

THE ISLAND

A Classroom Guide

Steven Palanchuck · version 1.0, September 2026 · may be reproduced for classroom use

WHAT IT IS

The Island is a 2,000-word illustrated tale, in fourteen chapters and an epilogue. Two men are washed up on an island after a shipwreck. One draws maps, the other cuts wood. They light a fire to be seen, build a boat, each hide something, get lost one night, and discover one morning that other islands have been there behind the clouds. The wind is fair, the boat is ready. They pull the boat a little higher up the sand.

The digital edition has three parts: the tale; “Read It Three Times,” which comprises twenty-four questions on three levels, followed by three questions that read the tale alongside *The Little Prince*; and notes on how the book was made, which show how the pictures were produced and which ones were set aside, followed by twelve questions about that process. This guide unpacks every one of those questions and says, for each, what the text will support. It does not give an answer key: The tale does not contain one.

Read aloud: twenty minutes. Silent reading at the secondary level: fifteen minutes. The tale fits in one period; the discussion takes one or two more.

LANDMARKS IN THE TEXT

Structure: Fourteen short chapters and an epilogue, in chronological order except one: Chapter 11 narrates the shipwreck (that is, the beginning) after ten chapters of life on the island. The epilogue repeats the legend of the treasure from chapter 5 word for word and adds one sentence.

Refrains: “Of course” (eight times). “It is a fire,” “It is a flower,” “it is a fox,” “They are clouds”: a family of sentences that say a thing is what it is. “It is as if there is nothing else to see” (chapters 1, 4, 9, 13). “A puzzle” (chapters 1 and 11). “That is a big sentence” (twice, chapter 12). “The same thing, not the same reason” (chapters 5, 11, epilogue).

What the text does not say: The two men have no names. They are “the first” and “the second.” The text never says who they are to each other. The treasure is never described or found. The ending does not say whether they stay.

Vocabulary to prepare at the elementary level: “wreckage,” “debris,” “puzzle,” “craft” (a small boat), “keel,” “provisions,” “raft,” “cove,” “high ground” (a hill), “flask.”

FIRST READING: UNDERSTAND

UPPER ELEMENTARY, AGES TEN TO TWELVE

Goals: Reconstruct what happens, distinguish what the text says from what we imagine, notice an object that changes meaning (the fire), talk about fear without judging it.

Suggested sequence: Read aloud, without comment, with the pictures. Pause after chapter 9 (the hiding places) to check understanding. Then the eight questions, out loud, as a group. Closing activity: Draw the island as the first would have drawn it on his map, or draw one picture from the book from memory (question 8).

- 1 On the first morning, the two men find wood on the beach. Why does the tale call it “a puzzle”? (Chapter 1)
The text says that two boats are mixed together in the wreckage and that neither man could say which was which any more. That is the puzzle: pieces that come from two places. Some children will already see the two men in the wreckage.
- 2 The first counts his steps and begins a map. The second looks for water and cuts wood. Which of them is right? Do we have to choose? (Chapter 2)
The text takes neither man’s side. The second thinks, “If nobody does these things, nobody will come and do them”; the first thinks, “Before living here, you have to understand how to get out.” They finish the argument under the same tree, “both just as wet.” Let the children defend both positions.
- 3 In chapter 3, the fire on high ground means “come and find us.” What does it mean at the end of chapter 10? What is different between the two scenes? (Chapters 3 and 10)
Chapter 3: The fire means “come and find us”; they are waiting to be seen. Chapter 10: “This is the way back”; they use it to get home. The fire has not changed; they are the ones who have changed sides: They are no longer the ones waiting to be found; they are the ones coming back.
- 4 The first craft is broken by three waves. What does each man blame the other for? What does each one fail to see? (Chapter 4)
“Your axe”; “Your calculations.” Each sees very well what the other should have done; neither sees what he himself got wrong. The text says so explicitly.
- 5 The fox does not take the fish. One evening, it sits down near the fire. What happens when the two men stop trying to approach it? (Chapter 7)
The text says: “So they stop trying. They are tired, that is all.” That same evening, the fox sits down a few steps away, and nobody moves. The text refuses to identify what has changed: “At first, they look for a reason. Afterward, they stop looking.” Open question: Are there things we can love without understanding them?
- 6 Each of them was hiding something: provisions, a raft. What do they answer when asked why? Do they have good reasons? (Chapter 9)
They answer at the same time: “I did it because I was afraid.” The text does not say whether that is a good reason. Afterward, there is silence, then the fire burns anyway. Ask the children to say what they would do.
- 7 The boat is ready, and the wind is fair. The first and second pull the boat a little higher up the sand. Do they stay on the island forever? Does the text say so? (Chapter 14)
The text says only that they pull the boat “a little higher up the sand,” “not very far.” It does not say that they stay forever. This is the moment to show that a text can choose not to be explicit.
- 8 Draw the island as the first would have drawn it on his map. Then look at one picture in the book for ten seconds, close it, and redraw it from memory. (The whole tale)
The activity points to a rule used to make the pictures in the book: “A ten-year-old who looks at the picture for ten seconds must be able to redraw it from memory.” Compare the drawings with one another, not with the illustration.

