

The Tell-Tale Start

By Gordon McAlpine

Identical twins Edgar and Allan Poe are far from ordinary middle schoolers. Not only are they certifiably brilliant, but they are also proud to be the great-great-great-grandnephews of famous 19th century author Edgar Allan Poe. They look a lot like him, they live in Baltimore as he did, and they share his love for “the thrilling and unexpected” (2). What’s more, Edgar and Allan are so in sync with one another that they can read each other’s thoughts! Naturally, they don’t find regular schoolwork very challenging, so they spend all of their free time conducting intricate science experiments, reprogramming computers, reading *True Tales of Horror*, decoding fortune cookies, and teaching their beloved cat, Roderick Usher, to do unusual tricks. To the delight of their school friends, the twins are also masterful pranksters who make classes exciting and keep would-be bullies in check.

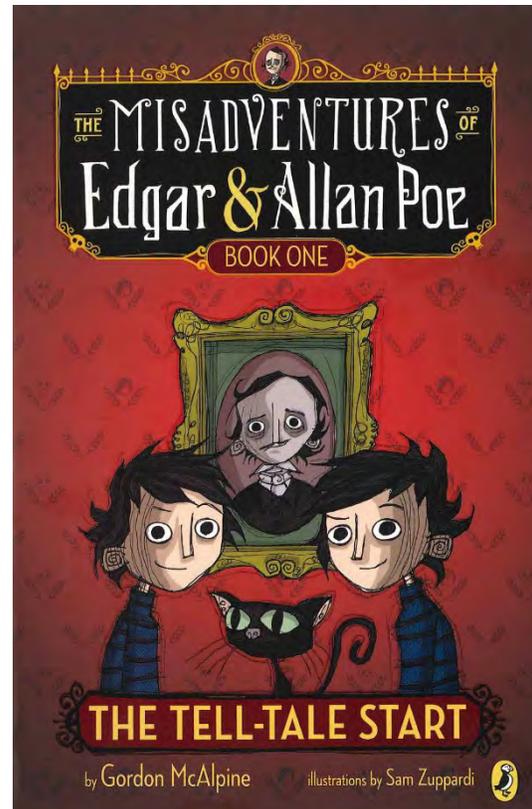
Overall, things are going pretty well for Edgar and Allan—other than being temporarily expelled from school—until their cat goes missing. They cannot bear to lose this last connection to their parents, who gave them Roderick Usher as a kitten shortly before they died in a botched satellite launch seven years ago. When they receive a mysterious phone call saying their cat has ended up at a Wizard of Oz theme park in Kansas, Edgar and Allan will do anything to convince Uncle Jack and Aunt Judith to drive them there. What the Poe twins don’t know, though, is that their parents’ disappearance wasn’t an accident, and neither is their cat’s! Someone creepy is after Edgar and Allan, but why? Will the boys decode the clues, survive their cross-country road trip, and escape with Roderick Usher in time?

About the Author

Although he was a capable reader from an early age, author Gordon McAlpine didn’t really get into books until he discovered a series of mysteries for children called *Alfred Hitchcock Presents: The Three Investigators* around age nine. These books were the first to spark his imagination, and his interest in creative writing as a career grew from there. McAlpine went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of California, Irvine. He has taught fiction-writing courses at several colleges and universities in California and written several television scripts, short stories, novels, and nonfiction books for adults. *The Tell-Tale Start*, which grew into a three-book series called *The Misadventures of Edgar & Allan Poe*, was his first book for middle-grade readers. In his spare time, McAlpine enjoys reading, playing basketball, and exploring new places. He lives with his wife and three dogs in Southern California. To learn more about McAlpine—and see some of Edgar, Allan, and Roderick Usher’s favorite roadside attractions—[visit the author’s personal Web site](#).

Getting Started

You can find *The Tell-Tale Start* at your local or school library, or at local or online bookstores. It’s also available as an ebook for your iPad, Kindle, or Nook.



While You're Reading

Every good story is full of captivating characters, timeless and timely themes, significant settings, pivotal plot points, and vivid vocabulary that combine to engage our brains and our hearts. In this section of the website, you will find activities that invite you to dig deeper into each of these literary elements for a better understanding and enjoyment of the book.

To aid your investigation, save our "Writing While You Read" guide (see pages 17 and 18), with helpful tips on keeping a reading journal and annotating a book while you read.

Respond to the following prompts in your reading journal as you read chapters 1-5 of *The Tell-Tale Start*.

- The key way a writer helps his or her readers connect with a story is through its characters. Which qualities, behaviors, and choices do you think make some characters more appealing than others? To help you answer this question with specific evidence from the book, use the Character Grid you'll find on pages 19 and 20 below (and you can make extra copies of page 20 if you need them). Tuck it inside your book, and, each time you meet a new character, take a minute to jot down the name and your initial observations about him or her on your Character Grid. Be sure to revisit your Grid every few chapters or so, too! There may be more ideas you want to add as you get to know each character better.
- In many books and movies, super-smart kids are teased for being "nerds" or "geeks." Is this the case for Edgar and Allan? How well do they relate to other kids their own age? Do the twins have many friends? How can you tell?
- Because they are so far ahead of their classmates (and even some of their teachers!) in school, Edgar and Allan are permitted to "teach the advanced material from time to time" (12). Have you ever had the opportunity to teach others information and/or a skill you know really well? What was it like to take on this leadership role? Whom did you teach? How did teaching others change or improve your own understanding of the information or skill?
- In the first chapter of the book, we learn that Principal Mann is being blackmailed into expelling Edgar and Allan from school. If he doesn't kick them out, a man named Ian Archer will tell everyone about "the money" Principal Mann "pocketed from [his] school's funds" (11). In what way(s) is it surprising that the principal, whom students and families believe to be a trustworthy authority figure, would be willing to punish Edgar and Allan unfairly rather than face justice for his own wrongdoing? Do you think something like this could happen in real life? Why (or why not)?
- After Edgar and Allan get expelled from school, they console themselves by making plans for the ultimate Halloween prank. From what you have read so far, why do you think Halloween is the boys' favorite holiday? What is your favorite holiday? Why? How do you celebrate this holiday with special activities or traditions?
- The Poe twins "[believe] that oddities and seeming coincidences [are] actually the world's way of communicating secret messages" (41). Even though "[a]dults usually [categorize] such thinking as 'overactive imagination'. . . the boys [know] that if you consider everything with an open and inquisitive eye, then at the very least you ensure that the world is never boring" (42). Do you agree with Edgar and Allan? How do you

