

2020–2021 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature

JASON REYNOLDS

GRAB THE MIC TELL YOUR STORY

Educator Guide for
High School





A **NOTE** TO EDUCATORS

Today is a time of great disruption and, hopefully, change. People around the world are finding their voices and using them to speak up for what they believe in or to discuss their experiences. Children and teens are among them, reckoning with unfolding events that greatly affect them and adjusting to new schedules and realities. Kids are eager to discuss and share ideas, to ask questions and learn from new sets of circumstances. Helping them feel comfortable sharing their stories and encouraging them to see value in those of their peers will activate empathy and mental strength that will stay with them as they move forward. Opportunities for social and emotional learning, especially tied to such a personal project, provide tools that not only shape academic life, but also equip students to build meaningful relationships and identify important ideas, behaviors, and goals. Activities like these build comradery and openness with classmates, and even help kids to better understand themselves. We hope you'll use this guide to help your students feel empowered to tell their stories and motivate them to think about giving an audience to all kinds of voices. When they feel supported and connected, they can replicate that atmosphere for others. They can see that when they tell their stories, they are inviting others to do the same; to be heard, to be understood, to be valued.

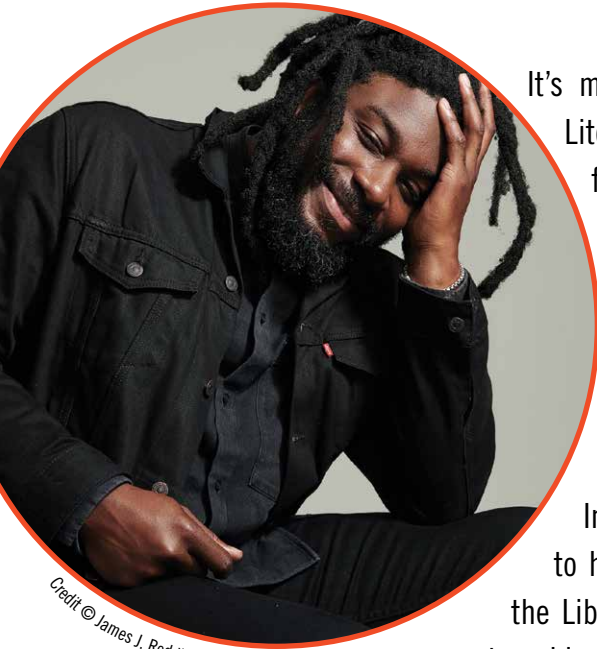
HOW TO USE THIS **GUIDE** WITH YOUR **STUDENTS**

You may be leading a virtual classroom for the time being and may be looking for ways to adapt these activities for your needs. Jason's ["Write. Right. Rite." video series](#) is perfect for distance learning; activities include "Create a Hashtag," "Amplifying Your Voice," and "Exploring Symbolism" in this guide also involve independent work that can work particularly well virtually, with students gathering again as a group for an opportunity to share responses. "Spine Poems" offers an alternative option for virtual learning. Look for the red stars throughout the guide for additional suggestions for remote learning adaptations. ★

Please note that the activities in this guide can be used independently and in any order. Each activity begins with an "Instructions" section that gives background information and instructions to use to prepare students for the activity that follows. You may choose to assign students or a group of students to prepare the group for the activity as outlined in these "Instructions" sections, allowing them to take more active roles in building and strengthening elements of storytelling. You might consider incorporating the guide into an author study of Jason Reynolds and his books or doing these activities with smaller groups and book clubs. Once students have spent time engaging and preparing to tell their own stories, you can visit StoryCorpsConnect.org and [view the StoryCorps Connect toolkit](#) to help them record their own interviews; please see more details in the StoryCorps section of this guide.

If you are in the classroom and eager to use these activities as part of an authorless event, please share the below steps with your students! The sections and activities that follow speak directly to your students as well, and can be shared accordingly.

A NOTE FROM **JASON REYNOLDS:** 2020 NATIONAL AMBASSADOR FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE



Credit © James J. Reddington

It's me, Jason Reynolds, your National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, which is a fancy way of saying the leader of the Literature for Young People Parade. I'm the dude with the whistle and fancy hat, marching and hyping up the crowd. Or better yet, an even easier way to think of me is as a cheerleader. Books are my pom-poms. High kicks and all. Or, for some of you, I'm the instigator in your crew, all in your ear like, "Yo, I know you not just gon' let this book look at you like that, and not read nothing." Yeah, that's me.

In all seriousness, I'm just a big fan of books, and now it's my job to help every young person become a big fan of books too. That's why the Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden appointed me and why I'm in partnership with the Children's Book Council, Every Child a Reader, the Library of Congress, and Simon & Schuster with this new initiative, [GRAB THE MIC: TELL YOUR STORY](#).