SECOND READING: INTERPRET

SECONDARY

Goals: Read and appreciate a literary text, identify devices and say what they do to meaning, form an interpretation and support it with the text, write in the style of the text.

Suggested sequence: Individual reading, then three chapters chosen by the students and read aloud. Questions 1 to 7 in teams of three, with a requirement to quote. Question 8 as individual written work: a fifteenth chapter of 150 to 300 words, in the manner of the tale (short sentences, at least one refrain, no names).

- 1 The tale repeats sentences: “Of course,” “It is a fire,” and “It is as if there is nothing else.” Find them. What does repetition do to the meaning of each scene? (The whole tale)
 Repetition does two things: It sets a tone (the narrator observes; he is not surprised), and it links distant scenes. “It is a fire” in chapter 3 (it is always hungry) and chapter 5 (nobody feeds it right away): It is the same sentence, but the second time, we know that something has cooled between them.
- 2 The narrator gives the two men no names and never says who they are to each other. What relationships between them does the text allow you to imagine? Which are less plausible? What changes with each hypothesis? (The whole tale)
 The text rules out only one hypothesis: that they are indifferent strangers. Everything else is open. The dedication and the author’s note, at the end of the book, give a subtle clue. Discuss what each hypothesis changes in the reading of chapters 9 and 14. Do not settle it in class.
- 3 The treasure is “priceless,” “irreplaceable,” and “cannot be found.” What example, real or imagined, could fit all three at once? Does the tale say where the treasure is? (Chapter 5 and epilogue)
 The text never says where the treasure is. It says what it is (priceless, irreplaceable, unfindable) and what anyone would do with it if it could be found (never trade it). Students often propose: the other man, life on the island, the act of giving up the search. All can be defended; none is explicit.
- 4 The shipwreck is described in chapter 11, after we learn about life on the island. Why tell the beginning so late? What would the story lose if this chapter came first? (Chapter 11)
 Placed at the beginning, the shipwreck would make the tale a survival story; we would know at once that they were looking for the same thing, “perhaps not for the same reason.” Placed in chapter 11, it comes after the hiding places and before the new boat: It explains the past at the moment they decide not to rebuild it (“they do not rebuild the first’s old boat, or the second’s”). What the story would lose: the mystery of the hiding places and the surprise that the same fear led both men to the same decision.
- 5 After the first and second put up a windbreak, bring water, and talk about moving the flower-that-grew-fast, the flower bows its head. When they stop, it stands up straight. The story says, “They will never know whether it was because of them or thanks to them.” What difference does it make to them that they never know? Where else in the tale do you find the same situation? (Chapter 6)
 The text is clear: They will never know, and they stop wondering. The same situation returns in chapter 7: They stop trying to approach the fox, and one evening, the fox sits down by the fire. The question is about care, not about the flower. Many students have recognized a situation they have experienced (involving a friend, a pet, a parent). Leaving the question open already provides an answer.
- 6 “That is a big sentence”: The tale says this twice in the same chapter. What are the two sentences, and why are they big? Imagine a sentence that would be big for one of the two men at another moment in the tale. (Chapter 12)
 The two sentences: “He wants help” and “He repairs it.” They are big because they contradict how each man was in chapter 2 (“He does not want help” and “He does not know how to help”). Each student’s “big sentence” is the most personal piece of work in the sequence; do not require it to be read aloud.
- 7 The bank of clouds does not move for thirteen chapters, then the wind turns. What part do the clouds play during that time? Support your answer with two passages. (Chapters 1 to 13)
 The notes on the making of the tale include the instruction that governed the pictures: “The clouds are not the danger. They are the limit of the gaze.” A way of looking that becomes an obstacle because it is no longer questioned: “Eventually, they stopped looking at it.”