think being curious and open-minded changes the way people understand and interact with the world around them?

- When the boys secretly transform their homeschool room on the day of the school district official's visit, their Aunt Judith's reaction surprises them. Edgar and Allan call her "*the Queen of Hearts*" (60). Why? What surprises you, if anything, about Aunt Judith's parenting style? Be sure to include specific evidence from the book to illustrate your answer.



- One of the funniest aspects of *The Tell-Tale Start* is the way the book's author, Gordon McAlpine, imagines the afterlife as a vast office building full of deceased famous people from history. In "theGreat Beyond," [Edgar Allan Poe](#) writes messages for fortune cookies, signs, and license plates (65, 175). [Emily Dickinson](#) and [Walt Whitman](#) are his co-workers (66), and they are all under the supervision of [William Shakespeare](#) (65). [Pablo Picasso](#) even designs posters in

the art department (70)! All of the products they produce end up in the world of the living, and no one there is the wiser. How does this vision of life after death compare to others you have read about, seen in movies, or imagined yourself? Why do you think the living are so interested in imagining what happens to people after they die?

Respond to the following prompts in your Reading Journal as you read (or re-read) Chapters 6-11 of *The Tell-Tale Start*:

- Edgar and Allan's "uncanny resemblance to their famous great-great-great-great granduncle Edgar Allan Poe. . . ensure[s] they [will] never be mistaken for run-of-the-mill boys (1). This doesn't really bother them, though: "The twins [know] they [are] unusual. But what else would they want to be—usual?" (30). Now that you've gotten to know Edgar and Allan pretty well, consider what they do for fun, their favorite foods, the way they talk, and how they interact with others. In what way(s) are the Poe twins atypical for their age? On the other hand, in what way(s) are they typical gifted children, like you?
- Why do you think Edgar and Allan feel "undeserving" of love (107)? How can you tell?
- After he captures Edgar and Allan in the OZitorium, Professor S. Pangborn Perry, PhD, P.O.E.S., finally explains his bizarre obsession with *The Wizard of Oz* and reveals that P.O.E.S. stands not for "Parents of Exemplary Children" but for "Physicist of Extreme Science" (145-46). The professor intends to use the twins and the principles of quantum entanglement to "rule *both* worlds" (150). He calls himself "Professor Marvel." He has also changed Roderick Usher's name to "Asparagus," a name taken from a [T.S. Eliot](#) poem (134-35). How

would you describe the professor as a villain? Is he surprising or unusual in any way? What do you make of his evil plan? Would you argue he is a gifted kid gone “bad guy”? Why (or why not)?

- Near the end of the book, Edgar and Allan “calculate” the precise time at their “longitude and latitude the satellite launched years before with their unfortunate mother and father accidentally aboard would be visible as a glimmering, orbiting star in the northeast skies” (168). They go outside in the middle of the night to look up at the sky and tell their parents about everything that has just happened to them. How have Edgar and Allan changed and grown as a result of their unexpected cross-country adventure and confrontation with Professor Perry? Look back over the notes you’ve made on your Character Grid (see pages 19 and 20 below) for ideas.



- Although they obviously miss their parents, Edgar and Allan are happy living with their aunt and uncle in Baltimore. In what way(s) are Uncle Jack and Aunt Judith ideal guardians for Edgar and Allan?
- Author Gordon McAlpine crafted *The Tell-Tale Start* to be a fast-paced, action-packed book. This is a very popular method of storytelling! When a storyline moves very quickly like this one, though, what do you notice about how the characters are shaped and developed over the course of the book? How well do you feel like you know and understand the characters in *The Tell-Tale Start* compared to the five narrators in our last Book Club selection *Masterminds* (or another slower-paced book you’ve studied this year)? Do you tend to prefer books that are more plot driven or character driven? What does that tell you about yourself?
- Now that you’ve finished the book, look back at the epigraph (or quotation) just before the Contents: “A black cat crossing your path signifies that the animal is going somewhere.” — Groucho Marx

In literature an epigraph often offers a hint about a work’s theme, or overall message from author to readers. In the case of *The Tale-Tell Start*, this epigraph could simply hint that something is going to happen to Edgar and Allan’s beloved cat Roderick Usher. Can you think of another possibility, perhaps something to do with the interplay between superstition and scientific observation? Why do you think McAlpine chose this Groucho Marx quotation for this particular book?

Getting to the Root



English is a living language. It changes and grows all the time. One of the best ways to understand the history of the English language and to unlock the meanings of unfamiliar words is to learn Latin and Greek word parts. As you study biology, you will learn more and more of these word parts, and once you know them, you will begin to recognize them in all kinds of words—and you'll find that your knowledge of those word parts will help you decipher the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Roots are the "base" of plants, and Latin and Greek roots form the base of many English words. For example, the Latin root *audi* means "to hear." How many modern English words can you think of that include the root *audi*?

