

# WORD NERD



THIS BOOK IS  
PEANUT-FREE

SUSIN  
NIELSEN



# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Penguin  
Random  
House

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Twelve-year-old Ambrose is a glass-half-full kind of guy. A self-described “friendless nerd,” he moves from place to place every couple of years with his overprotective mother, Irene. Ambrose forms an unlikely friendship with the troubled twenty-five-year-old son of the Greek landlords who live upstairs and they come to befriend the director of a local Scrabble Club. For the first time in his life, Ambrose blossoms. The characters at the Scrabble Club come to embrace Ambrose for who he is and for their shared love of words.

This brilliantly observed novel by award-winning author Susin Nielsen about a boy who’s searching for acceptance and for a place to call home can be used in a number of ways including:

- Exploring concepts and themes such as acceptance, bullying, friendship, family, responsibility, addiction, adversity, courage and perspective
- Studying character development and evolution
- As a springboard for on-going discussions about bullying
- As an entertaining group and/or independent reading experience

The reading guide that follows includes discussion questions and prompts to elicit a meaningful understanding of the text. Readers will be encouraged to ask and answer questions to clarify and monitor their understanding, identify important ideas and synthesize information for a broader understanding. Discussion questions can be adapted to suit the age level and needs of young readers nine to twelve years of age. Where applicable, activities have been aligned with Common Core State Standards.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**SUSIN NIELSEN** got her start writing a spec script for the popular television series *Degrassi Junior High*. She went on to pen sixteen episodes of the hit show and four of the *Degrassi* books. Since then, she has received two Canadian Screenwriter Awards and a Gemini Award. She has written for many TV series, including *Heartland*, *Arctic Air* and *Robson Arms*, which she co-created. Her first novel, *Word Nerd*, won four Young Readers’ Choice Awards and was a finalist for the TD Canadian Children’s Literature Award and the Canadian Library Association’s Book of the Year Award, among others. Her second novel, *Dear George Clooney, Please Marry My Mom*, won three Young Readers’ Choice Awards and is a Winner of the Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers by VOYA and the Gold Winner of the Book of the Year Award in Juvenile Fiction by *ForeWord Reviews*. Her third novel, *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*, won many awards, including the Governor General’s Literary Award, CLA’s Book of the Year for Children Award and three Young Readers’ Choice Awards. It was also selected as one of the best fiction for young adults by the American Library Association and a Top Shelf for Middle School Readers by VOYA. Her latest novel, *We Are All Made of Molecules*, is on the longlist for the 2016 Carnegie Medal, is a finalist for the 2016 Red Maple Award, was nominated for the 2015 Governor General’s Literary Award for Children’s Text and was named to Best of 2015 lists by *Kirkus Reviews*, *Quill & Quire*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Telegraph* (UK). Susin Nielsen lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband and son.

LINKS

[penguinrandomhouse.ca](http://penguinrandomhouse.ca)  
[susinnielsen.com](http://susinnielsen.com)

## PRE-READING DISCUSSION / ACTIVITIES

- What are your thoughts about the title *Word Nerd*? What is your understanding of the word “nerd?”
- Have you ever played Scrabble? Describe the rules of the game. What is the ultimate goal?
- What does it mean to be allergic to something?
- Make a list of behaviors that are examples of bullying.
- What kind of connections does a reader make as they read a novel? As you read, note the text-to-self, text-to-world and text-to-text connections that you make.



[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1]

## 1. CHARACTER

- Make a master list of the prominent characters in the story. Identify the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s). Select the three most important characters other than Ambrose in the novel and write a brief description of each. Identify at least five defining characteristics that show how and why these characters are important to the story.
- Ambrose’s mother is very protective of her son. How does Ambrose feel about this? What events in their family history may contribute to her feeling that she needs to be so protective of her son? How did Ambrose’s father’s death change his mother and contribute to her anxiety about Ambrose? Are her feelings of overprotectiveness understandable? Why or why not? Why did Ambrose’s mother move she and Ambrose around so often?
- “But, of course, telling me to stay away from Cosmo was like telling a kid not to lick a metal fence post in the middle of winter.” Ambrose and Cosmo form an unlikely friendship. Why was Ambrose initially so interested in Cosmo? Compare and contrast these two characters and explain why you think they had such a strong connection. How do they “save” one another from the problems each were facing? Identify an example in the story where Cosmo rescues Ambrose and vice versa.
- “Sometimes a guy could feel lonelier surrounded by people than he could when he was alone.” Discuss and/or write a short reflection about this statement. How does it connect to Ambrose’s experiences?
- Identify instances in the story where one of the characters acted: courageously, fearfully, joyfully, sadly, selfishly, sympathetically. Select one of these descriptors and describe a time when you have acted in such a manner and discuss how this experience compares to the character in the novel.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2]

