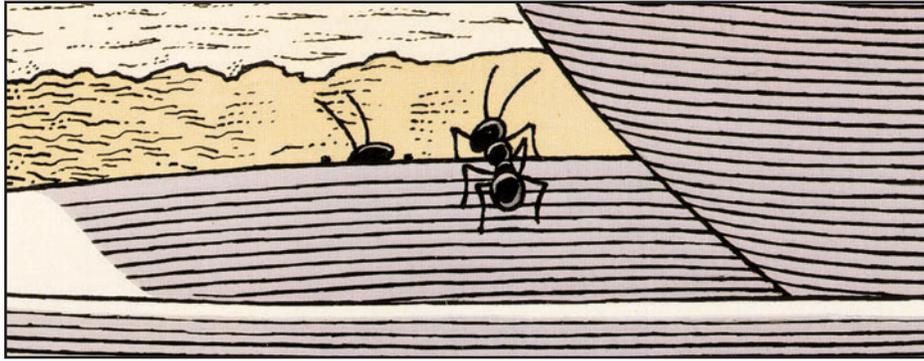


## TWO BAD ANTS

by CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG



## Plot Summary

When an ant scout returns home with a mysterious crystal, the queen ant decides it is the most delicious food she has ever tasted. That evening the other ants, wishing to make the queen happy, set off on a journey to fetch home as many of these crystals as they can carry. The journey is a dangerous one. Following the scout, the ants travel through the “forest” to the “mountain” they must climb in order to reach the treasure they seek. In the perilous and confounding world of the human kitchen, the ants find the bowl of delicious crystals. Hurrying home, they fail to notice that two small ants have stayed behind. The two ants have decided to tarry and eat crystals to their hearts’ content. When morning comes, the ants are violently awoken by a large scoop lifting them out of the crystal jar and dropping them into a hot brown liquid. They manage one narrow escape after another until finally they decide to choose one last crystal each and leave this strange and frightening place. Lugging the crystals back home, they are glad to be doing the right thing and returning to their family.

## Special Features

The spare illustrations in *Two Bad Ants*—drawn with pen and ink over a base of casein, a non-water-soluble paint—differ perceptibly from Van Allsburg’s other drawings but are equally expressive. In this book perhaps more than others Van Allsburg’s stories we observe the world from unusual angles and perspectives. As we follow the ants on their journey to the pot of delicious crystals, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and powerful. A simple kitchen becomes a perilous obstacle course. We are invited to try on the size of an ant – electric sockets loom overhead, a spoon is as big as an elevator. The adventure is described in fresh language that transforms a simple walk from the yard to the kitchen (in human terms) into a life-threatening excursion.

As in many of Van Allsburg’s books, the characters develop and change by passing through a dangerous or challenging experience unscathed. Once again we are encouraged to celebrate and honor the comforts of a simple life. The “two bad ants” are reminded that working together for the benefit of the whole community—something that is true to the nature of an ant—feels better than selfishly lingering in the sugar bowl to eat a great share of the delicious crystals. After their frightening experiences in the kitchen, they are relieved and delighted to head home to the calm and collaborative world of their home and family.

## Find Fritz:

Fritz the dog is hidden inside the swirl of water with the ants. He’s at the bottom left corner of page 27.



## Teaching Ideas

To reach their prizes, the ants traverse what to them is a mysterious land full of menacing obstacles. To us, it’s an ordinary kitchen—but Van Allsburg doesn’t tell us that directly. He describes the setting without telling us it’s a kitchen. A useful exercise is to have children describe a familiar setting without naming it. Encourage them to give as many details as possible so that other students can guess the location. For example, instead of saying “the ants walked through the grass,” Van Allsburg writes:

*Dew formed on the leaves above. Without warning, huge cold drops fell on the marching ants. A firefly passed overhead that, for an instant, lit up the woods with a blinding flash of blue-green light.*

Instead of saying “the ants were in the toaster,” he writes:

*When the ants climbed out of the holes they were surrounded by a strange red glow. It seemed to them that every second the temperature was rising. It soon became so unbearably hot that they thought they would soon be cooked.*

These excerpts and many others in *Two Bad Ants* demonstrate descriptive writing that shows rather than tells. Reviewing such excerpts can be useful during reading lessons to students when they undertake an examination of setting or description. How does a particular description affect the story? If the description were left out what would be the result? This technique of querying is useful in writing lessons as well.

