

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The First Four Years by Laura Ingalls Wilder

## Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, The First Four Years  
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During their first four years of marriage, Laura and Almanzo Wilder have a child and fight a losing battle in their attempts to succeed at farming on the South Dakota prairie.

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Series, Little House

## Main Characters

- Almanzo (Manly) Wilder Laura's husband, who is determined to become a farmer
- Caroline (Ma) Ingalls Laura's practical mother who occasionally gives Laura advice or assistance
- Carrie and Grace Ingalls Laura's two younger sisters
- Charles (Pa) Ingalls Laura's father, who owns a farm nearby
- Cora and Walter DeVoe neighbors and friends of the Wilders who are upset by the damage caused by the hailstorm
- Cousin Peter a relative of the Wilders who is half owner of the flock of sheep
- Hattie Johnson a young woman who helps wash the windows and do other chores at Laura's house
- Laura Ingalls Wilder a newly married young woman who reluctantly supports her husband's effort to become a successful farmer
- Mr. and Mrs. Boast friends of Laura and Manly who are unable to have children
- Mr. Mathews a farmer whose visiting friends from Illinois die in a freak blizzard
- Mr. Ole Larsen a neighbor of the Wilders who frequently borrows things
- Mr. Perry a kind-hearted neighbor who helps thresh the first crop of wheat; he is sympathetic when Laura makes mistakes in her cooking

Mr. Sheldon a bachelor neighbor of the Wilders who occasionally does kind things for them

Mrs. Powers the jolly Irish woman who oversees the birth of Rose

Rose Wilder the baby daughter of Laura and Manly Wilder

Royal Wilder Almanzo's bachelor brother who cares for the Wilders when they have diphtheria

The Whiteheads Cousin Peter's former employers who sold their sheep to Peter and the Wilders

## Vocabulary

**binder** a piece of farm equipment that cuts and ties stalks into bundles

**idly** without activity

**lard** a type of animal fat that can be melted and used for cooking

**shanty** a roughly made building that is meant to be used for a limited time

**slough** a marshy area with tall grasses

## Synopsis

Before they are married, Laura warns Manly that she does not want to live the hard life of a farmer's wife. However, she agrees to try farming for three years on the condition that if their venture fails, Manly will find another profession. The first year they settle into their little house on the tree claim, and Laura feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of cooking for the threshers and makes mistakes in the preparation of the meals. In addition, the crop of wheat is disappointing and so are wheat prices. Manly buys a plow on credit, and Laura tries to help by sending eggs to town, but prices are too low for this to be profitable. Laura is also annoyed by Ole Larsen, who frequently borrows things but does not always return them.

One day Laura is frightened by a group of Indians approaching the house. When she refuses to let them in, they go to the barn. Worried they will harm her pony, Trixy, Laura rushes out to confront them. One of them touches her arm, and she slaps him. The leader of the Indians protects her and tries to persuade her to come with him. When Laura

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refuses, he leads his men away without harming Laura or her property.

The prairie continues to show its dangers that winter when Manly is almost lost coming from the barn to the house during a blizzard. A man, three children and cattle die during the blizzard. However, the couple has a pleasant Christmas when they give each other a set of dishes. When the weather warms, Laura discovers she is pregnant.

As the growing season progresses, Manly predicts a wonderful crop of wheat. He buys on credit a binder to harvest the wheat. When harvest approaches, he delays a few days to give the wheat a chance to ripen more. Unfortunately, a devastating hailstorm destroys the wheat crop. While assessing their expenses, Laura learns that five hundred dollars is owed on the house as well. Manly arranges to pay just the interest on their machinery notes and finds he can mortgage the homestead if he and Laura are living on it instead of the tree claim.

The second year begins with the move to the smaller homestead. Manly harvests hay to help replace the lost wheat income, and they are able to meet their basic needs. Their daughter, Rose, is born in December, and Manly buys a clock as a Christmas present to all three of them, which Laura doubts they can afford. One day the Wilders take Rose to visit their friends the Boasts. They are horrified when the childless Boasts try to trade one of their horses for the baby. Another unfortunate event is the deaths of two travelers who freeze in an unexpected spring storm. The second year finishes with a disappointing wheat crop.