I think of who I was as a young person, believing the stories in my curriculum were the only ones that mattered. Believing that because the characters didn't line up with me, but found themselves between the pages of a book that my story—my character—was unwanted and unnecessary.

Some of you are thinking, "But isn't it your job to say, 'Hey kids, get out there and READ?' Isn't that why they gave you that shiny medal?" Well...I suppose. But when I was a kid, I never did something just because I was told to. I did it because I believed the person telling me could actually see me as me, and hear me as human. That's what GRAB THE MIC aims to do, and the residual effects of this, I believe, will be more readers.

GRAB THE MIC: TELL YOUR STORY

With the activities below and the challenges included in his [“Write. Right. Rite.” video series](#), Jason invites you to join him on a reading journey like nothing you may have seen before. That’s because it’s your turn to tell your own story, and, in doing so, you may even discover the types of stories you like to read.

Now, how do you go about doing that? Finding your voice and learning to value your experiences are great goals in theory, but what does that look like? How can you challenge yourself to share what’s important and meaningful to you? Maybe you haven’t thought much about it, or maybe you think about it all the time. Maybe you’re confused about what books and stories want from you, and what you want from them. Wherever you are, that’s okay—better than okay, really, because you’ve got a fantastic Ambassador for Young People’s Literature on your side, who wants to give you the opportunity to become your own ambassador.

So gather your classmates, rally your teacher, and let everyone know that you’re ready to GRAB THE MIC, and that you hope they’re excited to do the same.



SETTING UP AN **AUTHORLESS** EVENT

- 1.** With your teacher and classmates, choose a date and time for your GRAB THE MIC event. Will you invite kids from other grades or classes? Does your school have an e-newsletter? Consider including a banner with event details on your school's website or social media page. The details are up to you!
- 2.** Decide on the format for your event. Do you need a moderator or a host? Will you begin by interviewing one another the way Jason often asks questions to kids who attend his events? How else might you go about listening to others and supporting them in telling their own stories? How will you move between activities or conversations?
- 3.** Set up your space or pick your platform. How many people will attend? Think about printing copies of this guide to share with attendees or how you will distribute the link. Depending on your circumstances, you may be arranging an in-person or virtual gathering. Please adapt as needed using our red star suggestions for virtual learning throughout this guide.
- 4.** It's story time! GRAB THE MIC and follow the activities below as you host the event you and your classmates have put together. Let us know what you plan and how it went at #TellYourStoryWithJason.
- 5.** Come together after your event to talk about what activities got you most excited, and what you were most interested to discover about yourself or your classmates. Or reflect for yourself on how it felt to GRAB THE MIC, and what stories you might read or write next.

INSPIRING EPIGRAPHS

Instructions

Participants can partner with someone who has read the same book as they have, one they would like to use for this activity. Explain what an epigraph is and its purpose.

Activity

An epigraph is a short statement that is included at the beginning of a novel. It could be a sentence, a paragraph, or even a poem. But the words of an epigraph are written by someone other than the author of the novel. Take a look at two examples of quotes that authors Lorraine Hansberry and Esmeralda Santiago have used in their works:

Epigraph Examples		
Title & Author	A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry	When I Was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago
Epigraph & Author	<p>“What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?</p> <p>Maybe it just sags like a heavy load</p> <p><i>Or does it explode?”</i></p> <p>—“Harlem” by Langston Hughes</p>	<p>“El bohío de la loma, bajo sus alas de paja, siente el frescor mañanero y abre sus ojos al alba. Vuela el pájaro del nido. Brinca el gallo de la rama. A los becerros, aislados de las tetas de las vacas, les corre por el hocico leche de la madrugada. Las mariposas pululan —rubí, zafir, oro, plata...—: flores huérfanas que rondan buscando a las madres ramas...”</p> <p>“Under its palm frond wings, the little house on the hill senses the freshness of morning and opens its eyes to the dawn. A bird flies from its nest. The rooster jumps from his branch. From the nostrils of calves separated from the cows runs the milk of dawn. Butterflies swarm—ruby, sapphire, gold, silver— orphan flowers in search of the mother branch.”</p> <p>—From “Claroscuro” by Luis Lloréns Torres</p>

Even if you haven’t read these two books, what impression do these epigraphs give you about the stories that begin after these words?

Epigraphs grab readers. They spark interest, provoke questions, and suggest a powerful theme in a text. Essentially, epigraphs open the door, providing both insight as well as sneak peeks into the writing that waits ahead.