8 Write chapter 15.

Suggested criteria: faithfulness to the tone (observation, no explanation), at least one refrain used to good purpose, no disclosure of what the tale keeps silent (no names, no treasure found), a short last sentence.

THIRD READING: DISCUSS

COLLEGE LEVEL: PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE

Goals: Pose a problem from a text; distinguish between explaining, justifying, and excusing; build and assess an argument; recognize an undecidable question and draw a tenable position from it.

Suggested sequence: Read first. One period: questions 1 to 6, in plenary or in workshops, with a requirement to anchor every claim in a chapter. One period: question 7 as a short writing exercise, then question 8 as a structured debate (two sides, preparation time, two rounds, a synthesis from a third party).

- 1 When the first and second pull the boat “a little higher up the sand” but “not very far,” is that a decision? Distinguish between choosing, giving up, and putting off. Is not choosing still a choice? (Chapter 14)
The movement is minimal (“a little higher,” “not very far”), and it is undertaken by the two men, without a word. One can read it as a decision (they choose to stay today), a giving up (they do not leave), or a postponement (they keep the possibility open). The distinction between deliberating, choosing, and abstaining is the heart of the discussion. The formula “not choosing is still a choice” deserves to be tested against the text rather than quoted.
- 2 The fire is originally addressed to others: “Come and find us.” Then it becomes a landmark for the men themselves: “This is the way back.” Can a sign change meaning without changing form? Does its meaning come from whoever made it, from whoever uses it, or from the situation? (Chapters 3 and 10)
The same sign (a fire) changes its aspect without changing its form. Teacher suggestion: A sign has meaning only for the one it is addressed to; here, the fire ends up addressed to the men who lit it. This can be linked to the question of language as a form of address to another and to what becomes of a call when no one answers it.
- 3 “I did it because I was afraid,” they both say. Does fear explain or excuse? Do the simultaneous answers relieve the blame or intensify it? (Chapter 9)
“Because I was afraid” is an explanation (a cause) that the text does not turn into an excuse (a lifting of the fault). The simultaneity makes each man at once accuser and accused: The fault is not erased; it is shared. The silence that follows and then the fire “anyway” say that the relationship goes on without the fault being settled.
- 4 A treasure that “whoever found it would never trade it, not for anything.” What is something worth if it has no price? What hypotheses does the text allow about what the treasure is? Compare at least two interpretations using specific passages. (Chapter 5 and epilogue)
What has no price cannot be traded: The legend says so in its own way (“would never trade it, not for anything”). Teacher suggestion: In the distinction between what has a price and what has dignity, the treasure is defined by a refusal to trade, not by a value. Each candidate (the other man, the life they built, the end of the search) must be defended with a passage.
- 5 “Nobody ever knew what became of those who did not come back.” Propose at least two readings of this last sentence. Does the text favour one? What does the one we choose say about us? (Epilogue)
The epilogue does not settle the question and is built not to: It includes the same sentence, plus one more. Discuss what a reader projects by choosing death or secrecy and whether the text allows a third reading: Those who did not come back no longer needed to.

- 6 They end up no longer looking at the bank of clouds; then, the wind turns. Does the change come from paying attention, not paying attention, chance, or something else? (Chapter 13)
The text says the wind turns the moment they stop looking at the clouds. One can read it as saying that revelation requires letting go of the attention fixed on the obstacle or as a mere coincidence the text refuses to comment on. The question is about the relation between attention and availability.
- 7 The notes on the making, later in this book, say that the tale was first written for one person. Can a text addressed to one person have value for many people? What in the tale belongs to everyone, and what belongs to only one person?
The book was written for one person and published for everyone, with its dedication and its author's note. Teacher suggestion: Can a singular text addressed to a specific person be read by a third party without being betrayed? What in the tale can only be understood by two, and what can be understood by anyone?
- 8 Debate this question from both sides: Did the two men find what they were looking for? Defend opposing answers using the text alone.
The debate forces a distinction between "finding the treasure" and "giving up the search" as two possible ends to the legend. The side arguing that they found it relies on chapter 14 and the epilogue; the side arguing that they did not, on chapter 13 ("They could set out again. Keep searching") and on the fact that the boat stays ready.