Next, take a look at each word part below. Beside each part is a word from *The Tell-Tale Start* containing that word part. You can find the word in context on the page number in parentheses.

- **ap – apex** (6)
- **in – incorrigible** (8)
- **log – terminology** (21)
- **non, com, mit, al – noncommittal** (41)
- **re, und – redundancy** (47)
- **rot – rotund** (161)

1. Can you determine the meaning of the root from your knowledge of the word beside it?
2. If not, think of other words that you know that also contain that root. What do those words have in common? Based on that common element, can you figure out the meaning of the root?
3. If you're still stumped, check out this [list of Latin and Greek roots](#).
4. Now that you know the meaning of the root, how many words can you generate that use the root?
5. Once you understand the meaning of the root, you'll find that even your understanding and appreciation of familiar words will deepen and grow when you think about how that root works in those words.

Words, Words, Words

The Tell-Tale Start is full of great words. Below is a list of some of the words from the book that may be unfamiliar to you, along with the page number on which each word appears in the story. Be sure to follow the steps below for other words in the book that are new to you.

- uncanny (1)
- gothic (1)
- unison (4)
- grotesque (6)
- guff (7)
- proficiency (9)
- etymology (9)
- incredulous (13)
- sarcasm (16)
- ominous (16)
- encrypted (23)
- harbinger (33)
- optimistic (39)
- subatomic (45)
- particle (45)
- terminate (47)
- repertoire (49)
- cravat (64)
- formidable (112)
- infiltrated (122)
- ruse (122)
- simian (124)
- incongruous (129)
- egotistical (153)
- demoted (176)



Before you look these words up in a dictionary—or ask someone what they mean—try working through the following steps:

1. Generate a list of other words that share one or more of the same word parts. What do the words on the list have in common? Are there any clues from those commonalities that you can use to help figure out the meaning of the unknown word? Hint: Some word parts—as they appear in English words—have multiple meanings as we look back at the Latin and Greek, in part because of changes that have occurred in the words over the years. For example, does the "ped-" in "pedestrian" mean the same thing as the "ped" in "pediatrician"? Where there is possible confusion, or when you don't see familiar word parts, context clues (see step 2) are extremely important.
2. Go back and reread the word in its context. This context includes the sentence in which you find the word, but you should also read one or two sentences both before and after the appearance of the word. What context clues do you find that might unlock the meaning of the word for you?
3. Make your best guess at the meaning of the word.
4. Look up the definition in [a dictionary](#). Be sure to also look for information about the word's origin. This information will often contain the Latin or Greek word from which the word is derived.
5. How close was your guess?

Explore

Our world is full of connections—between people, places, and events. In this section of the website, you will find activities that uncover some important connections—in American literature and cultural history, quantum physics, astronomy, and cryptology—between *The Tell-Tale Start* and our world.

American Literature

Edgar Allan Poe, Thrill Master Extraordinaire

Edgar and Allan have a lot in common with their great-great-great-great granduncle Edgar Allan Poe. Not only do they look just like him but also they “[share] his taste for the thrilling and unexpected,” especially anything involving “[i]ntrigue, coded messages, [or] dark secrets” (2). As a result, the twins are huge fans of Poe’s stories and poems. According to the twins, although “some of the words their great-great-great-great granduncle [uses are] old-fashioned, the stories [are] grievous, shuddersome, and horrific—in other words, perfect” (91). Of course, Edgar and Allan are only fictional characters, but did you know Edgar Allan Poe was a real-life author who lived in New England in the early 1800s? In fact, a lot of what you’ve read about his life and work in *The Tell-Tale Start* is actually true! Let’s find out more about the real Edgar Allan Poe, so we can discern the historical facts from the fictional elements in the book we are reading.

Activities

- [Learn about Poe’s childhood and how he became a writer and literary critic.](#)
- [Take a tour of the Poe National Historic Site](#) to get a sense of how Poe lived and worked.
- Consider Poe’s unusual creative process, which led him to become a pioneer of [science fiction](#), [detective stories](#), and [macabre tales](#).
- Read “[The Raven](#),” the poem that finally made Poe famous only a few years before his death.
- Edgar Allan Poe died on October 7, 1849 under uncertain circumstances, and the cause of his death remains a mystery. [Visit the Poe Museum’s Web site](#) to review the theories surrounding his death.

Now that you know more about Edgar Allan Poe, which aspects of his character in *The Tell-Tale Start* are based on historical facts? Which aspects are make-believe? In what way(s) does author Gordon McAlpine’s blending of fact and fiction make this book more interesting and enjoyable to read?

Americana

Highways, Motels, and the Birth of the American Road Trip

Once Edgar and Allan find out Roderick Usher has ended up at the Gale Farm and OZitorium, they convince Aunt Judith and Uncle Jack to take them on a road trip to get back their cat. There are a lot of miles to cover between Baltimore and Kansas, but there is certainly no shortage of quirky roadside attractions and motels to keep the twins entertained along the way! Apparently, Edgar and Allan share their parents’ “sense of humor” (107). When they were alive, Mal and Irma Poe loved taking “crazy vacations” all over the country to see things like the “toy-robot museum,”

the “world’s largest ball of human hair,” “The World’s Largest Catsup Bottle,” and “The Pencil Sharpener Museum” (106, 148). According to Aunt Judith, “They’d send . . . postcards. And they’d buy T-shirts and give them away as joke gifts” (106). For many of us, motels and roadside attractions are an all-too-common sight, but did you ever stop to think about how and why they became such a defining feature of the American cultural landscape?



