

TEACHER GUIDE FOR **DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME** BY ERIC WALTERS

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Book Summary

Quinn and her friends Isaac and Reese are in eighth grade. They are faced with a very similar experience and many of the challenges that students around the world are facing, as their school is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their school and teacher provide classes and lessons through online and streaming techniques. The virus continues to spread and necessitates the suspension of nonessential services, increases the need for more physical distancing and isolation, and the school closure is extended. While they experience the pandemic from the perspective of three young people, they are more aware of the situation than most of their peers, as Quinn's father is an ER physician, Isaac's mother is the chief of police in their community and both of Reese's parents are teachers—and her grandmother is in a long-term care facility. When the decision to close the schools for the year is finally made, they realize that all of their school experiences—sports, school trips, dances and graduation—will be lost. They decide that, while things can't be the same, maybe at least one activity can still happen in a unique way.

Listen to the first chapter—**read by the author**—by going to YouTube: *The Write Stuff With Eric Walters*



Author Biography

Eric Walters has degrees in psychology, social work and education. He is trained as a family therapist and worked for 18 years in a hospital emergency department, which included time in a mask, scrubs and gloves during the SARS outbreak. Eric began writing as a way to get his fifth-grade students interested in reading and writing. A Member of the Order of Canada, he has now published more than 100 novels and picture books. He is a tireless presenter, speaking to over 100,000 students per year in schools across the country. He lives in Guelph, Ontario.

Feel free to email to let him know what you think of his book at ericwaltersauthor@gmail.com.

General Questions

1. What are the differences between an outbreak, an epidemic and a pandemic?
2. Research the Spanish Flu of 1918.
3. Create character profiles of Quinn, Isaac and Reese by listing their personality traits as you find examples of them in the story. As you read the story, fill in the profile. For example, here's one for Quinn:

Quinn's Personality Profile

- a) _____
 - b) _____
 - c) _____
 - d) _____
 - e) _____
 - f) _____
4. Find a picture on the internet of somebody who looks the way you imagine these characters look in the story. Print and attach this picture to their personality profile.
 5. Keep a running tally of the names of all the characters as they are introduced and their relationship to the three main characters.
 - a) Jenna; student vice-president, good friend of Quinn, friend of Isaac and Reese
 - b) Miss Fernandez, their teacher
 - c) _____
 - d) _____
 - e) _____
 6. How did your school announce the closing/cancelling of school?
 7. How did they provide ongoing lessons and assignments to students in your school?
 8. List student activities that were cancelled because of your school closing (e.g., field trips).
 9. Keep a list all of the settings where this story takes place
 - a) Classroom
 - b) Auditorium
 - c) _____
 - d) _____
 - e) _____
 10. Take a scene from the book and use the dialog and action to make it into a short play. As a group, act out and film the scene.

Chapter-by-Chapter Questions

Chapter One

1. Who would make a better student president, Jenna or Isaac? Explain your answer.
2. Design a poster for Isaac's campaign to be student president.
3. Quinn thinks, "*Isaac was one of my best friends, but Jenna was too. I didn't like them fighting. I didn't like anybody fighting.*" What does this tell you about Quinn?
4. How do you think Mrs. Reynolds would have reacted if she heard Isaac imitating her?
5. What does it mean to have a story written in "first person"?
6. The author writes almost all his books in first person. What are the benefits of writing in this style?

Chapter Two

1. Explain the term *physical/social distancing*.
2. How does Quinn explain exponential growth?
3. How does Miss Fernandez explain exponential growth?
4. Show a different version of exponential growth. You'll need a chess/checkers board and a bag of rice. Starting with one grain in the first square, two in the second, four in the third, etc., see how many squares you can fill.

Chapter Three

1. Quinn thought, "*While I was hugging people, I couldn't help but think about the circles I'd drawn on the whiteboard. If somebody did have the virus already, then a whole bunch of other people were going to be infected now. But I didn't want to be rude. These were my friends.*" Should she have been rude and refused to hug people? What would you have done in her circumstances?
2. Why wasn't Isaac surprised that the school holiday had been extended?
3. Why did Mrs. Reynolds insist that they leave the grounds of the school?
4. Quinn said to Isaac, "Better safe than sorry." Explain this old saying, or adage.
5. There is a saying, "Hindsight is 20/20." Explore and explain that saying. How does it apply to this story?