## 2. PERSPECTIVE

- From whose point of view is the novel written? Are there any instances where the author deviates from this point of view? What are the advantages of this type of narration? Can you think of any potential challenges for both the reader and the author?
- Consider how the story would read had it been told from Cosmo or Irene’s perspective. How would the voice and/or tone of the story differ?
- Even though the story is told from Ambrose’s point of view, the author shows the reader what other people in the story think about Ambrose. How does the author do this?
- What were Ambrose’s impressions of the people who attended the Scrabble group at first? How and why did his thinking change over the course of the novel? What life lessons did he learn as a result of belonging to this group?

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6)

## 3. BULLYING

- In the first chapter, there are several incidents of bullying behavior. Identify at least four occurrences that can be considered bullying. Review the types of behavior identified in the pre-reading discussion as examples of bullying. Connect the incidents in the book to this list.
- Bullying is targeted and repeated behavior that involves power, aggression, intimidation and shame. How do Troy, Mike and Josh’s actions against Ambrose fit into this definition? Was Ambrose’s comment towards Joan an example of bullying? Why or why not?
- Why didn’t Ambrose keep his Epipen with him? What responsibility does a school community have with respect to its members with serious allergies? Do you think Troy, Mike and Josh truly understood the potential consequences of slipping a peanut into Ambrose’s sandwich? How did the school react to this incident? What do you think would be a fair consequence for having committed such an offence?



(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3)

## 4. THINGS TO CONSIDER

- The first line of the novel reads, “The day I almost died, the sky was a bright brilliant blue...” What affect does starting the story in this manner have on the reader?
- Ambrose’s mother is very protective of her son. Is there such a thing as being too careful? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of having a super protective parent or guardian?
- Ambrose wasn’t honest with his mother about how difficult school was for him. Why did he not tell her the truth? What did he think might happen if she knew just how unhappy he was? Put yourself in Ambrose’s situation and explain whether you would have behaved in a similar manner or not.
- Is it a compliment or insult to call somebody a nerd? When might it be considered a compliment? When might it be considered an insult? What does this say about the importance of speaking respectfully to and about another person?

- “Scrabble wasn’t just about having a good vocabulary; it was also about which letters you held on to and which you dumped.” How does Ambrose apply this idea when asking his mother if he can join the Scrabble Club? Have you ever used a similar tactic?
- “And as I sat there sipping my second Roy Rogers, it dawned on me that this was what it was like to have friends. People who liked you for you. People you didn’t have to try and impress.” What is your definition of a real friend? If you are lucky enough to have a friend that fits your definition, write them a letter that thanks them for their friendship.
- When questioned by Ambrose about how he ended up in such trouble, Cosmo says, “What can I say, Ambrose? There’s a lot of paths to choose from in life. I took a wrong turn.” What does he mean?
- If there is a lesson to be learned about acceptance in the novel, what do you think it is? Explain your thinking by referring directly to events and characters in the novel.
- Does the novel have a happy ending? How do Ambrose, Irene and Cosmo evolve or change over the course of the novel? If you had to select one event in the story as having the biggest influence on the outcome of the story, which one would it be and why?
- *Word Nerd* is a book about second chances and the importance of learning to be yourself. Write a short reflection about this statement.

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2)

## 5. EXTEND YOUR THINKING

- What happens next? Write one more chapter that tells about what happens at the Scrabble tournament in Calgary. Try to stay true to Ambrose’s voice as you tell the story.
- Write your first name down and then brainstorm all the different words that you can make with the letters in your name. Repeat with your surname.
- Challenge a friend or family member to a game of Scrabble. Remember some of the lessons Ambrose learned about the importance of fair and respectful play.
- What is anaphylactic shock? What were the signs of Ambrose’s reaction to eating a peanut? Investigate your own school’s policy with regards to protecting its students and staff with serious allergies.

(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3)



# COMMON CORE STANDARDS

## TEXT TYPE: LITERATURE

### READING: LITERATURE

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3** Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6** Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3** Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.6** Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3** Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6** Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

### WRITING

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well structured event sequences.

## **SPEAKING AND LISTENING**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.