

**Matilda**  
by  
**Roald Dahl****Book Information**

Roald Dahl, Matilda  
Quiz Number: 5429  
Puffin, 1998  
ISBN 0-14-130106-6; LCCN  
240 Pages  
Book Level: 5.0  
Interest Level: MG

Matilda applies her untapped mental powers to rid the school of the evil, child-hating headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, and to restore her nice teacher, Miss Honey, to financial security.

**Award:** Bilby Award; Misc./Other; State Award

**Topics:** Community Life, School;  
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;  
Humor/Funny, Funny; Popular Groupings,  
Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred  
Reviews; Read Now with Power Up  
Recommended Lists, Onward and Upward:  
Change

**Main Characters**

Lavender, Hortensia, Bruce Bogtrotter, Amanda Thripp, Eric Ink, Nigel Hicks students at Crunchem Hall Primary School

Matilda Wormwood a brilliant young girl whose parents do not want to be bothered with her

Miss Jennifer Honey Matilda's primary school teacher, who recognizes Matilda's genius and tries to help her

Miss Trunchbull the mean Headmistress of Crunchem Hall Primary School

Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood Matilda's parents, who do not show their daughter any affection or concern

Mrs. Phelps the public librarian who helps Matilda choose books to read

**Vocabulary**

**asinine** silly or stupid

**diabolical** evil

**eccentricities** abnormal personality traits

**formidable** difficult, or arousing fear

**platinum blonde** a very light, silver-blond hair color, especially when artificially produced

**tyrannical** characteristic of someone who rules in a harsh and cruel manner

**Synopsis**

Matilda Wormwood is a four-year-old genius whose parents take no interest in her. She is left by herself most afternoons while her father sells used cars and her mother plays bingo. To occupy her time, she ventures to the public library where Mrs. Phelps, the librarian, helps her choose books to read. The librarian is amazed at Matilda's reading ability. She realizes that such a brilliant child should not be ignored by her parents, but she is determined to mind her own business.

Matilda's parents treat her terribly. She knows it is wrong to hate them, but she does. She decides that for each time they do something horrible to her, she will get back at them in her own way. Comical episodes follow. Matilda puts superglue in her father's hat, borrows a talking parrot to make her parents believe there is a ghost in their home, and pours platinum-blond hair dye in her father's hair tonic.

Because of her parents' lack of interest, they are late enrolling her in primary school. However, at five-and-a-half-years old, she is sent to Crunchem Hall Primary School and is placed in Miss Jennifer Honey's classroom. Miss Honey quickly recognizes Matilda as a child genius and informs Miss Trunchbull, the Headmistress, so Matilda can be moved to a higher class. Miss Trunchbull, a tyrannical woman, claims Matilda is a troublemaker who will remain where she is. Miss Honey is upset with Miss Trunchbull's decision and decides to help Matilda by visiting the Wormwoods to volunteer to coach Matilda after school. Matilda's parents do not welcome the idea that their daughter is a genius. In fact, Mrs. Wormwood believes her daughter will never find a successful husband by being brainy, but rather by being beautiful. Defeated, Miss Honey leaves.

## Matilda by Roald Dahl

Meanwhile, Matilda is learning all about Miss Trunchbull's brutal behavior towards the children. She witnesses the Headmistress picking up Amanda Thripp by her pigtails and throwing her over a fence, making Bruce Bogtrotter eat an entire chocolate cake, sending Nigel Hicks to stand on one leg in the corner, and pulling two other boys from their chairs by their hair and ears. When Matilda's friend Lavender plays a trick on Miss Trunchbull by putting a newt in her water, the Headmistress is quick to accuse Matilda. Matilda is so overwhelmed with anger at being falsely blamed that an extraordinary feeling comes over her, mostly in her eyes. It is a new sense of power for Matilda, one that allows her the supernatural ability to make a glass of water tip over and spill on Miss Trunchbull. She confides to Miss Honey what occurred, and Miss Honey takes Matilda to her little cottage where Miss Honey confesses she is very poor and has been under the influence of her horrible aunt. She suspects her aunt had killed her father and had hidden her father's will. Miss Honey also explains that she is forced to give almost all of her paycheck to her aunt. Then Miss Honey reveals that the evil aunt is Miss Trunchbull. Matilda is horrified by how Miss Honey is forced to live, and she devises a plan to help her teacher.

