research.

First, look into time travel and Einstein's theory to see if it's theoretically possible. Then look into wormholes. Do they have any scientific basis, or is it what Mrs Who might say in quoting William Shakespeare, "Such stuff that dreams are made on?" Ask your friends what they think. Take a poll and survey the school.

Web sites that will be useful to you are:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/time>

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/relativity.htm>

<http://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/W/wormhole.html>

18. On the summit of a tall mountain, Mrs Whatsit shows the children a shadow high above the clouds which encircles the mountain.

*It was a shadow, nothing but a shadow. It was not even as tangible as a cloud....*

*What could there be about a shadow that was so terrible that she [Meg] knew there had never been before or would be again anything that would chill her with a fear that was beyond shattering, beyond crying or screaming, beyond the possibility of comfort?*

What *is* that shadow, that Dark Thing? In the context of the story, how does the Dark Thing manifest itself? Will its effect on Earth be the same as it is on Camazotz, or will it appear as another kind of evil?

You can look at the Dark Thing as a metaphor. There have been evils throughout history that have plagued mankind. What are some examples of man's inhumanity to man? Look at today's newspaper. What are the modern "shadows" that threaten society and individuality?

19. Mrs Whatsit compares human lives to that of a sonnet. The sonnet has strict rules. Fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, but with that form, the poet can say whatever he wants to. *"You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you."*

This statement of free will is at the core of the novel. Discuss the notion of free will. How free are we to make choices for our own lives? What restrictions do we face: physical, parental, societal, legal, and religious? Is there any society in which freedom of personal choice is absolute?

20. The quest to save Meg's father and subsequently Charles Wallace was a success, but the Dark Thing still looms heavily over Earth. What will happen next? Will the Dark Thing ever be defeated? Try your hand in writing a sequel. Then read the books that complete the Time Quintet by Madeleine L'Engle:

*A Wind in the Door*

*A Swiftly Tilting Planet*

*Many Waters*

*An Acceptable Time*