Chapter Four

1. What personal protective equipment (PPE) would doctors wear to provide them with safety in treating COVID-19 patients?
2. Draw a doctor or nurse in full PPE or find a photo online and print it.
3. Quinn's mother was able to do her banking job *remotely*. List ten jobs that can be done remotely and ten jobs that cannot.
4. Why did Quinn's father choose to live downstairs?
5. What was one item that you missed the most during the pandemic and why?

Chapter Five

1. The story gives the reader a sense of the passing of time. What device was used to show this? Be aware of this resurfacing as a technique throughout the novel.

2. In chapter two, and again in chapter five, basketball is an activity. Going through Eric Walters' website, just looking at the covers, how many books have been written with an obvious basketball theme?
3. Quinn asks Isaac, "What happened to all the amazing things you were going to be doing on break?" In your opinion, what did happen?
4. Explain how *physical/social distancing* is important for containing a pandemic.
5. Why is there a greater danger to Reese's grandmother—and other seniors—in having visitors?

Chapter Six

1. Long-term care facilities for seniors became some of the worst sites for COVID-19 outbreaks. In a group, problem solve what should be done in the future to improve this situation and save lives?
2. What pre-existing conditions made it more dangerous to be infected with COVID-19?
3. Explain the term *flatten the curve*.
4. Originally Isaac was happy when spring break was extended from one week to three weeks. What were his reasons for now being upset when the school cancellation was further extended?
5. Why was it important for Quinn's father to live and eat in the basement? Why were his meals "delivered" on paper plates?

Chapter Seven

1. Quinn often felt anxious. The pandemic increased anxiety for many people. What are the reasons behind the increased anxiety people were feeling?
2. Did you find yourself more anxious or nervous? Explain.
3. What are the best and worst things about remote learning/teaching?
4. Try the experiment Quinn asked Isaac to do in order to demonstrate flattening the curve.
5. Quinn says, "That's the worst part. How many more tally marks does Isaac have to add before it's over?" Explain why she feels that way.

Chapter Eight

1. Isaac drew hopscotch courts and jokes on the sidewalk to make people happy as they passed by. What sorts of things did people do in your neighborhood?
2. Create a sign to place in your window that would make people feel happy or inspired.
3. Everybody seemed to need a haircut, hairstyle or to have their hair dyed during isolation. Describe your own COVID-hair look.
4. These are difficult, troubling times that they are experiencing. How did Isaac react?
5. Quinn and Isaac talk about getting information from watching the news. Where did you get most of your information about the pandemic? How well do you feel the media covered the situation? Explain.

Chapter Nine

1. Quinn's mother would "quarantine" or scrub groceries when they came into the house in case there were traces of the virus on those surfaces. Research how long the virus can live on the following surfaces: metal, plastic, wood, cardboard, glass and clothing.
2. Why do you think her mother told her not to help with carrying or unpacking the groceries?

3. What restrictions or changes were made in the grocery stores in your community?
4. What did you most miss while in self-isolation?
5. Why did Quinn want the school lessons to involve more information or research about COVID-19 and the pandemic?
6. Quinn’s mother says, “I never thought buying groceries could be so exciting and scary at the same time.” Did you find yourself anxious when you ventured out into the world? Why or why not?

Chapter Ten

1. Why Quinn’s father calls her “Q-cat” is never discussed. What do you think is the story behind this nickname?
2. “Be careful. There’s a lot of misinformation out there.” This is the warning from Quinn’s father. What are some false pieces of information that were spread about the virus during the pandemic?
3. Quinn and her father eat their dinner “together,” sitting on different levels of the stairs. Describe the sort of accommodations that your family and extended family experienced?
4. “If you’re racing downhill and you’re trying to slow down enough that you don’t crash, you don’t take your foot off the brake. We need to press down harder.” Explain how this related to the concept of flattening the curve.