Activities

- Learn how the growing popularity of automobiles in the wake of [the Great Depression](#) led to the [widespread construction of highways lined with drive-in restaurants, motels, and roadside attractions](#) to draw tourists and revenue to small towns across America. How did the recovering American economy make vacationing via car more appealing and accessible to everyday Americans?
- Trace the [development of roadside accommodations](#) from campgrounds to motor courts to motels. Why do you think it was so important for road-tripping tourists to sleep in close proximity to their parked cars?
- Consider how construction of the [Eisenhower Interstate Highway System](#) ended up [diverting tourists onto superhighways](#) and away from once-popular roadside attractions and motels. How do you think this change affected the communities that had once thrived on the tourist traffic along the smaller state highways? If you have seen the Pixar film *Cars*, which is set in a fictional town along [Route 66](#), that may give you a hint!
- Many motels and roadside attractions still survive today because tourists, like the Poes, are willing to go out of their way to find them. Take a closer look at a few of America’s quirkiest stops [here](#) and [here](#).

Are you feeling inspired to take a road trip? If so, get your family together and [use this interactive map](#) to find a unique roadside destination near you!

Quantum Physics

Untangling Quantum Entanglement

Professor S. Pangborn Perry wants to control the Poe twins because he believes their brains are connected via quantum entanglement (45-47). What exactly does that mean, and is it even possible? Let’s find out more about the cutting edge research going on in the field of quantum physics!

Activities

- [Get a general sense of the basic principles and applications of quantum mechanics.](#)
- Learn how particle physicists in Europe conduct experiments using the [Large Hadron Collider \(LHC\)](#) to [observe the behavior of particles on the subatomic level.](#)
- [Watch this video](#) to hear a professional physicist explain how researchers in his field have taken quantum mechanics from a “mathematical idea to a confirmed feature of reality” over the last forty years, particularly with the discovery of the Higgs Boson particle.
- [Investigate a recent discovery](#) by a research group in The Netherlands that may prove the existence of quantum entanglement, or “spooky action at a distance” as Einstein called it (45).
- [Consider how advancements in quantum mechanics have led to useful applications in everyday life.](#)

Based on what you’ve learned, what do you make of the brain-brain connection between Edgar and Allan? Obviously, particle physicists’ recent discoveries offer no indication that quantum entanglement could exist between two humans. However, it is interesting to note how author Gordon McAlpine weaves the principles of quantum entanglement into his depiction of the Poe twins: “One moment one was Edgar, the next he was Allan. Same boy, different identity; same identity, different boy. Their thoughts and actions were not identical but coordinated, like moving parts in a fine Swiss watch. Each always knew what the other was thinking, feeling, experiencing. Sometimes, they wondered if they were actually one boy with two bodies. Or two boys with one mind” (3-4). How do these sorts of details make the book’s main characters, and the overall storyline, more believable?

Astronomy

The World’s First Handheld Device?

After they are unjustly expelled from school, Edgar and Allan amuse themselves with various scientific projects, one of which is making their own astrolabe out of old CDs (37). Did you know astrolabes were once very common and even children knew how to make and use them? How does an astrolabe work and how might it be useful to curious, young scientists like the Poe twins?



Activities

- [Watch this video](#) to learn about the history of the astrolabe and the principle of stereographic projection, which makes an astrolabe work. There were once hundreds of everyday uses for astrolabes. In your opinion, what are some of the most surprising ones?

- Famous fourteenth-century British poet [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) wrote astrolabe instructions for his eleven-year-old son, which were eventually the first to be published in English. [Take a look at some sample text from Chaucer's treatise on astrolabes.](#) Can you decipher the Middle English wording?
- [Try this hands-on project to learn how an astrolabe works](#) and [to make one of your own.](#)

Has learning about astrolabes made you more, or less, appreciative of the handheld electronic devices we use today? Why? What have we sacrificed (in terms of knowledge of, and connection with, the world around us) for the sake of convenience?

Cryptology

The Science of Writing and Breaking Secret Codes

Edgar and Allan “[take] a particular (some might say ‘peculiar’) interest in things that others [disregard] as mere mistakes, because they [believe] that oddities and seeming coincidences [are] actually the world’s way of communicating secret messages” (41). What the twins don’t realize, of course, is that their great-great-great-great granduncle is writing and sending those coded messages to try and help them avoid danger! In the real world, secret codes are frequently used to secure data, transmit secret information, and protect national security. What should we know about the science behind secret codes and how they are used?

Activities

- [Find out how and why encrypted codes work.](#)
- [Distinguish “cryptology,” cryptography,” and “cryptanalysis.”](#)
- [Watch this video to get a sneak peek inside the National Cryptologic Museum](#) and learn how cryptologists helped the U.S. win the Battle of Midway and end World War II in the Pacific. [Meanwhile, code breakers at England’s top secret Bletchley Park developed the Enigma machine to crack German secret codes and help end the war in Europe.](#) How might the course of history have been changed if the Allies had not made such rapid advances in cryptanalysis?
- [Consider how the principles of cryptology have been adapted to encrypt \(or protect\) data transmitted via computers and the Internet.](#)
- Now that you know how secret codes work, practice decrypting secret messages using cypher tools you’ll find [here](#) and [here](#).

For what kind of jobs are cryptology skills a must? How so?

Create

An important part of learning is having the chance to produce something of your own. Here you will find engaging projects that connect with the novel and that allow your creative abilities to shine.