*Two Bad Ants* provides opportunities for less experienced readers to develop their predicting skills—either during a read-aloud or as part of their independent reading.

## Guiding Questions for a *Two Bad Ants* Read-Aloud

- Why does the queen ant want the crystals? Why do all the other ants feel happy to go on a dangerous journey to fetch them [for her?]
- Why do the two bad ants decide not to return home with the other ants?
- Do you think the two ants regret their decision to stay in the land of the crystals? Why or why not?
- The two bad ants finally decide to go back home to their family of ants. What prompts their decision? What matters to them about their home community? What matters to you about your home community?



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switch descriptions with a partner and try to guess what place their partner has described.

### Writing Time:

As your students write individually, confer with them about showing the setting rather than telling what it is. When each student has written a description of a setting, organize the class into writing partnerships and ask students to read their descriptions aloud and guess where their partner's setting is. If time permits, they may be able to share with more than one person.

### Share:

Share the work of a student or two who have written vivid descriptions of a setting.

### Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Writers:

- Instead of asking your students to try this technique in their own writing, spend more time with *Two Bad Ants*. Rather than ask them to guess about only one or two settings, spend most of your time covering the pictures and asking them to guess where the ants are, and then show them the pictures.
  - Give your students photographs of a location—a kitchen, a park, etc. Ask them to refer to the photos when they write about the setting to help them fill their text with details. It can be fun to have students read their description to a partner without showing the photo, and then to ask the partner to say as much as he or she can about the setting that was just described.
- ### Expanding This Lesson:
- The idea of “show, not tell” can be used in many different writing situations. It is a good technique to teach during your students’ revision process. It can be helpful if you have the class go back to a piece they have been working on. Ask them to underline sentences or passages that tell rather than show the reader. Then ask them to revise their work by describing something the reader can actually see. For example, a child who might have written “I felt great” can be encouraged to show readers that she felt great rather than coming out and saying so: “I grinned and laughed as I rolled off the raft into the cool green lake.”
  - Have your students think of an emotion and a time during which they felt that emotion. Instead of writing “I was happy,” ask your students to show that they were happy without saying so. Ask them to read their writing aloud so that the community can guess which emotion they were describing.

## Mystery Setting: Teaching Students to Show (Not Tell) When Describing Setting

An upper-grade writing lesson

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Two Bad Ants*
- Writing paper and pencils for the students

### Background Knowledge:

This lesson works best if your students are not yet familiar with *Two Bad Ants*. It can be helpful if students have been working on narrative writing of some sort and have been exposed to the idea of writing about setting, but it is not necessary.

### Introduction:

Tell your students that you are going to read the book *Two Bad Ants* to them. Ask them to pay particular attention to the way Van Allsburg shows us where the ants are by describing the setting in vivid detail, rather than saying where they are.

### Teaching:

Choose several pages to read to the children without showing them the pictures. For example:

*They found a huge round disk with holes that could neatly hide them. But as soon as they had climbed inside, their hiding place was lifted, tilted, and lowered into a dark space. When the ants climbed out of the holes they were surrounded by a strange red glow. It seemed to them that every second the temperature was rising. It soon became so unbearably hot they thought they would soon be cooked.*

Read the text to the children and then ask them to guess where the ants are. After they guess, emphasize that Van Allsburg doesn't just come out and say, “The ants went into the toaster,” but shows us where they are by describing the setting in detail. You may want to choose more than one place to stop and read a setting description without showing children the pictures, as they will probably enjoy it!

Tell your students that their job during writing time will be to choose a setting that is familiar to them and describe it by showing it in detail instead of simply telling where it is. Then have them

## Making Predictions As We Read

A lower-grade reading lesson

### What You'll Need:

- A copy of *Two Bad Ants*
- Books that your students can read independently

### Background Knowledge:

This lesson is designed to fit into a reading workshop in which students are either using familiar picture books to retell stories or are reading from leveled books matched to their abilities. The lesson can be used within the context of a class reader as well. You may already have read *Two Bad Ants* aloud to your students and

discussed the concept of predicting what will happen next based on information supplied by the pictures and the text. This lesson will help children transfer the concept of making predictions from a story that is read aloud to them into the context of their own independent reading.

