

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (Unabridged)

by  
Jules Verne

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## Book Information

Jules Verne, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea  
(Unabridged)

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389 Pages

Book Level: 10.0

Interest Level: MG

This extraordinary voyage into the depths of the unknown aboard the legendary submarine Nautilus—commanded by the brilliant, tragic Captain Nemo—explores both the limitless possibilities of science and the twisted labyrinth of the human mind.

**Topics:** Adventure, Misc./Other; Classics, Classics (All); Natural Environments, Oceans; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Science Fiction, Other Worlds; Series, Scholastic Classics

## Main Characters

Captain Nemo the designer, engineer, and captain of the "Nautilus," who has cut himself off from humankind and lives on his creation

Commander Farragut the captain of the "Abraham Lincoln," who invites Aronnax to join him in locating the mysterious creature that has attacked some ships

Conseil Aronnax's devoted servant; he has a superior talent for classifying organisms once given their names

Ned Land a Canadian whaler who resents his confinement on board the "Nautilus" and looks for a way of escape

Pierre Aronnax the narrator of the story, a French naturalist who is taken aboard the "Nautilus"

## Vocabulary

**hecatomb** a large-scale slaughter

**imperious** pressing or urgent, domineering

**misanthropy** a hatred of humankind

**phlegmatic** calm and unemotional in temperament

## Synopsis

Pierre Aronnax is a respected naturalist and professor from Paris. In 1867, when a strange sea monster that Aronnax suspects is a giant narwhal begins attacking several ships, the international community commissions a ship, the "Abraham Lincoln," to chase down, identify, and destroy the monster. Aronnax is invited aboard and is accompanied by Conseil, his dedicated servant who is well versed in classification. An excellent harpooner, Ned Land, is also one of the crew. Once the monster is finally sighted, Ned discovers it is covered in a steel-like armor. While trying to capture it, Aronnax and Ned are knocked overboard. Conseil jumps in to save Aronnax and soon all three are clinging to the strange creature. They are taken inside the monster by masked men and placed in a cell with no light to await their fate.

After reiterating their story three times to men who speak a strange language, Captain Nemo identifies himself and informs the captives he will spare their lives. However, they will never rejoin the world again, for Nemo has shunned the world and is committed to remain in the underwater domain. The submarine, called the "Nautilus," and its crew can be maintained totally by using sea products. The captives will be allowed freedom as passengers aboard the craft, except at certain times when Nemo will confine them.

True to his promise, Nemo gives the men freedom. He takes Aronnax on a tour of the ship and allows Aronnax access to his library and collections, which Aronnax and Conseil eagerly study. During their voyage, the "Nautilus" visits every ocean and many seas. By using diving equipment or observing through a glass pane onboard the submarine, the captives are able to see or experience many amazing sights. They visit the lost city of Atlantis, travel through an Arabian tunnel into the Mediterranean Sea, become the first people to set foot upon Antarctica, and battle a giant squid. Ned Land does not share Aronnax and Conseil's

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fascination with the voyage and looks for opportunities to escape.

The three captives are puzzled by Nemo's motivations for staying away from land. He seems to have a fierce dedication to the oppressed of the world and an equally strong hatred of the industrialized countries. When, in the Atlantic, they encounter a man-of-war ship that pursues them, Nemo attacks it, and all aboard the man-of-war lose their lives. Faced with this unbelievable horror and realizing Nemo is set on revenge, Aronnax now eagerly agrees with Ned to escape at the next opportunity. The three captives steal aboard the sub's dinghy just as the "Nautilus" encounters the maelstrom in the Norwegian Sea. When Aronnax awakens, he and his companions are being tended on a Norwegian Island, and the fate of the "Nautilus" is unknown.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why does Captain Nemo decide to wait for the tide to get them off the coral reef? Does he have any other options?

*Waiting for the tide is the most practical thing Nemo could do. The "Nautilus" is too heavy to push off the reef, and it probably does not have enough power to dislodge itself. The men could try to destroy the reef from underneath the submarine, but to do so they would have to leave the ship and risk an attack by the natives. Since the "Nautilus" is not in any danger for lack of air or food, Nemo lets nature take its course. Tides go through regular cycles of rising or falling. However, when a full moon occurs, the high tide is even higher than usual. Nemo calculates the time of the abnormally high tide and decides to wait the few days for it to occur, thereby dislodging the "Nautilus" without risk to the ship or his men.*

### Literary Analysis

Why do you think Jules Verne chose to narrate the story through Pierre Aronnax?

*By choosing Professor Aronnax to tell the story, Verne gives the readers the benefit of both a naïve and knowledgeable observer of the undersea adventures. Aronnax is naïve in the sense that he is seeing the wonders of the undersea world for the first time from the windows of the "Nautilus" and can convey the awe, horror, and excitement of a first-time voyager. On the other hand, Aronnax is a scientist himself and knows the names and significance of biological specimens. He can explain the various decisions the Captain must make by mathematical formulas and physics. Thus, the reader gains a better insight into the adventure than if a nonscientific objective narrator were to relate the story.*

### Inferential Comprehension

After traversing the Arabian tunnel and entering the Mediterranean Sea, the "Nautilus" is visited by a strange diver. Why do you think Captain Nemo gives this diver, Nicolas of Cape Matapan, a chest full of gold?

*Captain Nemo associates himself with the oppressed of the world, and he feels vengeful against oppressors. With this knowledge, together with Aronnax's comment that he does not know the outcome of Candia's insurrection against the Turks, the reader can guess that the money will go to finance the insurrection. The gold may also go for other humanitarian needs, such as food and medicine for Nicolas's people.*

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## Constructing Meaning

Which qualities of the characters do you find the most favorable? Which are the least?

*Answers will vary. Students may admire Aronnax's morals, Conseil's loyalty, Ned Land's practical knowledge, or Captain Nemo's ingenuity.*

*Conversely, they may disapprove of Aronnax's selfishness, Conseil's limited outlook on life, Ned Land's indiscriminant killing, and Captain Nemo's burning desire for revenge.*

attitudes towards conservation found in this book with the prevailing attitudes towards environmental conservation.

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Aronnax describes the interior of the "Nautilus" at various times throughout the narrative. Using his descriptions, have the students draw their conception of what the "Nautilus" looks like. Then have them compare their drawing with the conception of the "Nautilus" that appears in a movie version of the book.

**Describing Actions or Events** The "Nautilus" travels close to 20,000 leagues under the sea. Have the students obtain a detailed map of the oceans of the world and trace the voyage of the "Nautilus" from its start in the Pacific. The students may wish to mark the latitude and longitude where significant events took place. They could also measure the distances in leagues, miles, and kilometers.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Captain Nemo shows great respect for a sunken ship called the "Avenger." Have the students reread the history of this ship from chapter twenty, and then have them research the battles at Brest or Chesapeake Bay. They may also research the biographies of Villaret de Joyeuse, Count de Grasse, or Admiral d'Estaing. They can then write a paper explaining why they think Captain Nemo may have admired such a ship.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Conservation of animals and man's balance with nature are themes in this novel. Have the students locate examples from the novel that support these themes and write a report that compares the