David Copperfield

Charles Dickens

About the author
Charles Dickens, the most popular writer of the Victorian age, was born near Portsmouth, England, in 1812 and died in Kent in 1870. When his father was thrown into debtors’ prison, young Charles was taken out of school and forced to work in a shoe-polish factory, which may help explain the presence of so many abandoned and victimised children in his novels. As a young man he worked as a reporter before starting his career as a fictional writer in 1833. In his novels, short stories and essays, Dickens combined hilarious comedy with a scathing criticism of the inhuman features of Victorian industrial society. Many of his novels – Great Expectations, A Christmas Carol, Oliver Twist, etc., have been made into first-rate TV and film versions.

For more details see the Introduction.

Summary
David Copperfield is the story of the narrator’s life from early childhood to adulthood. In it, David describes all the obstacles he had to overcome in order to acquire peace of mind and economic stability.

Chapters 1–2: David enjoys a happy childhood with his mother and her faithful servant, Peggotty, until his mother marries again and proves powerless to protect him from the cruelty of his stepfather, Mr Murdstone.

Chapters 3–4: Mr Murdstone sends David to a boarding school in London where he makes friends with Steerforth and Traddles. When David’s mother and her baby brother die, David is sent to work at Mr Quinion’s business.

Chapters 5–6: While he works at the wine-bottling business David stays at Mr Micawber’s house but when the latter leaves London, owing to his debts, David decides to go in search of his only relative, Miss Trotwood, whom he finds in Dover. David is sent to school again and becomes a great friend of Agnes Wickfield’s, at whose house he stays when he’s not at school.

Chapters 7–8: After finishing school David goes to Yarmouth to visit Peggotty, who has married Mr Barkis. There, he meets Steerforth who seems upset that Emily, Mr Peggotty’s niece, is marrying her friend Ham. At Mr Spenlow’s, with whom David is going to study law, he falls in love with Dora, his daughter.

Chapters 9–10: David arrives at Yarmouth after Mr Barkis’s death. There he hears that Emily has run off with Steerforth. Mr Peggotty is devastated and starts searching for her.

Back in London David proposes to Dora and is accepted.

Chapters 11–12: When Miss Trotwood informs David that she has lost all her money, all his plans collapse. He starts learning shorthand to find a good job in order to be able to marry Dora. In the meantime, Uriah Heep, a disgusting man who lives with the Wickfields, wants to marry Agnes. Mr Peggotty keeps looking for Emily.

Chapters 13–14: David and Dora marry thanks to the money he has earned by writing stories. Dora proves to be a very incompetent housewife, but David loves her all the same. Mr Peggotty hears that Emily has left Steerforth and asks an old friend of hers, Martha Endells, to look for her in London. Martha locates Emily and Mr Peggotty decides to emigrate to Australia with her and the Micawbers, now that Mr Micawber has got rid of Uriah Heep and exposed him as a thief.

Chapters 15–16: Dora falls ill and dies and, in Yarmouth, a terrible storm kills Ham and Steerforth. Moreover, all the rest of David’s friends, except for Miss Peggotty and Traddles, leave for Australia. David travels abroad to try to forget Dora but he falls ill and returns to England. David eventually marries Agnes, who had always loved him, has five children and becomes a famous writer.

Background and themes
David Copperfield was published in instalments from 1849 to 1850 and in book form in 1850. Largely autobiographical, it includes many personal experiences Dickens was planning to put into an autobiography which he never got to complete. In the novel there are obvious
Teacher’s notes

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references to the time Dickens worked in a factory, to his schooling and his reading habits, to the first time he fell in love, and to how he became a novelist.

The text can be said to be highly didactic, as it makes clear points concerning values, such as:

– Hardships in life can be overcome by hard work and an honest behaviour.
– Goodness has nothing to do with social position.
– Greed and ambition corrupt people's judgement and behaviour.
– Suffering helps us mature.

Discussion activities

Introduction

Before reading

1 Research: Popular novelists

Have students find out the name of the most popular nineteenth century writer in their own country. Then tell them that Dickens is considered the most popular writer in England in the same century.

While reading

2 Read and discuss: Childhood

Have students discuss what we’re told about the novel on page v.

This story starts when David is a child. Does this make the story more interesting? Why/Why not?

After reading

3 Check: Dickens’s stories

Have students count the number of stories that appear in Dickens’s biography on pages vi and vii and then say which they have heard of.

Chapters 1–2

While reading

4 Discuss: Boy or girl?

Have students discuss the following:

Miss Trotwood wanted Mrs Copperfield to have a girl. Do you know people like her in your family? Are the young people in your family mostly boys or girls?

5 Discuss: Children's intuition

Have students discuss the following:

David feels that Mr Murdstone is not a good person. Did you ever feel something like that when you were small?

6 Predict: Mr Murdstone

Neither Peggotty nor David likes Mr Murdstone. What will he do to David?