Chapter Eleven

1. Design a decorating pattern for a mask. Be creative—this could include things like a fake mustache, big red lips, a zombie or leopard pattern.
2. Go online and find and print your favorite designs.
3. What was your favorite remote learning assignment/experience and why?
4. What did you miss most about not being able to attend school? Why?
5. Is there an assignment you wish you could have suggested to your teacher? Explain.
6. Do you think Miss Fernandez is a good teacher? Why?

Chapter Twelve

1. The chapter starts with Isaac—once again—marking the tally of days on the road. Why did the author decide to repeat this again? Is this helpful for the reader to understand the passage of time?
2. Draw a picture of Reese, Quinn and Isaac on their bikes collecting masks.
3. Have a debate. One side wants to keep nonessential services and schools closed and have people remain in quarantine, and the other side wishes to have everything opened up completely. List as many reasons as possible to support both arguments.
4. What accommodations or changes could be made to open up services while keeping people safer? Do you see changes that were implemented to make it safer? List them?
5. The school in the story is called Switzerland Point Middle School. Is there a real school with this name? Why do you think the author chose that name for the school in the story?
6. Reese and Quinn are very emotional at the end of the chapter. In your opinion, is that realistic? Would you have reacted the same way?

Chapter Thirteen

1. The chapter ends with the mask delivery being on the news. Was this story “newsworthy” in your opinion? Why?
2. Quinn, Isaac and Reese have been living with the hope that school would start again. In this chapter, that hope is removed as it is cancelled for the rest of the year. Write a scene where Reese and Quinn have a FaceTime discussion describing their thoughts/feelings/reactions about this.
3. Isaac has always been upbeat, positive and full of jokes. In this chapter he starts with tears and ends needing to be alone. Does this seem consistent with his personality? Does this make him more real or less realistic?

Chapter Fourteen

1. Quinn has been having trouble sleeping. List other ways people show that they are anxious or upset.
2. Quinn’s father “breaks down” in tears. What do you think just happened at the hospital that would cause him to react this way? Write that scene—as an added bonus, act it out and film it.
3. The following dialogue takes place between Quinn and her father:
“It’s just school.”
“It’s not just school. It’s your life.”
What is he trying to say to his daughter?
4. Her father suggests they have a meal together that night, trying to inject some sense of normal to life. What other things can be done during quarantine to bring happiness or a sense of normal back to life?

Chapter Fifteen

1. Quinn outlines her plans for a spring dance. “*In a quick burst I gave them my idea.*” List elements you think would be part of the dance.
2. Why would the school board turn down their request?
3. Mrs. Reynolds has always been described as being tough and no-nonsense, but she gives them an alternative. Does this fit with what you know about her thus far? Why might someone be tough on the outside but soft on the inside?

Chapter Sixteen

1. Draw Quinn and Reese as they are dressed for the dance.
2. Create a diorama or model of the street scene, using whatever you have on hand (e.g., Lego, a shoebox, etc.)
3. Create your own pandemic playlist for the dance. What would be your first song? Why?
4. Write a scene—start with you being driven there by your parents and end with you standing in your square on the street.

Chapter Seventeen

1. Research making an actual mask. Bonus—make one!
2. What background would you want to be photoshopped into and why?

3. Mrs. Reynolds and her husband appear at the dance. Does this add another new element to her personality? Were you surprised? Explain.
4. List what you would have brought to the dance in your backpack?
5. Could this dance actually happen? What things would get in the way and how would you fix them?

Chapter Eighteen

1. Were you able to predict the final scene? What clues did you have throughout the book?
2. Did the final scene evoke any emotions in you? If so, why did you feel that way?
3. Quinn's father says, "It was much more than a dance." What does he mean by that statement?
4. What song would you want to be the last song at the dance? Why?
5. Write the next chapter. Is it Quinn and Isaac in the backyard? Did the TV station show up and report the dance? Was there a message from Mrs. Reynolds that was shared to all the students? Were there YouTube and Instagram videos?

Author interview by Helen Kubiw of CanLit for Little Canadians

Q&A with Eric Walters re: *Don't Stand So Close to Me*

1. If there was one thing that compelled you to write a story based on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, what was it?

