***To Kill a Mockingbird***

***Chapter 2***

***Brief Summary:***

Scout prepares to start school, but her enthusiasm is short lived. Jem informs her that things will be different since she is in school. He wants her to leave him alone when they are at school. Scout meets her teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher. The teacher is a beautiful young woman, but no to teaching and new to that section of Alabama. She is from Winston County, Alabama, and all the children know Winston County seceded from Alabama during the Civil War. Alabama seceded from the Union, but seceding from Alabama is a different situation. This leads to people in Maycomb having a low opinion of people from Winston County.

It is also evident that Miss Fisher is not familiar with the type of poverty that is prevalent in Maycomb. She cannot understand that little Walter Cunningham doesn't have a lunch. She offers to lend him money, but he refuses to take it. Walter comes to the first day of school with no shoes, mended overalls and no lunch, but his shirt is clean.

Scout notices the frustration between Miss Fisher and Walter, and tries to explain. Everyone in Maycomb knows about the Cunninghams. They have very little money and do not take anything if they cannot afford to pay it back. Miss Fisher offered to loan Walter money for lunch, but he knew that he couldn't repay her. When Scout tells Miss Fisher about this, the teacher gets frustrated with her.

Miss Fisher holds up cards with letters on them. She doesn't realize that most of the students are in first grade for the second or third time. Scout's problems increase when Miss Fisher discovers that Scout can read and write. She insists that Scout will not learn to read yet, and she must print. These instructions frustrate Scout who loves to read and write and sees nothing wrong with that. Calpurnia taught Scout to write, even though writing isn't taught until the third grade.

Scout continues to try and explain the Cunningham's situation with Miss Fisher, but the teacher losses patience with her. Before long, Scout finds herself standing in the corner. The lunch bell rings and Scout can leave for lunch. She notices that Miss Fisher laid her head on her desk, but cannot manage to feel sorry for her.

The bias and prejudice of Maycomb comes out in this chapter. The fact that first grade children know a county seceded from Alabama in the Civil War, shows that it was taken serious by their elders. The reader gains insights into the economic situation in Maycomb. It doesn't seem out of place for children to attend school barefoot and there are several who cannot afford lunch.

Atticus explained to Scout that county folks have to exchange work and food when they need to "purchase" something. The doctors, lawyers and shop owners are often paid with poultry, potatoes, firewood and like items, because the county folks don't have the money to pay for the things they need. What money is made usually goes to the bank for their mortgages.

It is also mentioned that many of the children failed first grade the year before. Many times this was because they missed school because they had to work. Having the children available to make money for the family was more critical than their education.

***Brief Analysis:***

September arrives, and Dill leaves Maycomb to return to the town of Meridian. [Scout](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/scout-finch/), meanwhile, prepares to go to school for the first time, an event that she has been eagerly anticipating. Once she is finally at school, however, she finds that her teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher, deals poorly with children. When Miss Caroline concludes that [Atticus](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/atticus-finch/) must have taught Scout to read, she becomes very displeased and makes Scout feel guilty for being educated. At recess, Scout complains to [Jem](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/jem-finch/), but Jem says that Miss Caroline is just trying out a new method of teaching.

Miss Caroline and Scout get along badly in the afternoon as well. Walter Cunningham, a boy in Scout’s class, has not brought a lunch. Miss Caroline offers him a quarter to buy lunch, telling him that he can pay her back tomorrow. Walter’s family is large and poor—so poor that they pay Atticus with hickory nuts, turnip greens, or other goods when they need legal help—and Walter will never be able to pay the teacher back or bring a lunch to school. When Scout attempts to explain these circumstances, however, Miss Caroline fails to understand and grows so frustrated that she slaps Scout’s hand with a ruler.

