



Robinson Crusoe

Daniel Defoe



About the author

It is perhaps strange that a man who rarely left his own country and certainly never visited the exotic places he writes about should have produced the all-time adventure classic, *Robinson Crusoe*.

It is even more surprising when you consider that this was his first novel, published when he was 59, although he had been a writer for magazines and newspapers since his youth.

Daniel Defoe was born in 1660 in London. His father, James Foe, was a butcher and candle-maker and it seems that the young Daniel was disappointed that he was not born into a higher-ranking family. This may be the reason why he added the *De* to his surname.

As a young man, Daniel toyed with the idea of becoming a minister but instead went into commerce. At the age of twenty-four, he married Mary Tuffley. Defoe's import-export business was not successful, nor was his marriage and by the early 1690s he was engaged in revolutionary activity against James II, King of England. For this he was imprisoned for a period of time. Later he wrote for whichever side would pay him.

Late in life he turned to fiction and wrote an enormous number of works, mostly adventure stories, many of them published anonymously. Some see Defoe as the Ernest Hemingway of his day. Although his books were a popular success, he was never wealthy and in fact died at the age of seventy, a poor man.

Summary

Robinson Crusoe's parents want him to stay in his home town of York but he has other ideas. He wants to become a sailor and travel the world. He leaves home and sails to

Brazil where he makes his fortune. On his way from Brazil to Africa, he is shipwrecked on an uninhabited island and he spends twenty-seven years alone there before he finally manages to return to England.

Chapter 1: Robinson Crusoe leaves his home town of York without saying goodbye to his parents and is shipwrecked off the coast of England. This is a foretaste of what is to come but he ignores any omens and goes to sea again. He is more successful this time and becomes a prosperous land owner in Brazil. However, he is not satisfied with his success and he sets sail from Brazil to pick up slaves from Africa. On the way he is shipwrecked, and all his fellow sailors drown. He alone makes it to a beach of an uninhabited island.

Chapter 2: He builds a house for himself near the top of a hill and surrounds it with a strong wall for protection against animals and intruders. He works hard and makes all the things he needs. He begins to write his story.

Chapter 3: Robinson Crusoe's first year on the island sees him build a second home and establish a garden. He lives through his first rainy season – from August to October.

Chapters 4–5: The years pass. He catches a parrot and teaches it to say his name. He begins to grow corn and make bread. He tries to dig the ship's boat out of the sand, but is not successful. Later, he tries to make a boat to explore the coastal areas, but strong seas force him back to the land. He has now been on the island for eleven years.

Chapters 6–7: Crusoe finds the mark of a man's foot on the beach. He is both happy and afraid. He improves the defences around his home but doesn't actually see anybody for more than two years. Then, one day, he sees a boat at sea, and later, he finds the bones of a man on the beach. He realises the island has been visited by cannibals! Many more years pass before he finally sees the cannibals for the first time, but they leave without realising he is there. One day a ship is wrecked off the coast of the island. Crusoe goes to the ship and finds guns, food, wine and clothes, but all the men on board are dead.

Chapters 8–11: Some years later, the cannibals return and Crusoe helps one of their prisoners to escape and befriends him. He names him Friday, in honour of the day they became friends. Friday's presence on the island changes Crusoe's life. He teaches him to use his tools, his guns and to speak English. Friday tells Crusoe about his homeland and that there are white men living there. They plan to visit Friday's country.



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Chapters 11–14: When the cannibals come to the island again, Friday and Crusoe rescue two of their prisoners, a Spaniard called Christianus and a man from Friday's island, who is in fact Friday's father. They all work to send an expedition to Friday's land to bring back the sixteen white men who have been shipwrecked there. But before Christianus and the man can return, an English ship arrives. Once again, all is not plain sailing, as the ship is under the command of mutineers and a battle ensues in which Crusoe and Friday help the lawful captain to regain command.

Chapters 14–15: Crusoe finally sails from the island. Five of the mutineers are left behind and Crusoe tells them about his garden and his animals and leaves them a letter for Christianus. He forgets the money he collected from two sunken ships, and finally reaches England thirty-five years after he first left home. Good and bad news awaits him. His plantation in Brazil has thrived and he is a wealthy man. But his parents are dead. He helps the remaining members of his family and later marries and lives in London with his wife and three children. When his wife dies, Crusoe is tempted to go back to sea again. He eventually returns to his old island, where he finds that the mutineers and the original sixteen white men have now become a complete colony, with men and women from Spanish America. Crusoe stays on the island for three weeks. He gives the colony things from his ship and sends more from his home in Brazil. He even thinks about returning to live on the island again one day.

Background and themes

Robinson Crusoe is not only an adventure story but a 'rite of passage' novel, as it describes one man's struggle against the odds.

Sin and retribution: The book is also a tale of sin and retribution. It could even be seen as a retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son. Robinson Crusoe fails to heed his father's advice and runs away without even saying goodbye. He is immediately shipwrecked and punished. He tries again and makes a financial success of his life. But again he sins, getting into the slave trade, and is punished far more severely this time, being marooned for nearly 28 years on an uninhabited island. But he comes through it all and, in the original version, embraces Christianity and converts a savage to Christianity, too. When he eventually returns home, it is too late to be reconciled with his parents, but in his absence, he has become a wealthy man.

Empire: Another thread runs through the story. It is as if the uninhabited island is a microcosm of an empire; Crusoe colonises an island and then civilises a cannibal. He wins several battles against invading forces and is ultimately responsible for the setting up of a thriving colony on the island.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 Pair work:** Ask the students if they have ever heard of Robinson Crusoe. If they haven't, tell them that it is the story of a man who is left on an uninhabited island after his ship sinks. Working in pairs, they write down three sentences about what happens (or what they think happens) to Robinson Crusoe after he is left on the island. After 10 minutes, ask each pair to present their sentences to the rest of the class.
- 2 Discuss:** Put the students into small groups. Ask them to imagine that they are stranded on a desert island. Their ship is stuck on rocks near land. They can swim out and bring five things back to the island before the ship sinks. What will they bring back? After ten minutes, ask each group to read out its list to the class. Write their suggestions on the board.
- 3 Guess:** Photocopy the pictures and their captions on pages 7, 11, 15, 23 and 31. Separate the pictures from their captions. Photocopy the five pictures on to one page, and the five captions on another page, not in the same order as the pictures. Put students in small groups and give each group a page of pictures and a page of captions. Ask students to put the captions with the right pictures. Then ask them to try to build a story around the pictures and the captions.

Chapter 1

After reading

- 4 Discuss:** Robinson Crusoe was attracted by the idea of going to sea. Each student decides whether they would like to go to sea. Have them write down three reasons why they would/would not like to do so. Then put the students in small groups and have them discuss their choices. Depending on the students' level of interest, this could be expanded into a whole-class activity, with the teacher writing key vocabulary on the board as the discussion progresses.
- 5 Pair work:** On the board, write the list of 'important things' that Robinson Crusoe finds on the ship (page 3) – *food and drink, guns, pens, paper, money, clothes, knives, books*. Working in pairs, the students decide how each of these things could help them live on a desert island. After a few minutes, ask each pair to report back to the rest of the class.



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Chapters 2–5

- 6 Discuss:** Robinson Crusoe says he was happy on the island. What do you think about Robinson Crusoe's life on the island? Was it good or bad? Why? Have students work in small groups. Draw two columns on the board labelled 'good things' and 'bad things' and tell them to put as many things in each column as they can. Then ask each group to report to the whole class and put words into each column as the discussion progresses.
- 7 Write:** On page 9, we read that, after some years on the island, Robinson Crusoe feels he understands what his father told him before he left York because now 'I understood more about life.' Working with the whole class, ask the students what they think Robinson Crusoe means here. Put their suggestion on the board. After a few minutes put the students into pairs and tell them to write a letter from Robinson Crusoe to his father in which he tells him why he is happy now. When they have finished, collect the letters and read some of them out to the class.
- 8 Debate:** On several occasions Robinson Crusoe speaks of how he planned each day of his life on the island in order to keep busy. Ask the students if they like to make a plan for each day. Then write the following sentence on the board: *This house believes that it is important to make a plan for each day.* Split the class in half and hold a debate that is for or against this issue. Each side can choose a student to represent their arguments. Write the main arguments on the board. At the end of the debate, you can ask the students to vote on the proposition.
- 9 Guess:** At the end of Chapter 5 Robinson Crusoe tells us that 'something wonderful happened.' Put the students into small groups and ask them to predict what will happen next. After ten minutes, the groups can present their predictions to the class. Note down the main points on the board and conduct a class discussion to decide on the best suggestions.

Chapters 6–10

- 10 Artwork:** Ask the students that if Robinson Crusoe was to draw a map of the island, what features do they think should be on the map. Write their suggestions on the board. Then ask the students to draw the map. When they have finished, put the students in pairs to compare their maps.
- 11 Pair work:** In pairs, tell the students to make a copy of one of the maps they drew in exercise 10. Tell the students that, in case he is attacked by the cannibals, Robinson Crusoe decides to bury the following items on the island – money, a gun, dried fruit, drinking water, a pen and paper. The students sit back to back. Student A plays Robinson Crusoe and draws the location of each item somewhere on his map. Student B plays Friday and asks questions to find each item. They must not look at each other's maps until the end of the exercise.

- 12 Role play:** Friday has never seen many of the things that Robinson Crusoe has and he needs to be taught how to use them. Put the students into groups of three or four. Allocate one of the following items to each group – *gun, matches, bow and arrow, money.* Each group prepares a short talk on how to teach Friday how to use these items. After fifteen minutes, each group elects two students to present their talk to the class, who can then ask questions.

Chapters 11–15

- 13 Pair work:** Tell the students to look again at page 33 where Robinson Crusoe sits down in his house with the English captain. Working in pairs, tell them to imagine some of the questions that the captain asked Robinson Crusoe about his years on the island. Each pair should think of at least five questions and answers. After five or ten minutes, get the pairs to practice their dialogues out loud until they know them. Then ask some of the pairs to perform their dialogue in front of the whole class.
- 14 Role play:** Have students act out the conversation between Robinson Crusoe and the captain on page 34. On the board write out the dialogue from 'How many men are on the ship now?' to 'That is a good plan.' as if it were a stage play. Ask a student to say the first line. Work on the pronunciation. Then have another student repeat. Do the same with two or three more students before moving on to the next line. As the students begin to memorise it, erase the dialogue line by line. When the whole dialogue has been rehearsed, have the students play out the dialogue in pairs.

Extra activities

- 15 Research:** Tell the students to use the Internet and/or the library to find out about true life survivors of accidents at sea. Give the students a list of questions to help with their research: e.g. *When did the accident happen? Where did it happen? How did it happen? How did the people survive? How long was it before they were rescued?*
- 16 Discuss:** Tell the students to work individually and answer the following questions: *What was the funniest moment in the story? What was the scariest moment in the story? What was the stupidest moment in the story? Did you enjoy the story? Why/why not? Would you recommend the book to anybody else?* Students can share their answers with the class.
- 17 Write:** As a follow-up to activity 16, ask the students to write a short review of the book. Tell them to include the following points: a brief summary of the story; a brief description of the main characters; the things they liked about the story; the things they didn't like about the story.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.