

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis

## Book Information

C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

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This is C. S. Lewis's classic tale of temptation and free will.

**Topics:** Family Life, Growing Up; People, Elderly; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; Religion, Christianity

## Main Characters

Our Father Below the Devil

Screwtape author of the letters; uncle and mentor to Wormwood; Under Secretary in the bureaucracy of Hell

Slubgob principal of the Tempter's Training College from which Wormwood is a graduate

the Enemy God; "enemy" of the Devil and his disciples

the patient the object of Wormwood's temptation, who shifts naturally and repeatedly from good to bad behavior, sometimes in response to Wormwood's efforts

Wormwood recipient of the letters; novice Tempter in the service of his Uncle Screwtape

## Vocabulary

**anodyne** a drug that relieves pain

**cynical** contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives

**panacea** a remedy for all ills or problems

**philological** pertaining to the study of literature and language

**temporality** in time, as opposed to eternity

**the Lowerarchy** bureaucratic organization of Hell

**transcendent** beyond the limits of ordinary human experience

## Synopsis

The Screwtape Letters, written by C. S. Lewis, are presented as a series of correspondence between an upper-management devil, Screwtape, and his new subordinate, Wormwood, with regard to Wormwood's efforts to tempt a specific human toward eternal damnation. Each letter identifies errors made by Wormwood and provides suggestions about how these errors might be corrected to achieve the ultimate harvest of the human soul. Screwtape points out that the Enemy, God, wants the humans to submit to His will as enlightened individuals choosing through knowledge and humility. The Father Below, on the other hand, hopes to deceive, confuse, and pervert, thus denying humans' truth, knowledge, and individualism, and resulting in the entrapment of their souls in Hell.

Twisting the meaning of words and phrases provides one device for deception and confusion. For example, Screwtape suggests that Love be replaced with Lust, in so far as Love is a Pleasure of the present while Lust represents a hoped-for conclusion existing in the future, providing frustration and no real Pleasure in the present. The frustration then becomes a tool engendering self-pity, anger, and further self-deprecation. Another example is his use of the concept of democracy. In its best form, Democracy glorifies individuality. In the hands of Screwtape, however, individuals are encouraged to proceed from a sense of "I am as good as you..." to the sense that "you must not have more than I." Following this path leads to suppression of individuality and fear of being "different," resulting in a population easily led by fad and fashion rather than principle.

While Wormwood attempts to secure his "patient's" soul, Screwtape provides criticism, reinterpreting his own advice to suggest that Wormwood's failures are a result of Wormwood's incompetence. In this way, Screwtape protects himself at the expense of his subordinate and ultimately consumes Wormwood in the same shifting sand of rhetoric and false logic he has encouraged the minor tempter to apply to the

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human patient. This conclusion demonstrates what Lewis suggests in his preface, that "...the devil is a liar" and will use any means to preserve himself while consuming all else.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Given that all Pleasure is created by the Enemy, how can Screwtape and his disciple use Pleasure for their purposes?

*They place Pleasure in the Future as something to be sought, but not achieved. In this way, they build frustration and disappointment without providing the reward. The situation results in increased craving and diminished resolution.*

### Literary Analysis

Lewis has presented this material as a collection of correspondence from Screwtape alone. What effect might this single view have on the reader's view of the other characters?

*By delivering only Screwtape's advice after Wormwood's varying mistakes and difficulties, the author maintains a comic perspective on the patient's foiled seduction. Not only does Screwtape's detachment from the events involving the patient aid the parody, it also focuses the text on his nuanced eschatological word plays. Wormwood is far too stupid to add interesting rejoinders to Screwtape's views.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What maintains the bond and relationship between Screwtape and Wormwood?

*On the surface, the letters display the regards and affection that would normally mark an uncle's correspondence with a fond nephew. In hell's dog-eat-dog ethos, however, affections are always merely displays. Wormwood's willingness to be the dog who eats is seen by his betrayal of his uncle to the Secret Police. Ultimately, Screwtape is more powerful and threatening. His position of strength compels Wormwood to obey him out of abject fear. In both their cases, hunger is the fundamental motive for relationship.*

### Constructing Meaning

What error did Screwtape encourage Wormwood to promote with his patient concerning the idea of "being in love"?

*He praises the idea held by humans that "being in love" precedes and causes marriages to be happy and holy. From Screwtape's perspective, the error comes from confusing cause with result. The Enemy's true purpose in creating marriage was to lead humans to happiness and grace. Humans who foolishly expect to "be in love" before marriage, rather than seeing marriage as the way leading them to love, become a Tempter's delight.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author has chosen to present his argument through Screwtape's letters to Wormwood without benefit of letters from Wormwood. Consequently, the reader must infer Wormwood's positions from Screwtape's responses. Interpretation is further complicated by the warning in the preface that devils lie. Choose two contiguous chapters and write the missing letter that you feel Wormwood might have written.

**Making Inferences** In part two, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," Screwtape spoke about the "I am as good as you" principle with regard to its corruptive effect on education in democratic

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societies. Using this as a reference, identify the author's position on the condition of education in England and generate a class discussion based on your observations. Are the issues he identified concerns in the schools today? Debate your answers.

**Recognizing Feelings** Under most circumstances, the greetings and salutations of Screwtape are polite and, for the most part, warm and friendly. Identify passages in the text that reflect Screwtape's true feelings about Wormwood (Does he mean what he says?). Do they change from the beginning to the end? Support your answer with specific references.

**Responding to Literature** In the introduction, Lewis referred to several other descriptions of the Devil by other authors. Choose one of these or another with which you are familiar and compare him with the character created in *The Screwtape Letters*.