READING ALONGSIDE ANOTHER BOOK

The Little Prince features a rose and a fox; *The Island* has a flower and a fox. This is not a coincidence, and it is not an imitation: It is a deliberate counterpoint. Here are three questions to explore it. (College)

- 1 In *The Little Prince*, the rose seeks to be loved, and the fox asks to be tamed; both of them speak. In *The Island*, the flower bows its head when it is looked after, and the fox sits down by the fire on the evening the men stop approaching it; neither says a word. What does the silence change? (Chapters 6 and 7)
In *The Little Prince*, the rose and the fox speak: They ask, and they explain ("tame," "responsible"). In *The Island*, the flower and the fox say nothing; it is the men who try interacting with them, then stop. Teacher suggestion: The silence shifts the burden onto the men; they are the ones who learn, or not, without being told. Plan to read chapters XX and XXI of *The Little Prince*.
- 2 In *The Little Prince*, the author writes, "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." In *The Island*, nobody tames anybody, and the book still ends with two men pulling the boat a little higher up the sand. Do the two books say the same thing about attachment, or the opposite? Support your answer with chapters 6, 7 and 14.
In *The Little Prince*, the fox's sentence makes attachment a duty that follows taming. In *The Island*, the flower straightens up when the men stop looking after it (chapter 6), the fox comes when they stop trying to interact with it (chapter 7), and the two men pull the boat a little higher up the sand without making any commitment (chapter 14). Two defensible claims: The books have opposing messages (duty against letting go); they say the same thing from opposing directions (we do not possess what we love). Do not settle the discussion.
- 3 The notes on the making of *The Island* say the flower and the fox were forbidden to be in the same picture and explain why. What does a book owe to those that came before it, imitation, distance, or acknowledgement? Where does *The Island* stand?
The notes acknowledge the obligation: "I owe him that refusal." Three stances are in the question: imitate, deviate, acknowledge. *The Island* does the last two. Have students look for other books that acknowledge their debt; discuss what an acknowledgement is worth when it is placed in the notes rather than in the tale.

LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

Elementary, French, language of instruction: Read a variety of texts, appreciate literary works, communicate orally. Secondary, French: read and appreciate a variety of texts, write a variety of texts, communicate orally in a variety of ways. College: Philosophy (rationality, the human being, ethics), French (literature and the imagination). The tale also lends itself to discussion in Culture and Citizenship in Quebec, around dialogue and the recognition of the other. The exact wording of the competencies varies from one version of the programs to another; this guide refers to them without claiming to replace them. Teachers outside Quebec will find the equivalent strands in their own language arts, literature, and philosophy programs.

REREADING THE MAKING: THE PICTURES AND THE PROGRAM

The illustrations were conceived and directed by the author and produced with the help of an artificial intelligence program. The colophon says so; the notes on the making of the book show the pictures that were set aside and why; the last two pages own the choice in the first person and ask twelve questions in four groups (the process, the result, what it is worth, what it says). The debate is meant to stay unresolved. Suitable from secondary to college level; groups 3 and 4 call for preparation and lend themselves to structured debate.

- 1 In these notes, what did the author do himself, and what did the program do? Find three decisions stated in so many words. (“The Rule”; “Seven Corrections, Nothing Else”)
The notes name what the author did: write the text before the pictures, write the rule, write the instructions, and then compare, set aside, correct seven points and discard the rest, check every picture against a list of prohibitions. They name what the program did: produce variants from the instructions. The discussion is about the share of judgment, without denying the share of execution.
- 2 Sixty-five pictures kept, twenty-four in the book, and the attempts discarded along the way not counted. What became of the others, and why do the notes show some of them rather than leave them out?
Sixty-five kept, twenty-four in the book, the discarded attempts not counted. The rejections are shown because a book illustrated this way is judged on its choices, and a choice cannot be judged without seeing what was refused. Point out that most books do not show their drafts; ask why this one insisted on it.
- 3 “A short instruction, one correction at a time, and the rejection of anything that I had not asked for.” Is that a painter’s method, an art director’s, a patron’s, or someone else’s? What is missing from this method for it to be thought of as drawing?
All four candidates can be defended: the painter also corrects one thing at a time; the art director commissions and refuses; the patron pays and chooses. What is missing for this to be thought of as a drawing? The human hand and the time it spends. Discuss whether the absence of the hand disqualifies the work or only changes its name.
- 4 The rule said a ten-year-old must be able to redraw the picture from memory. Choose one picture from the book and one that was set aside. Which one obeys the rule? What was lost, and what was gained?
The rule is a criterion of simplification. The pairs in the notes (fire, shelter, a hundred islands, the rowboat) provide cases. Lost: detail, atmosphere, sometimes beauty. Gained: legibility, faithfulness to the text, a picture one can hold in memory. Let students defend a picture that was set aside if they like it better.
- 5 Look at the twenty-three pictures of the tale without reading the text. What do they tell on their own? Where does the text say something other than the pictures? Why did the book side with the text every time?
An exercise in reading the pictures alone: They tell of a shipwreck, a fire, a shelter, a boat, a hundred islands; they tell neither of the hiding places nor of fear. Where the text said something else, the book followed the text (the rowboat removed, the island hidden until chapter 13). Why: the text was sealed before the pictures; that is a chosen hierarchy, open to discussion.