Work with a partner to write an epigraph to a novel you’ve both read that you feel would “open the door” to this book for other new readers, even if the novel already has one. What is another equally attention-grabbing choice you could include?

If you’re feeling stuck, select a quote, sentence, or poem from another author, as Hansberry and Santiago have done.

★ Share your screen to show students the epigraph examples, and talk about the authors’ choices and impressions they leave. Host a group discussion about other example epigraphs students have seen, or ideal tones and messages they think an epigraph should express. Once students feel comfortable with the concept, invite them to work on creating their own; consider setting up a shared folder for completed epigraphs that students can read and discuss in another post-activity discussion, or assigning partners to exchange completed epigraphs and give reactions and constructive feedback.

BEING **LOYAL** TO YOURSELF

Instructions

Engage participants in a coming-of-age conversation centered around loyalty and the pressures young people navigate as they try to determine who they really want to be in the world. This conversation can take place in small groups of three or four. You might begin by giving participants powerful examples of this in literature as in the following examples.

Activity

In his books, Jason Reynolds illuminates the pressures young people face in their daily lives. The pressure to be loyal is one example. In just sixty seconds, Will, the main character in *Long Way Down*, determines whether or not to demonstrate his loyalty by avenging the death of his brother. Seventeen-year-old Rashad Butler, a character in *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, is loyal to the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) because of external pressures.

He says, “I didn’t need ROTC. But I did it, and I did it good, because my dad was pretty much making me. He’s one of those dudes who feels like there’s no better opportunity for a black boy in this country than to join the army. That’s literally how he always put it. Word for word.”

Is there a character from a book you’ve read who is loyal to a person or a cause that you questioned? Talk about ways we can each be loyal to something or someone, and how sometimes that loyalty isn’t always well placed. Discuss the pressures that can be placed upon young people and the challenges of being true to one’s self. How might we reconsider our loyalties when we realize they may be misplaced, and channel them where they may truly belong? How might this impact the way we tell our own stories?

★ Read book passages or show short film clips of coming-of-age conversations to students over your virtual platform. If small breakout rooms are an option, then send students off into groups of 3–4. Consider posing a specific question or two to keep on task, and give the groups five minutes to discuss among themselves before returning them to the main screen for a large group discussion. You can repeat as needed, with students being given another question and sent back to small groups to brainstorm ideas before rejoining as a whole. If breakout rooms are not an option, consider an activity you can do as a class while discussing some of these questions, such as building character(s) with situations and pressures students would like to see confronted, how they might explore their own lives through story.

CREATE A HASHTAG

Instructions

Invite young people to work collaboratively to create or use a hashtag that applies to a book they've read. Start by asking participants to discuss the existing hashtags they've used and searched, and to discuss why those hashtags are used on social media.

Activity

The purpose of a hashtag is to provide a concise label used on social media sites to house ideas and discussions focused on a specific topic, issue, or theme. It also makes it easier for users to find these posts and information.

Create a new hashtag based on a book you've read. Your hashtag will be an invitation to launch discussions around ideas and issues that don't just exist in the book, but in the world. You can also use an existing hashtag if you believe it applies to issues and ideas in the book. For example, #BlackLivesMatter is a well-known hashtag that might be used in a post about issues raised in the novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas.

Then write a post. What is an idea you'd like to express that addresses the topic, issue, or theme? Remember to conclude your post with the hashtag you've created or are using.

Hashtag # _____		
Title & Author		
Post		

★ Lead a virtual discussion about hashtag use, and encourage students to put their hashtag ideas or existing hashtag examples in the chat box. Once they feel comfortable with the idea, have them work independently to create their own hashtag and post.

AMPLIFYING YOUR VOICE

Instructions

Explain that it may seem counterintuitive, but brevity in your writing can help amplify your voice as you share ideas and issues you care about. We see this in our daily lives on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Social media has changed the way we express ourselves. It's more immediate and concise, yet powerful.

Activity

What's been on your mind not only recently, but continuously? Perhaps you have opinions on how playing video games helps or hinders, a product you think everyone should know about, or whether technology makes us smarter. Or perhaps you've been thinking about a major event happening in the world, how to advance the work of equity, or issues related to the environment.

Draft a one-page opinion piece about a topic or issue you feel most passionate about. Get as many of your ideas down as you can that clearly reflect your stance on the topic you've chosen. This is not the typical opinion writing piece that you may do in school. Instead, refine and edit your writing down to just a few powerful lines.

Begin by editing your draft down to half a page. The challenge is to make sure the writing continues to reflect your stance. Then reduce your writing from half a page to a quarter of a page, making sure the writing continues to hold your point of view. Finally, edit your writing so that you end up with a 280-character tweet that powerfully expresses your thoughts about the topic you've chosen. Share your "tweet" with your peers. Whether or not you post it is up to you!