### Introduction:

Tell your students that you will be showing them how readers stop and make predictions as they go, using both the pictures and the text. You will be modeling this concept for your students using *Two Bad Ants*, and then they will get to try it out in the books they are reading themselves before they go off and read independently. It can be helpful if you ask your students to sit on their books or put them behind their backs so they are not distracted as you teach. Tell them to pay very close attention to what you do as you read, stop, make a prediction, and go on.

### Teaching:

Tell the children that every so often readers stop and make a prediction, or guess what is going to happen next. Tell them to watch you as you show them how this is done, using *Two Bad Ants*. Remind them quickly of how the two ants decide to stay in bowl of crystals, and then read the following excerpt (pp. 16–17):

*Daylight came. The sleeping ants were unaware of changes taking place in their new found home. A giant silver scoop hovered above them, then plunged deep into the crystals. It shoveled up both ants and crystals and carried them high into the air.*

*The ants were wide awake when the scoop turned, dropping them from a frightening height. They tumbled through space in a shower of crystals and fell into a boiling brown lake.*

Think aloud for your students as you make a prediction. You might say, “I think the ants might have fallen into a cup of coffee when they got scooped out of the sugar bowl. This is why: I read in the text that a silver scoop shoveled them up. I think that’s a spoon. Then I read that the ants fell into a boiling brown lake. I think that must be coffee. The pictures make me think that also—the big silver object does look like a spoon.”

Ask the students to get out their own books and read for a couple of minutes. Tell them you will be stopping them and asking them to make a prediction to their talk partners. Do this. As they talk to each other, remind them to use both the pictures and the words to help them. Bring the class back together and ask a child or two to share their predictions in their own books with the class.

Tell the students as you send them off to read independently that whenever they are reading, their job is to stop every so often and make a prediction about what is going to happen next, using both pictures and text.

### Reading Time:



As your students read, confer with them individually about the process of making predictions, “just like we did using *Two Bad Ants*.” Stop the class midway through reading time and ask them to tell their reading partners what they predict will happen next.

### Share:

Share the work of a student or partnership that made predictions in their books based on information given by the pictures and the text.

### Adapting This Lesson for Use with Less Experienced Readers:

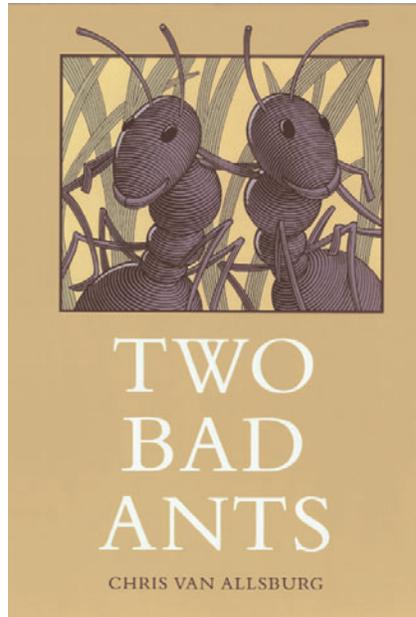
- If your students are not yet reading and are still working with emergent storytelling in familiar picture books, simply tell them that readers make predictions about what will happen next using the pictures and what they know about the story.
- You may want to spend several more read-aloud sessions working on predictions as a class instead of immediately transferring this work into children’s independent reading.

### Expanding This Lesson:

- Expand on the predicting work that can be done within reading partnerships. Focus on helping students to stop and take turns telling each other the predictions they are making within their own books. Teach them to ask each other questions about what they are reading.
- Try reading the story to your students without showing them the pictures at all. Stop and have them predict where the ants are simply by listening to the words. Remind them how writers like Chris Van Allsburg put lots of detail into their descriptions.

### Just for Fun:

- Imagine you are ant-sized. What obstacles might you encounter walking around in your own home/school/garden/street? Write about it!
- Have you ever been “bad” like the ants? What happened? Write about it!
- Write the continuing adventures of the two bad ants. What would happen if they came to school with you?
- Write about a part your classroom from an ant’s perspective. Read what you wrote to your classmates and ask them to guess what you have described. The more specific you are, the easier it will be to guess correctly!



**Two Bad Ants (1988)**

- **IRA/CBC Children's Choice**

"Children will be fascinated by the ant-eye view that Van Allsburg provides of common everyday items." — *Booklist*