

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO  
**THE Z WAS ZAPPED**



by  
**CHRIS VAN ALLSBURG**



### Book Summary

*The Z Was Zapped* is a delightful alphabet book set up as a play in twenty-six acts performed by the brave and self-sacrificing “Caslon Players.” One by one in alphabetical order, each letter appears on the stage experiencing some sort of predicament. The A, for example, stands up in the midst of a rain of falling rocks. As we turn the page, we read, “The A was in an Avalanche.” Then we see the B, missing its top half, with the gigantic mouth of a hungry dog hovering overhead. We must turn the page, however, before we can read, “The B was badly Bitten.” On through the alphabet we go, watching the letters suffer alliterative mishaps and surprising situations—all the way to the zapping of the Z. Each page gives us the fun of guessing what words will describe the picture we have just seen.

### Special Features

This is a dramatic and highly engaging alphabet book that lures children to investigate the relationships among letters, letter sounds, and words—almost in spite of themselves. The letters are bitten, cut, flattened, nailed, uprooted, and tortured in many other gruesome and amusing ways—and as they are, readers cannot help but want to guess what words will describe these experiences. Van Allsburg’s pencil drawings imbue each letter, or actor, with personality and pluck. Never has an evaporating E looked so mysterious. Never has an I been so artfully iced! The concept of this book is brilliantly simple—as many of the best ideas are—and will prove an exciting read for even the most disinterested-seeming young learner.

### Find Fritz:

Fritz can only be the dog who badly bites the B!



### Summary of Teaching Ideas

There is a wealth of teaching opportunities in this simple and ingenious alphabet book. One idea is to discuss this book in the context of an alphabet book study in which children are asked to examine the different ways that alphabet books can be put together. Some alphabet books are

organized by concept, as is *The Z Was Zapped*. Some are organized by theme—for example, alphabet books using animals or different types of fish, or flowers, or sports. You can ask your students to create their own alphabet books, either individually or in groups or partnerships. This can be a wonderful activity to do with “buddies” across grade levels. It is good for children of all ages, as the concept of the book can be made simpler or more complex depending on your students’ level of experience as readers and writers. Children will be delighted if you can display their work in your school or community as well.

Of course, *The Z Was Zapped* provides wonderful word-work opportunities as well. Younger children will benefit from an exploration of letter identification and letter-sound correspondence. More experienced readers and writers will benefit from an exploration of alliteration—both in writing and in reading. Children of all ages and abilities will benefit from a discussion of how we can use the pictures and what we know of letter sounds to predict what the words will be on the following page.

### Guiding Questions for *The Z Was Zapped* Read-Aloud

- What do you notice about how this book works? How is it similar to or different from other alphabet books you know?
- Can you think of some ways to describe what is happening in the picture using other words? Try to use alliteration if you can.
- Using the pictures and what you know of how the book is put together, try to guess how each letter will be described on the following page.

### Make Your Own Alliterative Alphabet Book *An upper-grade writing lesson*

#### What You’ll Need:

- A copy of *The Z Was Zapped*
- A stapled booklet of twenty-six sheets of paper (plus front and back covers) for each student
- Pencils, markers, and crayons for the students

#### Background Knowledge:

This lesson works well whether the students have been exposed to the book *The Z Was Zapped* already or not. You may or may not have already discussed the concept of alliteration with your students.

**Introduction:**

Tell your students that you are going to study the way Chris Van Allsburg has put together his alphabet book *The Z Was Zapped* and then they are each going to have a chance to create their own alphabet book using some ideas they have learned from Mr. Van Allsburg.

**Teaching:**

Read through the book, asking your students to pay attention to the way Van Allsburg uses alliteration in his text. You may want to stop on several pages and have students “turn and talk” to a partner about some other words they know that begin with that letter. While this may sound like a simple thing to ask upper-grade students to do, it gets them warmed up to be thinking alliteratively. Ask them to notice how in Mr. Van Allsburg’s book, the letters are experiencing catastrophes on each page. Tell them that they will be making their own alphabet books using alliteration like Van Allsburg does, but that they will be able to decide for themselves how that will work. Some students might want to structure their books the same way Van Allsburg structured *The Z Was Zapped* and have something happen to a letter on each page: The A was Awfully Ache-y, for example. Some students may want nice things to happen to the letters: The A Ate an Awesome Apple pie. Some students may want to create other situations for their characters. Challenge them to use as many alliterative words as they can in each sentence.

They may choose to do all of the text first and then go back and illustrate, or they may go page by page. It will take more than one class period to finish this activity.

