



# **Books That Teach & Model Critical Thinking Skills**

# Books That Teach & Model Critical Thinking Skills

Look closely enough, and you will find kids solving problems in all kinds of books — whether it's Brian Robeson surviving the wilderness all alone in *Hatchet*, or little Jayden creating a container garden out of recycled materials in *Jayden's Impossible Garden*. Because of the way it demonstrates perseverance and resourcefulness, trial-and-error problem-solving is a centerpiece of many stories for kids.

Books that blend critical thinking and kid appeal can be harder to find. One book that succeeds in examining crucial critical thinking concepts while maintaining its sense of humor is *Killer Underwear Invasion* by Elise Gravel. This book deserves a special position at the top of this list because its silly cartoons and clear examples demonstrate the difference between fact and opinion, disinformation and misinformation, and hearsay versus authoritative content for readers of all ages.

First Book's Title Selection Team recommends the following books that engage, entertain, and introduce age-appropriate critical thinking and problem-solving problems. These titles were available on the [First Book Marketplace](#) at the time of publication.

## PREK-GRADE 1

Concepts like opposites, sorting, and comparison help to lay the groundwork for higher-level skills. Books that ask questions about our observable world are the basis for critical thinking.

***Why Is It Hot?*** and ***Why Does It Rain?*** by Eric Carle. Board books in The World of Eric Carle series encourage pre-readers to look at the world around them and ask questions.

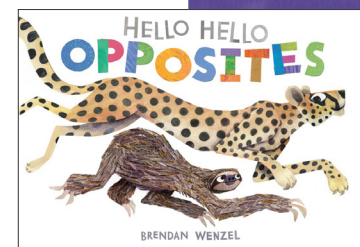
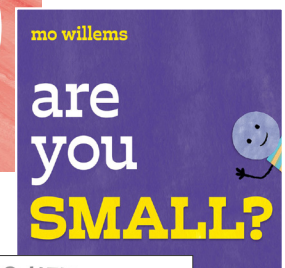
In ***Not Just the Driver!***, author Sara Holly Ackerman looks closely at a favorite subject to show that every vehicle and transportation system involves multiple processes and a team of workers. It's a great model of analytical observation.

***Are You Small?*** by Mo Willems. Physical size is just one of many attributes in this book that looks at small objects (and pets!) and considers them in terms of their impact. "A baby tooth is small... but it is a BIG deal when one comes out!"

***Hello Hello Opposites*** and ***Hello Hello Colors*** by Brendan Wenzel. Books that feature color words and opposites are great ways to introduce concepts such as sorting and classification and teach important descriptive vocabulary.



FIND THESE BOOKS & MORE ON THE FIRST BOOK MARKETPLACE



Look for books that feature characters achieving success via trial and error — one of the most basic problem-solving techniques. Books about fixing or inventing things also demonstrate these skills. Emerging readers have lots of books about solving community problems to choose from.



Breaking an action into parts is an essential piece of process writing. In *I Want an Apple* by David L. Harrison, a kid calls upon their body parts to contribute their skills. “Clever hands, touch the apple. Sharp teeth, bite the apple.” Analysis of process is a sophisticated problem-solving skill.

In *Space: The Final Pooping Frontier*, Annabeth Bondor-Stone answers the first question that everyone always asks. Readers learn about the succession of solutions created by NASA scientists to solve the problem of weightless elimination, eventually putting the question to the general public.

What to do when there’s no room to play? In *The Floating Field* by Scott Riley, a group of soccer players on an island in Thailand tackle this problem. They scavenge wood planks to make a wobbly surface and eventually achieve enough attention to upgrade their field. This true story makes a great read-aloud.

Poor Amy Wu! She tripped and squashed her family’s heirloom paper lantern right before the lantern parade! In *Amy Wu and the Lantern Festival* by Kat Zhang, Amy attempts to fix the lantern before asking for Dad’s help.

Nelson Molina has a knack for finding the possibilities in items that others consider worthless. In *Gifts from the Garbage Truck*, author Andrew Larsen tells Nelson’s story of building birdhouses out of scrap wood as a child and growing up to create New York City’s “Treasures in the Trash” exhibit. This book is about rescuing, repairing, and repurposing discarded objects and inspires readers to take a second look at items they might be ready to throw out.

*Cookie Time* by Jessie Sima. Kat and Ari can’t wait for Grandpa’s cookies to come out of the oven — so they build a time machine to take them to the future! But setting their machine to exactly the right time destination proves to be harder than it looks. Encourage students to think about the implications of time travel as Kat and Ari touch down in the future and in the past.

Crows are the animal kingdom’s ultimate problem solvers, and in *Crick, Crack, Crow!* by Janet Lord, readers meet a mischievous crow who uses objects to play, gets himself out of (and into) trouble, and calls to his community for help when he finds himself in more trouble than he can handle alone.

Many beginning readers and early chapter books are all about characters identifying and solving problems. Here are two series that work for emerging readers.

*The Gingerbread Man: Class Pet on the Loose* by Laura Murray. When it’s his turn to feed the class pet, Gingerbread Man finds a mystery afoot! Fun rhymes and a graphic novel format make this and other books in this series an appealing choice as Gingerbread Man employs problem-solving strategies to save the day.