Almost immediately I started receiving emails and twitter comments from students, teachers and teacher/librarians asking me if I was going to write a story about the pandemic. At first, I simply told them it wasn't something I was contemplating. As those contacts reached over a hundred, I began to realize that there was both a desire and a need. Young people needed to see something that reflected their present lives, to understand their situations, and teachers needed something to get their students engaged.

2. Though literature can be solely for entertainment and not harbour hidden messages to illuminate or educate, *Don't Stand So Close to Me* cannot help but facilitate young readers' understanding of the circumstances. If there was one message for them to take away from reading the book, what would you like it to be?

There were some very important pieces of information I wanted incorporated into the narrative including 'flattening the curve' and 'exponential growth'. I wanted these to be explained in a way that they could understand. The overall message, however, is about changes, adapting, understanding what's lost, acknowledging the anxiety of uncertainty, and perhaps more important, remembering what is still with us—family, friendship, human connection and hope.

3. *Don't Stand So Close to Me* is more than “just” a book. It is an undertaking to involve young people in tackling the pandemic at their own level. It doesn't require action but it certainly empowers them to look beyond the inconvenience and see the big picture of how they might help reduce the impact of this dangerous virus. If you could choose 3 actions that you would encourage them to take, what would they be?

It all stems from a basic understanding that while we're certainly *not* in the same *boat*, we are in the same *ocean*. We have a deep connection, and need for that connection, with those around us. Be kind. Have faith. Have hope.

- What can you do to show kindness to those in your family?
- How can you connect with others in your community to make their lives better?
- Change always starts with one person. Be the person that helps to change your part of the world.

4. I applaud your characters who seem to follow the saying that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. But we know that there are many for whom this pandemic is a struggle. As a former social worker and teacher, do you have any guidance for young people who might be struggling emotionally?

This pandemic has helped to expose the fault lines in our society. We are not all blessed with the same support systems—either internally or externally. Share a gentle word, encourage, make a phone call, a donation. Be kind to each other—and be kind to yourself. Being kind to yourself may be the hardest. Don't judge—support.

If you're having problems, reach out to your parents, teachers and friends. It's a sign of strength to know when you need help. Be strong enough to reach out.

5. The book's dedication is to your grandchildren whose names are coincidentally that of the three main young characters. But your grandchildren are far younger than Quinn, Isaac and Reese in *Don't Stand So Close to Me*. Do the characters share any characteristics with your grandchildren or are they modelled after other young people you know or have known?

I love being a grandfather. My grandchildren are all 2 or under. Someday they'll look at this story, see their names, and this will be part of my gift to them, to help bind them together. You always invest bits of yourself or people you know in your stories. I REALLY like these characters. They are caring, capable, funny and thoughtful.

6. Getting a book written and to press is usually a lengthy process. How were you able to complete this process so quickly, especially under the circumstances of everyone working remotely?

From the very beginning this was an act of trust and partnership. With just a rough outline my publisher trusted me to craft and complete a novel on a tight schedule. While I was writing they were simultaneously editing, marketing, working on digital strategies, designing a cover

and doing all the things necessary to publish a book. We not only published in record time but created a marketing and promotion path that was more comprehensive than any plan previously attempted with any of my books—or any of their previous books!

7. Fingers crossed that this pandemic will be over, some time. Would you consider a sequel to reveal how Quinn, Isaac and Reese and their peers and families managed and look back at how this event has shaped them? Or would you perhaps write another book that addresses life in the aftermath of the pandemic? Or are you just as happy to let *Don't Stand So Close to Me* be the end of this story?

Until you asked this question, I hadn't thought about it at all! Maybe I better call Orca before I answer.

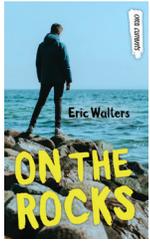
This story ends with hope. It's the best possible place for any of us right now. I've always believed in the power of hope. At the same time, I strongly believe that you prepare for the worst and pray for the best.

I enjoyed those characters so much I would like to revisit them in another story. I think what the story might be will be dictated by what's going to transpire in the world. I choose to believe it will be better.

You have to have hope.

Other books by Eric Walters

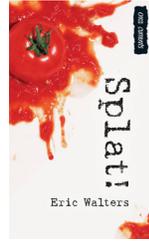
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