Despite their financial problems, Manly buys a stove for the cold weather as the Wilders begin their third year. During the unusually warm winter, Laura and Manly are struck with diphtheria. Laura's case is more serious, but Manly overexerts himself too soon after his recovery and has a stroke that paralyzes him for a while. As he slowly recovers, Laura struggles to do his work on the farm. They have to sell the homestead to cover the medical expenses, and they move back to the house on the tree claim.

The wheat crop fails again, but Laura has invested in a flock of sheep with Cousin Peter and hopes to make money with them. At the end of the third year, Manly persuades Laura to try one more year. She recognizes that they have few other options. Fortunately, Cousin Peter moves nearby to tend the sheep and help Manly with the chores.

In December, Laura realizes she is again pregnant. During the winter, she bravely helps protect the sheep from wolves and high winds. When shearing season arrives, the sheep immediately show a profit, and the flock is more than doubled with the arrival of the lambs. With the arrival of warm weather, Laura struggles to keep Rose out of trouble while she plays outside.

The fortunes of the Wilders again take a turn for the worse when hot winds kill the young crop and most of the trees on the tree claim. Manly saves the land by making arrangements to pay the government two hundred dollars in six months, but Laura doubts they will have the money. Their new son is born in August, but he dies soon afterward. Misfortunes continue when the house burns down, but Manly rebuilds and reassures Laura that despite their trials, they still have many assets and are due a good crop. Laura finally accepts that they will always be farmers.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How does Laura react to the death of her son?

*She feels numb and she only wants to rest and avoid thinking. However, she feels obligated to continue on with her work, so she takes care of Rose, feeds Manly and the other workers and does her chores. She remembers the time as being "mercifully blurred."*

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## Literary Analysis

Life on the prairie is very isolated. How does the author show this isolation?

*Many characters in the book are briefly mentioned, and the author provides little character development of most of Laura's neighbors. This shows that Laura had little opportunity to develop close relationships with her neighbors. Also, Laura is forced to deal with most challenges by herself. There is no one for her to call when the Indians come to the house or when she hears wolves near the barn. Furthermore, the author describes the prairie as having few houses and as a large expanse of land.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Sometimes, Laura feels farm life is overwhelming. Why?

*Before she marries Manly, Laura is against the idea of becoming a farmer's wife. She loves Manly and agrees to give farm life a chance. As Manly's wife, she feels it is her duty to do the work expected of her. When Laura lived at home with her parents and siblings, the work was shared by everyone. She is now expected to do most of these chores on her own. In addition, her pregnancies and illnesses in the first four years make doing the work even more strenuous. After Rose is born, she has the added burden of trying to keep Rose safe while she goes about her chores.*

## Constructing Meaning

Do you think Manly was right to continue borrowing money? Why or why not?

*Answers will vary. Some students may feel that Manly had to borrow money in order to keep the farm going. They may think that Manly was wiser to borrow than to lose everything by giving up the farm or trying to do things without the proper tools or resources. Other students may feel that Manly should not have continued to borrow money. They may note that Manly continued to assume he would have good crops even though something always happened to ruin them. They may also note that Manly frequently borrowed money for household items and even Laura did not always think the items were necessary. Manly also continued to borrow money despite the fact that his wife was extremely uncomfortable with the amount of debt they were accruing.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Laura has many objections to becoming a farmer's wife. Ask students to read the history of farming life during the 1880s and 1890s. Have students write a paper that uses details from their research to either support or refute Laura's objections to farming.

**Identifying Reason** Because the Ingalls family moved to so many different places during Laura's childhood, she considered herself a pioneer girl rather than a farmer's daughter. She said her family always moved on before the fields grew large. Ask students to research Laura Ingalls Wilder's life and provide a timeline of the places Laura lived before she married Manly. Then ask students to write a paragraph telling whether they would or would not have liked moving to move to new places as the Ingalls did.

**Recognizing Detail** Manly says that determining whether farming is a success depends on how a person assesses the situation. Have the students make a chart showing what the Wilders lost and what they gained over the four years they were

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farmers.

**Identifying Reason** Manly and Laura do many things to show their love for one another throughout their hard times. Ask students to make a list of the gestures of love that Laura and Manly make in this story. Have the students also note why some of these gestures involved great effort or sacrifice on the part of the giver.