***Detailed Summary:***

* Summer's over, and Dill heads back home to Meridian.
* The narrator looks forward to joining the kids at school for the first time instead of spying on them through a telescope like a pint-size stalker.
* Jem takes the narrator to school, and explains that it's different from home—and he doesn't want his first-grade sibling cramping his fifth-grade style.
* The narrator's teacher is a young woman by the name of [Miss Caroline Fisher](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/caroline-fisher), who's from North Alabama, otherwise known to the native Maycombians as Crazy Land.
* Miss Caroline reads the class a story about cats and seems blithely unaware that she's already completely lost her audience, a bunch of farm kids who the narrator says are "immune to imaginative literature" (2.8).
* Miss Caroline puts the alphabet up on the board. All of the class already knows it.
* Amazing! Is it a class full of geniuses?
* Nope. Most of them are starting first grade for the second time.
* Miss Caroline asks the narrator to read, and is not pleased that she's already good at it.
* See, the teacher assumes that Atticus has taught the narrator how to read. Apparently, these lessons must stop because [Atticus](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/atticus-finch) isn't a licensed teacher and therefore is doing his child more harm than good.
* Even though she's already a fluent reader, when the rest of the class is repeating first grade.
* The narrator gets the impression that reading, which seems to come as naturally as breathing, is something like a sin when it's done out of class.
* Trying to stay out of further trouble, the narrator zones out till recess, then complains to Jem.
* Jem says that Miss Caroline is at the center of educational reform in the school, which he calls "the Dewey Decimal System" (2.25).
* This new system results in boring class time, so the narrator starts writing (in cursive) a letter to Dill. Miss Caroline makes the narrator stop, saying that first graders print, and cursive isn't taught until third grade.
* The narrator remembers that [Calpurnia](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/calpurnia) had passed rainy days by giving writing lessons.
* Miss Caroline is halted in her inspection of her students' lunches by [Walter Cunningham](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/walter-cunningham-jr), who doesn't have one.
* She tries to lend him a quarter for lunch, but he refuses to take it.
* The narrator, whose name we now learn is [Jean Louise](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/scout-jean-louise-finch), steps in, explaining to Miss Caroline that Walter is a Cunningham.
* That explanation, crystal clear to Jean Louise, doesn't mean much to Miss Caroline, so she explains further: the Cunninghams won't take anything from anybody, preferring to get by on the little they have.
* Flashback: Jean Louise knows about the Cunninghams because Walter's father hired Atticus for some legal work, and paid for the service by barter rather than in cash.
* Back to the schoolroom present: Jean Louise wants to explain but can't, so she just says that Miss Caroline is making Walter ashamed by trying to lend him money he can't pay back.
* Miss Caroline cracks at this, and calls Jean Louise up to the front of the class, where she pats her hand with the ruler and makes her stand in the corner.
* The class breaks out laughing when they realize that the ruler taps were supposed to be corporal punishment.
* The bell rings and everyone leaves for lunch. Miss Caroline collapses with her head in her hands at her desk.

***Detailed Analysis:***

September comes and [Dill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Dill) leaves for home in Meridian, Mississippi, just before school starts for [Jem](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Jem) and [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout). Scout is entering first grade, and she's looking forward to it after many days of watching the other schoolchildren from her treehouse. However, her first day starts off rough.

Her teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher, becomes frustrated when she discovers Scout is already an avid reader and writer. She tells Scout that her father should stop teaching her because he doesn't know how to teach. New to Maycomb, Miss Fisher knows little about the town's social structure, resulting in an awkward confrontation with Walter Cunningham, a student who comes from an extremely poor family. Miss Caroline offers to buy him lunch since he didn't bring any, but he has no means of paying her back. Scout explains to Miss Fisher that the Cunninghams don't take anything they can't pay for. Although Scout's explanation is well intended, Miss Caroline sends her to stand in the corner, confusing Scout about what she thought was a helpful interruption.

[Chapter 2](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/chapter-2-summary/) captures what an observant and intelligent six-year-old [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout) is. Scout can read and write, something her new teacher Miss Caroline doesn't appreciate. As the story is told from Scout's perspective, we learn that reading came about as naturally as breathing for her.

Another interesting aspect of this chapter is Scout's young and inexperienced teacher, Miss Caroline. A parallel can be drawn here between Miss Caroline's unwillingness to understand the people of Maycomb and the town's unwillingness to understand each other.

***Critical Study:***

The summer is over, and September has arrived. Dill has returned to his family in Meridian, and Scout eagerly awaits her first day of school. She is excited about the prospect of finally starting school, but her first day of first grade leaves her extremely disappointed. Her teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher, is 21 years old and new to the Maycomb County schools. Miss Caroline is from the richer and more cultured North Alabama, and does not understand the country ways of Maycomb.

To begin the day, Miss Caroline reads a saccharine children's story about cats, which leaves the children feeling restless. Scout explains, "Miss Caroline seemed unaware that the ragged, denim-shirted and flour-sack-skirted first graders were immune to imaginative literature." Half of these children had failed first grade the year before. Therefore, when Miss Caroline writes the alphabet on the board and Scout reads it through easily, then reads from her reader and from the local paper, Miss Caroline forbids Scout to let Atticus teach her to read anymore. Rather than congratulating Scout on her knowledge, Miss Caroline believes Scout is being taught incorrectly and tells her not to read at home anymore. Scout explains she doesn't remember learning how to read, but it seems she always knew how. When Miss Caroline forbids her to continue reading, she realizes how important it is to her: "Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing."

At recess, Jem listens to Scout's complaints and tries to reassure her, explaining that Miss Caroline is introducing a new teaching technique which he calls the Dewey Decimal System. Back in class, Scout gets bored and starts writing a letter to Dill, but is criticized again by her teacher for knowing how to write in script when she's only supposed to print in first grade. Scout blames Calpurnia for teaching her how to write in script on rainy days.