Spin Your Own Spooky Yarn

Have the adventures of Edgar, Allan, and their great-great-great-great granduncle Edgar Allan Poe given you a “taste for the thrilling and unexpected” (2)? If you are feeling inspired to try your hand at writing a tale of suspense, mystery, and maybe even horror, use [this online “Skeleton of a Scary Story”](#) guide to help you conceptualize the kind of spooky characters, setting, and plot twists that will leave your readers shaking in their boots!

Before you begin to write, take some time to

- jot down plans for the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and textures that will create your story's setting;
- visualize the characters' appearance, body language, and roles as your story progresses; and
- map out your story's plot, especially an unexpected twist or two!

Then, using the notes you have made, handwrite or type up your first draft of your story. Read your first draft aloud to yourself. Consider any changes or improvements you want to make. When you are satisfied with your final product, share your story with friends or family members.

Did your words affect your audience as you were hoping? Why (or why not)? If you were to revise this story again, what would you add or change? Remember, creative writers, even famous ones like Edgar Allan Poe, revisit their work-in-progress many, many times. Don't be afraid to cut, add, or move parts of your story around. The more you work at it, the spookier your story will be!



Shape-and-Stuff Your Own Fortune Cookies

For Edgar and Allan, the best part of eating Chinese food is cracking open their fortune cookies at the end of the meal! They love trying to decode the cryptic messages. Have you ever wondered who actually writes those fortunes or how the tiny slips of paper are tucked so neatly inside each cookie? Why are fortune cookies always served with Chinese food, anyway?

To solve the many mysteries of fortune cookies—and, maybe, even make some of your own!—follow these simple steps:

- [Trace the history of the fortune cookie as we know it today.](#)
- [Watch this video to see how fortune cookies are made in large batches at a factory.](#)
- Try your hand at making your own [edible](#) or [paper](#) fortune cookies at home. **Be sure to ask a trusted adult for assistance with cooking implements and/or cutting tools!**

For an added challenge, develop a coded message (see the next “Create” activity) to write on your fortunes! Then see whether friends and family can decipher your code while they enjoy your homemade treat.

Communicate Via Secret Code

Now that you know all about how cryptologists encrypt and decipher coded messages (see the “Cryptology” activities on page 10 in the “Uncover” section above), why not try creating a coded message yourself? There are many different secret codes from which to choose, or you can develop a brand new code all your own! [Experiment with this online code generator](#) or [follow these sample codes](#) to get started.

To continue the fun, consider inviting a friend or family member to exchange coded messages with you! Before you begin, be sure to agree upon the secret code you will use. Then challenge one another to see who can decipher the other’s message fastest.

Build a Book-Based Theme Park

Professor S. Pangborn Perry’s roadside theme park, The Gale Farm and OZitorium, is based on his favorite childhood story, *The Wizard of Oz*. The property is located in Kansas, where Dorothy’s wind-swept, fictional adventure begins. The driveway into the park is surrounded by a maze of corn (114). From the entrance, a yellow brick path leads visitors to the “Authentic Gale Farmhouse” at one end of the park and the “OZitorium” at the other (115). The park is filled with *Wizard of Oz* themed merchandise and boasts multiple daily showings of *Oz*, a staged musical version of the story (117-18). If the park weren’t run by a would-be villain, it would be a totally fun place for *Oz* lovers to visit!

Imagine you have been awarded unlimited funds and time to design and build your own theme park based on a favorite book. How would you do it? Here are some questions to jumpstart your brainstorming process:

- Upon which book would you base your theme park?
- Where would you build it? How would you describe the weather and landscape at this location?
- What features, characters, rides, merchandise, and/or activities would you include to help visitors feel like they have stepped into the book upon which your theme park is based?
- What name would you give your park?

Once you have a clear mental picture of the park you'd like to design, [create a 3D diorama](#), using cardboard, construction paper, scissors, and glue. This multi-dimensional prototype will help you visualize how the various components you have envisioned will fit together.

When your diorama is complete, share it with family and friends, especially ones who are also fans of the book world you are re-creating! What are their favorite features of your proposed theme park? Do they foresee any potential problems with your design or suggest something else from the book they wish you would include? Use the feedback you collect to improve your diorama and make your plan for the book-based theme park even more attractive to potential visitors. Who knows? Maybe someday you will actually get the chance to build it!

Reflect & Connect Prompts

In Duke TIP's online Book Club, the "Connect" prompts provide an opportunity for students to share their ideas about the book with other Duke TIP students. You may choose to record your responses to these questions in your Reading Journal, or you can use them to talk about the book with friends or classmates who have also read it.

A Flair for the Dramatic

After their trip to the principal's office, Edgar and Allan try to explain to Uncle Jack and Aunt Judith that they have been "the victims of some kind of treacherous fix" having "to do with an 'institution' dedicated to messy science experiments. . . . [a]nd unauthorized hair removal" (22). The boys are definitely on to something! However, because Uncle Jack and Aunt Judith have already "heard too many tall tales from their nephews" (22), they don't take the boys' concerns seriously. As a result, Edgar and Allan are left to connect the dots on their own.

Have you ever had an experience where adults have dismissed your ideas, observations, or concerns? How did it make you feel? What happened? Why do you think adults sometimes underestimate the reasoning and observation skills of spirited and imaginative kids?

Poster Pick-Me-Up

In an effort to make their homeschool classroom more cheerful, Aunt Judith orders several posters "with [p]ictures of panda bears, adorable raccoons, and fuzzy puppies spouting sweet, optimistic sayings" to hang on the walls (39). Although the posters are not really Edgar and Allan's style, the boys do appreciate their aunt's effort to encourage them.