**Writing Time:**

Confer with students as they work. Encourage them to stretch their thinking and include as many alliterative words as possible in their sentences.

**Share:**

You may want to sit in a circle and have each student share the page of which he or she is proudest.

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

- Have younger students “buddy up” with older students and work collaboratively on the book.
- Have younger students simply write a word and draw a picture to go along with it for each letter of the alphabet.

**Expanding This Lesson:**

- You will need to take several more class periods to finish these books. Each day, focus on alliteration and how students could add more to their sentences.
- Take the books to a lower-grade classroom and have your students read them with younger buddies.

## Strong Readers Use the First Letter to Help Them

*A lower-grade reading lesson*

**What You’ll Need:**

- A copy of *The Z Was Zapped*
- Chart paper or an overhead projector labeled “Reading Strategies for Strong Readers”
- Markers/overhead pens
- Books for the students to read on their own

**Background Knowledge:**

Readers need not be familiar with the book *The Z Was Zapped* before this lesson is presented. It is helpful, however, if your students are beginning to independently read leveled books from your classroom library. An understanding (even a rudimentary one) of letter-sound correspondence is important as well.

**Introduction:**

Tell your young students that strong readers often look at the first letter of a word to help them when they are trying to read the

word. Tell them that you are going to be showing them how to do this with the book *The Z Was Zapped*, and that then they will have a chance to try this out in their independent reading. Direct their attention to the chart you have started that is labeled “Reading Strategies for Strong Readers.” Before you start reading, write as the first item on the chart, “Strong readers use the first letter of a word to help them.” (Note: You may have already discussed how strong readers use the pictures to help them, so that may be the first item on the chart.)

**Teaching:**

Tell students that *The Z Was Zapped* is a great book for practicing using the first letter to get ready to read a word because it is an alphabet book that can remind them as they go how each letter sounds. Tell them to watch what you do as you try to read some of the words in the book.

Model using the first letter as you read. For example, with “The *b* was badly Bitten,” exaggerate the shape and sound your mouth makes when you get to the *b* words. Think out loud, “Oh, I can use the picture and the first letter to get this word—b-, b-, badly.”

Ask students to “turn and talk” about what they saw you do. Have them share some ideas with the whole class.

**Reading Time:**

During independent reading time, ask your students to try this out with their own books. Tell them that when they come to a word they don’t know, they can use the first letter of the word to help them. Confer with them individually during this time.

**Share:**

Have a student who successfully read a tricky word using this strategy share his or her work with the rest of the class.



**Adapting This Lesson for Use with More Experienced Readers:**

This lesson is specifically designed for emergent readers. It doesn't translate well into upper-grade reading situations. You can teach *other* strategies for reading tricky words if you are working with older students: use the context clues, read all the way through the word, etc.

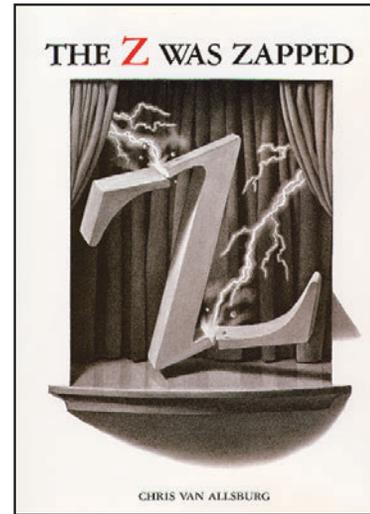
**Expanding This Lesson:**

Continue teaching reading strategies though modeling with *The Z Was Zapped*. Teach how strong readers read the end of the word as well as the beginning. Teach how strong readers get their mouths ready to say the word. Teach how strong readers ask themselves, "Does that sound right? Does that make sense?"

**Just for Fun**

Suggest these activities to your students:

- As a class, act out *The Z Was Zapped*. Ask each of your students to portray one of the letters. You can be the narrator. Make a simple stage. Invite community members.
- Make an alphabet mural in a long hallway. Ask your students to write words they know that start with each letter on a piece of paper with that letter on it. Invite other children and community members to add to the mural as they walk by.
- In this book, the letters experience catastrophes. Using Van Allsburg's concept of the letters as actors, write an alphabet of your own that focuses on what the letters can do: "The Z plays the Zither," for example.

**The Z Was Zapped**

ALA Notable Book for Children  
Booklist Editors' Choice

A dramatic black-and-white presentation of the alphabet in which the three-time Caldecott medalist depicts a mysterious transformation of each letter.