Matilda practices her new ability to move things with her mind every day until she is ready to go through with her plan to help Miss Honey. On a day when Miss Trunchbull comes to teach Matilda's class, Matilda uses her mind power to make a piece of chalk write on the blackboard. The chalk writes a message supposedly from Miss Honey's dead father telling Miss Trunchbull to return Miss Honey's home and money to her or else he will come to get her. Miss Trunchbull faints and then, after regaining consciousness, flees the school and the town. A few days later, Miss Honey returns to her father's home and the will suddenly turns up, giving her back the money that rightfully belongs to her.

Over the following days, Matilda and Miss Honey spend time together at her home. One day, Matilda goes home and discovers her parents are moving to Spain. She runs to tell Miss Honey, who is not surprised, as Mr. Wormwood has been up to some

crooked dealings with his used car business. Matilda wants to live with Miss Honey, and the two ask the Wormwoods if she can stay with her teacher. The Wormwoods are eager to be rid of their daughter, and Matilda and Miss Honey happily watch the Wormwoods drive away.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Matilda realizes that she should not hate her parents, yet she cannot help feeling negatively towards them. She gets back at them by playing tricks on them. What better methods might she have tried to deal with her anger?

*Matilda might have tried to talk with Miss Honey or another person she trusted about how her parents treat her. Since Matilda is an avid reader, perhaps reading a book on parent-child relationships might have helped. Or she could have written down her feelings in a journal and expressed her emotions that way.*

#### Literary Analysis

Some parts of the story are believable, but other parts are not. What are some examples of each?

*Some realistic elements in the story are Matilda's dysfunctional family, her father's dishonesty, and her close friendship with Miss Honey. Events that are not realistic are Matilda's ability to teach herself to read the newspaper by the time she is three, her ability to move objects with just her mind, and Miss Trunchbull's extreme cruelty.*

## Matilda by Roald Dahl

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### Inferential Comprehension

Matilda chooses to use her brain power to frighten Miss Trunchbull into giving Miss Honey the house and money that is rightfully hers. Is this a good way to help? How would you have chosen to help Miss Honey?

*Students may respond that Matilda's method of scaring Miss Trunchbull is a good choice because the chalk message appears right in front of the headmistress, and she cannot explain it or blame it on anyone. Students may offer suggestions or alternate ideas on how they would have helped Miss Honey.*

### Constructing Meaning

How do you feel about Matilda's growing brain power? Do you think a child can handle the powers Matilda has? Are they good powers or bad?

*Students responses will vary, but should include mention of ethical/moral dilemmas and the powers being used for good and bad things.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The story takes place in a small English village. Have students identify words or phrases in the story that are typical of England, and have them use context clues to define them. Or have students research English schools. Are they similar to American schools? Are they divided into the same grade levels? Assign students to write a short report answering these questions.

**Recognizing Setting** When Matilda visits Miss Honey's cottage, she sees a magical place right out of a fairy tale. She imagines the house from "Hansel and Gretel," "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Three Bears," and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Have students illustrate what they believe Miss Honey's cottage looks like.

**Making Predictions** The story ends with Matilda being placed in a top class in her school and living with Miss Honey. Have students pretend to be Matilda writing a letter to her brother, Michael,

who left with their parents to live in Spain. What might she say is happening in her life now that she is free from her parents and Miss Trunchbull? How has school life changed since Miss Trunchbull left town? How might she feel about being academically challenged?

**Understanding Sequence** In small groups, have students choose eight to ten events they feel are the most important to the story and put them in the order which they occurred. After sequencing the events, have students create a comic strip based on *Matilda*, using each event they listed. Students may want to use comics in the newspaper as models for their own. Discuss comic strip characteristics with students before beginning this activity.