- 6 The notes say some pictures were “beautiful and false.” False compared with what? Can a picture be true if nobody painted it?
False with respect to the story (a rowboat that does not yet exist) or with respect to the rule (a realistic seascape). The second question opens onto truth in art: Can a picture be right without a human hand, or does rightness presuppose an embodied intention? Do not resolve the discussion.
- 7 Who is the author of these pictures? The one who wrote the instructions, the one who set aside sixty attempts, the artificial intelligence program, or the artists whose work may have been used to train it, with or without their consent? Defend at least two answers, then say what each one asks of us.
Four candidates to hold together. In Canada, the status of works produced with an artificial intelligence program is still debated; case law puts the emphasis on the human contribution of skill and judgment, and the moral question is not reducible to the legal one. The fourth candidate (the artists whose work may have been used in training) opens onto consent and payment; the precise training corpus of the artificial intelligence program used is not documented here. Have students write what each answer asks: of the author, the publisher, the reader, and the law.
- 8 The colophon says in one line how the pictures were made; the cover does not. Where in a book should that information be? What changes for the reader depending on whether they learn it before or after reading? Do we need a law, a label, or trust?
The question is about the place of a piece of information, then about the means of requiring it. Colophon: That is where production notes belong. Cover: The reader chooses before opening. Law, label, or trust: These are three regimes, each with its costs; the European Union has chosen labelling for some content, but Canada has not yet decided. Discuss what would happen to this book under each regime.
- 9 An illustrator could have made these pictures. What would the book have gained? What would it have lost? Who lost something when the author chose the program, and who gained?
Gained with an illustrator: a hand, a style that belongs to no one else, a trade supported. Lost: time, cost, picture-by-picture control; nothing obliges us to believe the book would have been worse. Who lost: an illustrator not hired, and perhaps the painters in the corpus; who gained: a lone author who was able to make an illustrated book. Have students articulate both sides.
- 10 The tale is about two men who make do with what they have: wreckage, an axe, a map. The book was made the same way. Is that an excuse, a form of consistency, or nothing at all?
The link between the making and the tale: making do with what one has. Three readings: an excuse (a justification after the fact), a form of consistency (the book practises what it tells), nothing (a coincidence being over-read). Teacher suggestion: The question is there to keep the debate from taking place outside the book.
- 11 Should a child who loves these pictures know how they were made? If the child knows, will the pictures be loved differently? What does that say about what we love in a picture?
A question about loving a picture and knowing how it was made. Students often recognize the reverse experience (a song loved less once they knew). What it says: We also love an intention, a story, a face behind the picture, or else only the picture. Both positions are tenable; have students defend them with examples from outside the book.
- 12 Debate the following, from both sides, with these notes as the only source: On what conditions should a school, a library, or a reader accept, or refuse, a book illustrated this way? Write the conditions, not only the verdict.
A debate from both camps, with the notes as the only resource to prevent arguing from what one does not know. For: transparency, visible judgment, price, the possibility for a lone author to make an illustrated book. Against: illustrators’ work, the risk of training on works without consent, the uniformity of the pictures, the risk that a school endorses a contested process. The required output is the list of conditions, not the verdict: Have it written and compared between sides.

*This guide accompanies the digital edition of *The Island* (Steven Palanchuck, 2026). It is free and may be reproduced for classroom use. The questions are those of the sections “Read It Three Times” and “Rereading the Making” in the book.*