Do you have a favorite poster, sign, calendar page, post card, or other visual item that encourages or motivates you? What does it look like? What does it say? Where is it displayed? Why is it important to you? Tell us all about your item! Be sure to use lots of descriptive details (colors, shapes, images, text, layout, and so forth), so your fellow TIPsters can visualize it.

Choose Your Own Adventure

In a letter to their classmates, Edgar and Allan wish for a little more excitement to help pass the time until they can return to school: “If only a little adventure would come knocking on our door But that only happens in stories, right?” (44). Little do the twins know that their wish is about to be granted! They are characters in a novel, after all.

Have you ever wished you could leave ordinary life behind and have an adventure like a character from a book or movie? What kind of adventure would best suit you? Why? Perhaps you have even found yourself on an unexpected adventure of sorts, just as Edgar and Allan do later in the book. Use this space to share your dream—or real-life—adventure story with us!

This is Only a Test

On their way to the Gale Farm and OZitorium, the Poes stop for the night at the Wagon Wheel Motel. In their room, Edgar and Allan use one of the beds “like a trampoline, testing the elasticity of the memory foam and the torque of the box springs” (92). To some people, Edgar and Allan’s destruction of the hotel bed may look like inconsiderate mischief. From their own perspective, however, their behavior is perfectly logical and scientific.

Have you ever been inspired to conduct a test or experiment, in hopes of learning something new, but second-guessed yourself because others might criticize you or call you crazy? What was that experience like? In what way(s) do you think our intellectual pursuits are limited by social expectations? Are these expectations for our own good, or do they hold us back in some way? Why?

Kid Power

Spoiler Alert: If you haven’t finished the book, stop reading here and come back later!

On the day they expect Edgar and Allan to arrive, Professor Perry and Ian Archer are careful to clear the Gale Farm and OZitorium of all children “to ensure that the Poe brats stumble upon no natural allies” (120). The Professor believes this will make the twins easier to capture. What do you think of this strategy? Are children naturally inclined to help one another, or does it depend on the circumstances? How so? Include an example to support your answer.

Villain Most Vile?

Spoiler Alert: If you haven’t finished the book, stop reading here and come back later!

How does Professor Perry, a.k.a. Professor Marvel, compare to other villains you know from books or film? In what way(s) is he a typical “bad guy”? In what way(s) is he unusual? Be sure to include specific evidence to support your answer.

“Drive” into a Good Book

Spoiler Alert: If you haven’t finished the book, stop reading here and come back later!

In a letter to his imprisoned mother, Professor Perry explains how “the character of Professor Marvel (aka the Wizard)” from *The Wizard of Oz* became his “inspiration and . . . namesake . . . in hiding” (63). Now the professor operates the Gale Farm and OZitorium, a quirky roadside attraction in Kansas, as a cover for his secret lair (145). This amusement park is surrounded by a maize (corn) maze and even features a wind-blown farmhouse and daily performances of *The Wizard of Oz* musical (114-118)! With Professor Perry out of the way, this park would be a pretty fun place for an Oz fan to visit.

Imagine you have been asked to create a roadside amusement park based on your favorite book. Which book would you choose? Why? What name would you give your park? Where would you build it? What features, characters, rides, and/or activities would you include to attract visitors and make your park memorable? Give your fellow TIPsters a virtual tour!

Thrust into the Limelight

Spoiler Alert: If you haven't finished the book, stop reading here and come back later!

Near the end of the book, Edgar and Allan must appear at a chaotic press conference, where they are bombarded with camera flashes, reporters' questions, and offers to join the governor's reelection campaign (158-165). The next morning, their Aunt Judith fields a call from a movie producer who wants to cast them in a film about their great-great-great-granduncle, Edgar Allan Poe (168-69). The twins are instant celebrities—showered with attention, accolades, and awards—all because they have outwitted Professor Perry and helped the police capture him.

Is this sort of reaction from the public realistic, do you think? What do you notice about the way(s) in which society celebrates people's accomplishments and/or pounces on their failures by pushing them in front of cameras and microphones? Why do you think we do this? Should we?

Keep Reading

A few thoughts on books and reading...

"When I have a little money, I buy books; and if I have any left, I buy food and clothes."—Erasmus

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go."—Dr. Seuss

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read."—Groucho Marx



What's next?

We hope that you enjoyed reading *The Tell-Tale Start*, by Gordon Korman. Check your email for information about our next book club selection. In the meantime, if you are looking for a new best friend—and aren't inside a dog—here are some books you might enjoy. Don't forget to use the tips from "Writing While You Read" (see pages 17 and 18) to deepen your enjoyment and understanding of these books too.

- *Masterminds*, by Gordon Korman
- *My Near-Death Adventures*, by Alison DeCamp
- *The Scavengers*, by Michael Perry
- *A Single Shard*, by Linda Sue Park
- *The Island of Dr. Libris*, by Chris Grabenstein
- *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library*, by Chris Grabenstein
- *The Lost Kingdom*, by Matthew J. Kirby
- *Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures*, by Kate DiCamillo
- *The House of Power*, by Patrick Carman
- *Rivers of Fire*, by Patrick Carman
- *The Dark Planet*, by Patrick Carman
- *The Phantom Tollbooth*, by Norton Juster
- *Navigating Early*, by Clare Vanderpool
- *The Apothecary*, by Maile Meloy
- *The Apprentices*, by Maile Meloy (sequel to *The Apothecary*)
- *The City of Ember*, by Jeanne DuPrau
- *The People of Sparks*, by Jeanne DuPrau
- *The Prophet of Yonwood*, by Jeanne DuPrau
- *The Diamond of Darkhold*, by Jeanne DuPrau
- *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, by Trenton Lee Stewart
- *Chasing Vermeer*, by Blue Balliett
- *The Lightning Thief*, by Rick Riordan
- *Fever 1793*, by Laurie Halse Anderson
- *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson
- *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, by Brian Selznick



Writing While You Read

Have you ever read every word on a page, and turned every page, but when you finished reading, you couldn't remember anything that you had read? If so, you're not alone! Reading can be relaxing, but sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that reading is passive, when it should be active. This doesn't mean you need to run while reading – that might not be a good idea. Writing as you read, however, makes reading active. This process involves some effort, but the payoff for that effort is a deeper understanding and greater enjoyment of the books that you read.