MY LIFE AS A **MUSIC VIDEO**

Instructions

Ask participants if they've ever heard the phrase "soundtrack of my life." You might explain that this expression is used to describe an album that evokes powerful memories of pivotal turning points in a person's life, places that have great significance, and people who have made an indelible imprint in their mind and heart. Create small groups for students to share and listen to one another's ideas.

Activity

Name an album that represents the soundtrack of your life. Then pick your favorite song from this album.

With this song in mind, write your life as a music video. Great music videos, the ones that we remember, tell a story. You might think about one significant moment of your life. How do the lyrics of this song capture this experience? How does the music represent what you felt? How would the video begin? Who would be in it? Where would it take place? Jot down your ideas and tell the story of this moment as a music video. If you can, play the song as you share your story with your group.

★ Ask students to submit a song that describes them or has affected them in advance of the lesson; put together a playlist of these songs, and play short clips from each to set the tone once students have gathered on screen. Ask students to jot down a few words or thoughts about how each song makes them feel while they listen. Use this as a jumping off point for discussion, comparing and contrasting how different styles and sounds evoke different moods or moments, and how the lyrics can tell a story. Then have them work independently to complete the activity.

EXPLORING SYMBOLISM

Instructions

Explain that writers often develop symbols that can represent more than just one thing. Short stories like “Early Autumn” by Langston Hughes and “Eraser Tattoo” by Jason Reynolds are filled with symbolism, beginning with their titles. The symbols in these stories have multiple meanings.

Activity

Write a poem or start a short story that includes a symbol that is prevalent and revealing. When selecting a symbol, think about something that has significance in your life: maybe your hoop earrings, a baseball cap, or a photograph. Here’s the challenge: think about all the possibilities for that symbol. Don’t cop out! Share your ideas with a peer. Their insights about your use of symbolism can be feedback that helps you to see more depth in your writing and to push yourself to consider even more possibilities for what your symbol could represent.

Then, when you’re ready, share your writing with peers, friends, and family. You might even consider submitting your work to your school’s literary magazine (or start one!), or to publications you read and enjoy.

SPINE POEMS

Instructions

Participants should have access to numerous physical copies of books, such as in a well-stocked classroom or school library. Students can work in pairs or individually. Tell participants that they will be creating a poem they won't actually write.

Note that this event can be altered in the following ways to address virtual events or contexts where access to books may be limited. For virtual events, students might locate the covers of four to five books that they have read or are planning to read, and arrange them horizontally to create their spine poem. For in-school events, students could write the titles of books on a whiteboard or chalkboard (which they can erase and revise) to create their spine poems and then share them with peers.

Activity

A spine poem is a type of “found” poem created by arranging the spines of books. You can use books that you've read or ones that you haven't yet tried.

You and your partner can select titles that seem to work together as a poem. Your poem can be poignant, humorous, or clever.

Working with four or five books, arrange them on a table to see if the titles work together in such a way to tell a story that could also be a poem. This activity is about trial and success! Try a different arrangement if the first attempt doesn't feel right. You may want to try different titles until you feel you've expressed the feeling and tone you're aiming for.

Once each partnership has finished, take a gallery walk to view and admire one another's work. Read the poems aloud. Start from the top and read to the bottom. You might explore what happens when you read from the bottom to the top. Take photographs of the spine poems that moved you or made you laugh.

EXTENSION IDEAS

StoryCorps

Take some time to reflect on ideas that have emerged while participating in these discussions and activities. Jason Reynolds has said, “Every person walking this earth has a story. Everybody has a story that could change the outlook for life for somebody else.” How might you use your voice to tell your story?

Then think about how your story might grow. Perhaps you’d like to build a story with a writing partner or collaborate with a small group where each person contributes ideas for words, lines, characters, conflicts, and events. Or perhaps you’d like to develop a story on your own. Consider how your experiences can shape your story and how it might, as Jason says, “change the outlook” on life for others. Then go ahead and GRAB THE MIC: Tell Your Story.

At twenty-one years old, Jason worked as a StoryCorps facilitator, assisting and enabling others to tell their stories; he also recorded this clip sharing his experiences growing up and his desire to become a writer. When you’re ready, resources on StoryCorps Connect can help give you a platform to tell your story. Visit StoryCorpsConnect.org for more information. [Listen to Jason talk](#) more about his experiences with StoryCorps, and learn how you can participate!

NOTE TO EDUCATORS: Download the StoryCorps Connect 2020 Teacher Toolkit [here](#).

This guide has been created by Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul utilizing Jason Reynold’s Write.Right.Rite series as inspiration. More about her below.

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