Ali Tahir is as good at finding his way out of trouble as he is at getting into it. Start with *Ali the Great and the Market Mishap*, in which Ali loses track of little brother Fateh... and then finds him by applying prior knowledge to a new environment. Eight books in this charming series by Saadia Faruqi are already available, with more on the way.

## GRADES 4-6

Books for independent readers are all about setting up a problem and knocking it down — whether the problem is surviving a difficult situation or overcoming injustice. Books about urban legends and cryptids are fun ways to exercise critical thinking.

Climate change and the environment are important subjects. Read about young people working to raise awareness and fight for the future in *We Have a Dream: Meet 30 Young Indigenous People and People of Color Protecting the Planet* by Mya-Rose Craig. From clean water and deforestation to climate justice, these problems — and the activists' actions — are spelled out clearly and succinctly.

Farah can't wait to attend geology camp this summer! But her family just can't swing the expense. In *Farah Rocks Summer Break*, the second in the Farah Rocks series by Susan Muaddi Darraj, Farah tries various odd jobs, learning the pros and cons of yard sales, lawnmowing, and tutoring. When she discovers a competitor who plays dirty, how will she raise enough money for camp?



Award-winning author Dusti Bowling returns to Arizona with another tale of survival in *Across the Desert*. Jolene loves following the live-streamed adventures of Addie Earhart, who pilots an ultralight plane on solo flights. When Addie crashes, it is up to Jolene, armed only with a hand-drawn map and a stolen cell phone, to trek across the desert to save her.

Do you believe in Bigfoot? Podcaster and journalist Laura Krantz lays out evidence and myth in *The Search for Sasquatch (A Wild Thing Book)*. Gripping stories of strange encounters are interspersed with discussions of the scientific method and critical thinking concepts. Keep an open mind!

Introverted Maya has trouble making friends, and fifth grade poses a special challenge. In the illustrated novel *Maya and the Robot* by Eve Ewing, a forgotten homemade robot, which Maya gets up and running using her science skills, is the catalyst for Maya to solve her problems. Part friend, part science fair project, Ralph the robot becomes part of the family.

## GRADES 7-9



Biographies of inventors or social problem solvers demonstrate real people solving real problems. Two great examples include William Kamkwamba (*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*) and Victor Hugo Green, publisher of the *Green Book*, which listed hotels and restaurants that welcomed Black travelers. In fiction, look for characters who must learn how to harness new powers — always a great middle school metaphor.

In *Boy 2.0* by Jumbies author Tracey Baptiste, Coal has just arrived in his latest foster home, a big, noisy, nosy family named the McKays. Coal is slow to trust them, especially since he recently acquired a big secret — Coal can turn invisible. Adjusting to his new power and learning to trust his new friends gains urgency when a new threat appears.

**Alone** by Megan E. Freeman. One morning, Maddie wakes up in her small Colorado town to find that she is all alone. The town has been mysteriously evacuated and cut off from power, phones, and the internet – how will she survive looters, natural disasters, wild animals, and crushing loneliness? Survival in a small-town environment draws on everyday skills rather than wilderness skills, making this a more relatable context.

**Shift Happens: The History of Labor in the United States** by J. Albert Mann. This comprehensive history of labor tells the story of struggles, setbacks, and triumphs, encouraging readers to think critically about economic growth, collective action, and justice. A witty authorial voice and short chapters on everything from indentured servitude to the gig economy make this book a surprisingly fun and accessible read.

Manuela “Mani” Semilla is firmly opposed to the trip to Guatemala that her mom is planning for her thirteenth birthday. If her mom sacrificed so much for a safer life in the U.S., why should Mani even want to visit? In **Mani Semilla Finds her Quetzal Voice** by Anna Lapera, what Mani learns about her family’s history shows her how to stand up against the culture of harassment at her own school.

Plenty of problem-solving goes into a successful heist. And in **Thieves’ Gambit** by Kayvion Lewis, master thief and escape artist Ross Quest must pull off (and survive) a series of dangerous, international heists to save her mom’s life. First in a series, *Thieves’ Gambit* is a fast-paced, thrilling ride.

## GRADES 10-12

Older readers may be ready to learn about more nuanced problems, or problems that may seem insurmountable. Characters who are victims of domestic gaslighting or worse will evoke a sympathetic response from high school readers.

Horror movies have their own kind of logic, and in **You’re Not Supposed to Die Tonight** by Kalynn Bayron, Charity and her girlfriend Bezi must apply what they know — and solve for the serial killer’s motive — if they are to survive a slasher who has invaded their summer camp.

In **My Father, The Panda Killer**, author Jamie Jo Hoang introduces readers to Jane, an American teenager, and her dad, Phúc, who fled Vietnam in 1975. Phúc can’t control his temper, and Jane must somehow learn why before she goes to college and leaves her brother Paul unprotected.

In **Work with What You Got: A Memoir**, wrestler and wheelchair racer Zion Clark tells his story of growing up in foster care, navigating his disability, and achieving success. The reader is treated to the stories of underdog schools, inspiring coaches, and fellow athletes.

**Pick the Lock** by A.S. King follows high school student Jane as she lobbies to attend school for the first time and gradually realizes that her family is not normal. When her punk rocker mother is not touring, she is confined to a system of tubes in the house. Jane’s aunt Finch may be a shapeshifter. And her father may not be as infallible as he claims. Finding the truth amid the untruths, Jane learns to see what’s really going on.



**FIRST BOOK** 