Two strategies for being an active reader are keeping a reading journal and annotating your books.

How do I keep a reading journal?

Below are some suggestions of things that you might write in your reading journal. Experiment with them. You may find that one strategy works really well for you, while others don't work at all. There's really not a right or wrong way to keep a reading journal, as long as you use it as a place to explore your thoughts, reactions, and questions as you read.

What Do I Write?

Write a brief summary, in your own words, at the end of each chapter or section. Include the main ideas or concepts of the chapter, major events in the plot, and any new information that you learn in the chapter.

Do you meet a new character? If so, what is the character like? How do you know? What are the reasons behind what that character says and does? How is the character like other characters in the book? How is the character different? Does this new character remind you of characters you've read about in other books?

Does the setting change? If so, how does the new setting compare and contrast with the previous one? Why does the setting change?

Create your own title for the chapter. If the book includes chapter titles, you might write about why the author has chosen that particular title for the chapter. How does it relate to the main ideas or concepts, major events, and character action in the chapter?

Respond to the chapter. What is the most interesting thing in the chapter? What did you learn that you didn't know before? Do you agree or disagree with the choices the author is making about plot and character? Why or why not? What do you think is going to happen next? How can you connect what is happening in the book to other things you've read? To other things you know? To your own experience?

Identify words that you don't know. Some of these words may just be new to you; others may be jargon, terminology that is used in a particular field or academic discipline. Look these words up in a dictionary, write down their definitions in your notebook, and be sure you understand their meanings and how the author is using them. Often these words are some of the most important in the reading.

Make note of passages where you are confused and/or have questions, and be sure to include a page number. Once you finish the chapter, you can return to the passages. Perhaps further reading clarified the confusion. If not, you know exactly which points in the text to further research or to ask questions about.

Write down striking or unusual use of language. Often writers use particular words, expressions, or sentences in ways that we wouldn't have thought to use them, and the effect can really jump off the page at us. If you come across a passage that seems really cool to you, write it down in your reading journal.



Throughout the online book club activities, you will find activities that are specifically labeled “Reading Journal.” When you see that label, read the writing prompt, and respond to it in your reading journal. These prompts will usually ask you to write about a personal connection to what you’ve been reading. For example, a journal prompt might ask you to write about a time when you found yourself in a situation that is similar to a situation of one of the characters in the book.

To Write or To Type, That is the Question!

Your reading journal doesn’t have to be a hard-copy, hand-written one, but there are some advantages to using an old-fashioned journal:

- The physical act of writing promotes a stronger memory for new words, phrases, and strategies you will be learning
- The hard copy notebook can evolve into a collage, a scrapbook, even a work of art that represents your creative, messy, overflowing mind!

How and where you keep a reading journal is much less important than actually doing it! So find an old notebook that may be buried in your desk, ask mom or dad if you can buy an inexpensive composition book, or create a new folder on your home computer and get started!!



How do I annotate a book?

As the word suggests, annotating a book involves making notes or other types of marks that help you focus on particular words or passages that seem important, are often repeated, relate to other things you’ve read, or simply interest you as a reader. An active reader annotates a text by doing any or all of the following:

UNDERLINING

Specific words that convey significant events or elements of the story’s characters, plot or theme

VERTICAL LINE ALONG THE MARGIN

This helps the reader quickly find an important passage underlined, or to highlight a paragraph or other section too long to underline.

ASTERISK/STAR/DOODLE ★

Placed in the margin, this device is reserved for the most important, special ideas, events or elements of the book. There would be no more than a dozen of these in the entire book; by flipping through, one could easily find once again the most significant passages in the text.

4. NUMBERS

Placing numbers in the margin can help count a set of related points or ideas the author is listing.

P.#32 PAGE NUMBERS

Often indicated by “p. #” or “Cf. #” next to the number, this indicates an idea or element is connected to another on different page of the book, and should be considered together.

CIRCLES

These serve the same function as underlining key words or phrases, but may be reserved for the BIGGEST ideas or facts in the book.

Of course, all of these strategies involve marking in the book. So if you’re planning on annotating your book, we recommend that you have your own copy – librarians take a very dim view of writing in books that belong to the media center/library!



Names, Places, & Faces...Oh, My!

Keeping Track with a Character Grid

When reading a new book, it can be helpful to keep track of the characters you meet and what you think about them. This Character Grid is one way to do just that!

Characters in books (or movies!) are often very like people you meet every day in real life. You may notice the way a character dresses, talks, thinks, behaves, or makes new friends. As you record your ongoing thoughts here, remember that some characters will change and grow depending on what happens to them—or whom they meet—as the story progresses. These are called **dynamic** characters. On the other hand, some characters stay the same no matter what happens to them. These are called **static** characters. Whether a character is willing to change and grow can affect the kind of person he or she turns out to be in the end, and it can also influence how we, as readers, feel about that character.