7 Discuss: Physical punishment

Have students discuss the following:

Do children learn more when they are hit or when they are afraid? Are children hit in schools today? Were your parents hit at school?

After reading

8 Read carefully and research: No parents

Have students count how many children in this section don’t have either one or the two parents and then discuss with them or have them do research on why people died much younger in the UK at the time of the story.

9 Discuss: Psychological violence

Have students discuss the following:

Mr Murdstone calls David a bad and stupid boy and his mother a silly woman. Why are those words so bad for them? How does he make them feel?

10 Write: Peggotty’s letter

Have students write the letter Peggotty sends Mr Peggotty and Emily telling them that David isn’t a bad boy (page 8).

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

11 Guess: Titles

Have students read the titles of Chapters 3 and 4 and then guess what David’s new school, Salem House, will be like. Then they can guess what will happen in Chapter 4 to make David grow up.

While reading

12 Write: Mr Barkis’s questions

Have students write five questions Mr Barkis may have asked David about Peggotty. Then make them exchange the questions and answer them.

13 Discuss: Is Steerforth a gentleman?

Have students discuss the following:

Is Mr Mell rude to Steerforth? Is Steerforth rude to Mr Mell? Why doesn’t Mr Creakle ask Steerforth to leave? Who’s a true gentleman, Steerforth or Mr Mell?

14 Guess: Clara and her baby

At the top of page 18 it says ’I did not see either (my mother or the baby) again.’ What will happen to Clara and the baby?

15 Discuss: Families

Have students compare how David feels at Mr Murdstone’s house and at Mr Peggotty’s.

After reading

16 Discuss: Boarding schools

Have students discuss the pros and cons of boarding schools. Would you like to sleep at school like David does? Is his school more fun than your school / the school you went to? Would you miss your parents / your home?

17 Check and write: David’s life now

Have students check whether what they predicted about Chapter 4 in Activity 11 was right or wrong. Then have them write down all the bad things that happen to David in this chapter.
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Chapters 5–6
While reading
18 Research: Dickens's life
Have students find out where Charles worked when he was a child and what his father was like with money. Then they can relate the information to what David did in Mr Quinion's business and to Mr Micawber's personality.

19 Write: David's letter
Have students write the letter David sends Peggotty asking her for money and for Miss Trotwood's address.

After reading
20 Role play: The Murdstones and Miss Trotwood
Have students role play the dialogue between the Murdstones and Miss Trotwood on page 26.

Chapters 7–8
While reading
21 Discuss: Steerforth's personality
Have students discuss what else we learn about Steerforth in these chapters.

22 Guess: David's loved one
Have students discuss this:
In Chapter 8 we find out that David is in love with Dora Spenlow. Do you think that he will marry her? Why/Why not?

After reading
23 Artwork: A love card
Have students make Uriah Heep's card for Agnes. Uriah Heep seems to be in love with Agnes. Design the card that he's planning to send her.

24 Role play: Steerforth's problems
In pairs, have students write down and then role play the dialogue that Steerforth has with his doctor about his unhappiness (page 35).

Chapters 9–10
While reading
25 Discuss: Debt
Just like Dickens's father, Mr Micawber liked to spend more than what he earned. Have students discuss the problems that people like them bring to their families.

26 Guess: Steerforth in Yarmouth
Have students guess why Rosa Dartle says that Steerforth is acting very strangely (page 45).

After reading
27 Write: An epitaph is an inscription on a tombstone in memory of the one who has been buried there. In groups have students write the epitaph on Mr Barkis's tombstone.

28 Write: Dora's letters
Have students write some of the letters Dora sends David (page 53).

Chapters 11–12
While reading
29 Discuss: The importance of money
Have students discuss all that David can't do now that his aunt is poor. Is Dickens right or wrong in giving such importance to money in the story?

30 Discuss: Drink
Dickens is a very didactic writer. Have students discuss what he wants to teach us by making Mr Wickfield a man who drinks so much.

After reading
31 Guess: David's future with Dora
Have students guess what their future together will be like.

Chapters 13–14
While reading
32 Discuss: Dora's failure as a housewife
Have students discuss what was wrong with Dora.

33 Discuss: Emily's case
Have students discuss society in Dickens's time regarding 'fallen' women. Why doesn't Emily want to see her family again? Why is Mr Peggotty planning to go to Australia with her?

After reading
34 Write: Heep's letter of apology
In pairs, have students write Heep's letters to Mr Wickfield, to Agnes and to Miss Trotwood.

Chapters 15–16
While reading
35 Discuss: Jip's death
Jip dies at the same time as its owner. Have students discuss the strong love that exists between dogs and their owners.

36 Write: Emily's letter
Emily has written a letter to Ham (page 83). Have students write it down in pairs.

After reading
37 Research: Australia
Mr Peggotty and Mr Micawber decide to leave for Australia. Have students research on a) which other countries, apart from Australia, belonged to the British Empire and b) why the two families chose to go there.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.