At lunchtime, Miss Caroline asks everyone who isn't going home for lunch to show her their lunch pails. One boy, [Walter Cunningham](https://www.gradesaver.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird/study-guide/character-list#walter-cunningham), has no pail and refuses to accept Miss Caroline's loan of a quarter to buy something with. Miss Caroline doesn't understand his refusal, and a classmate asks Scout to help explain. Scout tells Miss Caroline that Walter is a Cunningham, and thinks that explanation should be enough. After realizing Miss Caroline doesn't know what that means, Scout explains that the Cunninghams don't accept other people's help, and just try to get by with what little they have. Scout mentally recollects how Mr. Cunningham, when entailed, repaid Atticus for his legal services by giving the Finch family hickory nuts, stove wood, and other farm produce. The Cunninghams are farmers who don't have actual money now that the Depression is on. Many professionals in the town charge their country clients in farm produce rather than monetary currency. When Scout explains that Walter can't pay back the lunch money Miss Caroline offered, the teacher taps Scout's hand with a ruler and makes her stand in the corner of the room. Scout and the children are puzzled by this very unthreatening form of "whipping," and the entire class laughs until a locally-born sixth grade teacher arrives and announces that she'll "burn up everybody" in the room if they aren't quiet.

The first half of the day ends, and on her way out of the classroom, Scout sees Miss Caroline bury her head in her arms as the children leave the room. However, Scout doesn't feel sorry for her considering her unfriendly treatment that morning.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

[Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) returns home to Mississippi in early September. [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) is miserable until she remembers that she starts school in a week. [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) agrees to take Scout to school and explains that she can’t bother him at all because things are different at school. Scout learns that Jem is right almost immediately. Her teacher, [Miss Caroline](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters), is from Winston County, a peculiar place. After reading the class a silly story about talking cats, Miss Caroline prints the alphabet on the board. Nearly every student can read it since many failed first grade last year, but Miss Caroline asks Scout to read it aloud. Scout then reads most of her reading book and part of the newspaper. Miss Caroline is upset that Scout can read and tells her to tell [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch) to not teach her anymore. Scout isn’t sure what she did wrong—she can’t remember not knowing how to read.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Miss Caroline’s teaching methods show immediately that, within the world of the novel, school is silly for most children and forces them to conform rather than building on what they already know. Note, too, that Scout makes it clear that Miss Caroline is from Winston County, and therefore is an outsider who shouldn’t be taken seriously. This again illustrates how insular Maycomb is, while also making the case that Scout is missing out on opportunities to expand her horizons by writing off people from other places outright.

***Summary Part 2:***

At recess, [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) finds [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout), and Scout explains her predicament. Jem assures her that [Miss Caroline](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters) is introducing a new teaching method called the Dewey Decimal System, which Scout doesn’t question. Back in class, Miss Caroline waves cards printed with “cat,” “rat,” and other words. Scout is bored, so she begins a letter to [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill). Miss Caroline scolds Scout for writing in cursive, which she isn’t supposed to learn until the third grade. Scout explains that [Calpurnia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/calpurnia) taught her cursive on rainy days to keep Scout out of her hair.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Jem’s announcement that Miss Caroline is teaching the Dewey Decimal System points to the fact that even though he’s older than Scout, he’s still a child and doesn’t know everything—the Dewey Decimal System is a system of organizing libraries, not of teaching. Scout’s willingness to buy this, meanwhile, points to her trust in her brother, as well as her youth.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Miss Caroline](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters) prepares the class for lunch by taking stock of who will go home to eat and who brought lunch. She notices that [Walter Cunningham](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/walter-cunningham) isn’t going home and doesn’t have a lunch. Walter quietly agrees that he forgot his lunch but refuses Miss Caroline’s offer of a quarter to eat downtown, to be paid back later. Scout notices that despite his poverty, Walter is clean and tidy. Someone hisses for [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) to explain the situation, so Scout raises her hand and announces that Walter is a Cunningham. She believes her meaning is clear—everyone knows that the Cunninghams have no money or extra food. At Miss Caroline’s prodding, Scout explains the Cunninghams won’t accept anything if they can’t pay people back. She tells the reader that last year, [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch) helped Mr. Cunningham with his entailment. Then, throughout the winter, Atticus found firewood and foodstuffs on his porch.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Scout, importantly, isn’t trying to embarrass Miss Caroline with her explanation of the Cunninghams’ situation—she’s trying to help her fit into Maycomb and understand some of the eccentricities. Scout’s confusion when Miss Caroline doesn’t immediately understand her intentions, however, reminds the reader that Scout doesn’t have a lot of experience dealing with outsiders who aren’t aware of how Maycomb works. She doesn’t yet have the skills to think about what Miss Caroline might not know or understand and to explain herself accordingly.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch) explained to [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) then that [Mr. Cunningham](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/mr-cunningham) was hit hard by the stock market crash but doesn’t want a WPA job since it’ll mean nobody will be around to work his land. Not being able to explain this as well as Atticus, Scout tells [Miss Caroline](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters) that she’s shaming [Walter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/walter-cunningham) since he can’t pay her back. Miss Caroline hauls Scout to the front of the room and asks her to hold out her hand. Scout is confused when Miss Caroline lightly taps Scout’s hand with a ruler. Children laugh when they realize Miss Caroline “whipped” Scout.

***Analysis Part 4:***

“Whipping” Scout like this makes the public school system look even more ridiculous, especially since Scout was only trying to help both her classmate and Miss Caroline fit in better. Scout’s understanding of the reasons why the Cunninghams are so poor, meanwhile, speaks to her precocity and her ability to understand complex concepts, even if she can’t figure out how to navigate school.