For example, Marlin, from the movie *Finding Nemo*, starts out as an overprotective dad who doesn't believe his son Nemo should try new things because he might get hurt. As the movie progresses, though, Marlin makes new friends, like Crush and Dory, who help him learn to guide and encourage his son without keeping him from experiencing the fun life has to offer. By the end of the movie, Marlin has changed his way of thinking about how to be a "good" dad. This not only makes him a dynamic character but also makes us like him better and want him to succeed as a parent. (If Marlin had not changed his ways, we might have ended up being frustrated by him.)

INSTRUCTIONS:

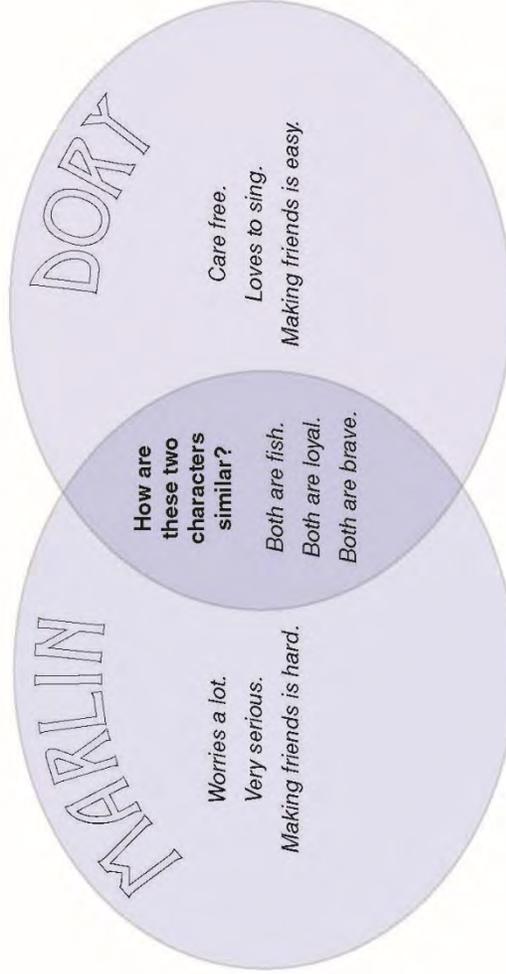
1. Tuck this Character Grid into your book or Reading Journal. Then, each time you meet a new character in the book, take a moment to write down his or her name on the grid and answer the "As You Are Reading" questions. (If you run out of writing room, feel free to create your own grid or answer these questions in your Reading Journal!)
2. Once you have finished the book, go back through your grid and answer the "After You Have Finished the Book" questions. As a way of wrapping up, consider: With which character(s) did you connect most strongly? What does this tell you about yourself?

Character's Name	As You Are Reading...		After You Have Finished the Book...	
	Where/When do you meet this character?	Describe this character's appearance and behavior.	What stands out to you about this character's name, behavior, or choices?	Why is this character important to the story overall?
			Is this character static or dynamic ? What evidence from the book tells you so?	

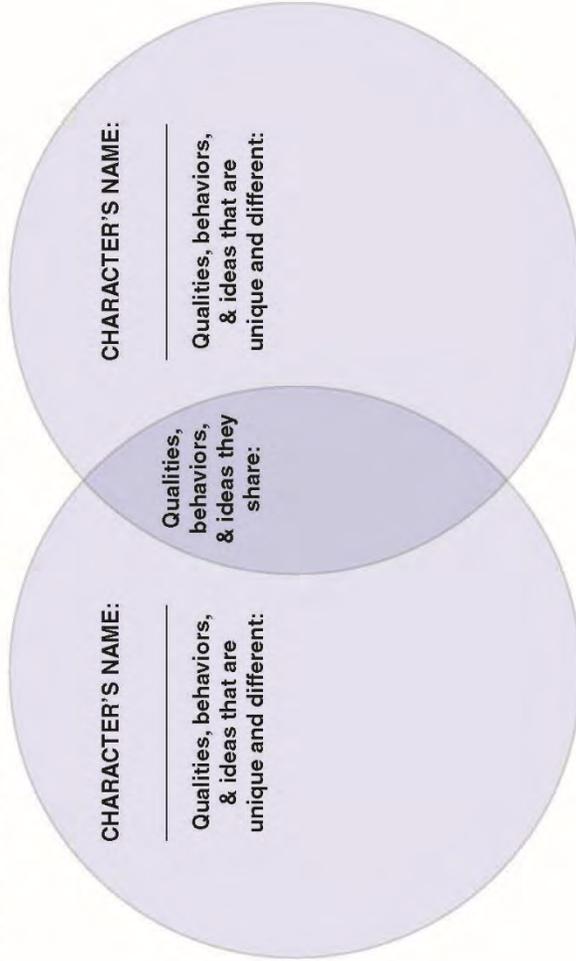
Side-By-Side Comparison with a Venn Diagram

Creating a Venn Diagram can help you visualize and make sense of the similarities and differences between two or more things. For example, as you are reading a book, you could use a Venn Diagram to compare key characters, places, or events.

A basic Venn Diagram is made up of two, partially overlapping circles. Let's say you wanted to compare two characters. In the outer part of each circle, you would write one character's name and list the qualities, behaviors, and ideas that make him or her unique and different. In the space where the circles overlap, write down characteristics the characters share. If we were comparing Marlin and Dory, from the movie *Finding Nemo*, here is how our Venn Diagram might look. (If you've seen this movie, try adding some observations of your own!):



Now you are ready to draw your own Venn Diagram in your Reading Journal! To get started, try something like this:



If you want to compare more than two characters, places, or events, simply add additional circles to your Venn Diagram. Be creative! Just pay attention to the places where your circles overlap and look for similarities there. Here are some other possibilities:

