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Teacher's Resource Guide • Grades 3–5

ABOUT THE BOOK

Because of Winn-Dixie is a funny, poignant, and utterly genuine novel that has quickly become a children's literature classic. This guide provides an array of thoughtful, student-friendly activities that deepen students' understanding of characterization and make teaching this Newbery Honor-winning book a fun and enjoyable experience.

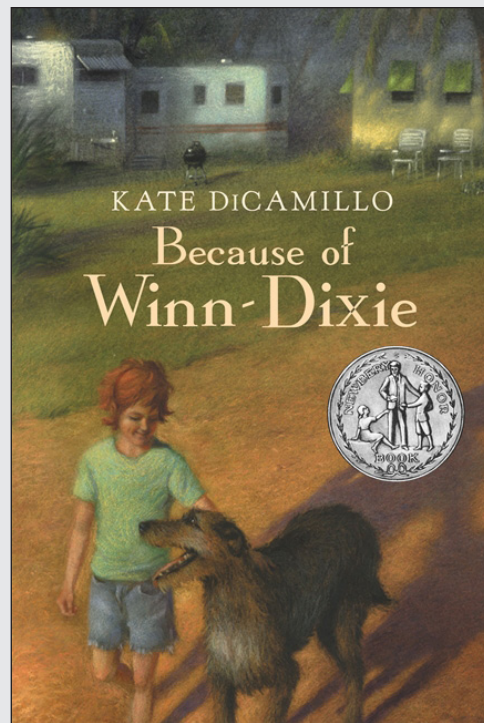
STORY SUMMARY

When ten-year-old Opal returns home with a stray dog she names Winn-Dixie, things begin to change in Naomi, Florida, the sleepy town where Opal and her father, a reticent preacher, have recently settled. Winn-Dixie helps Opal make friends with the endearing outcasts of Naomi, including a woman rumored to be a witch; the elderly town librarian, who gives Opal candies that taste like melancholy; and an ex-con musician who runs the local pet store. Through these new friendships, Opal learns not to judge people—including the mother who abandoned her—for their past mistakes, but to appreciate people for who they are in the present. These unassuming characters become a dependable community in which everybody has a sorrow to let go of and a story to tell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Kate DiCamillo was five years old, she and her mother and brother moved from Philadelphia to a small town in Florida in hopes that the warm southern climate would alleviate young Kate's chronic pneumonia. She spent her sickly childhood reading books—"I learned to rely on stories as a way of understanding the world"—and dressing her standard poodle Nanette in a tutu and, later, disco clothes. When she was in her twenties, Kate DiCamillo moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she lived in an apartment that did not allow dogs. "I wrote *Winn-Dixie*



"My name is India Opal Buloni, and last summer my daddy, the preacher, sent me to the store for a box of macaroni-and-cheese, some white rice, and two tomatoes and I came back with a dog. This is what happened. . . ."

because I was homesick for Florida . . . and because I wanted a dog and couldn't have one . . . It allowed me to go home and to spend time with a dog of the highest order." The author continues to live in Minneapolis, where she writes two pages a day, five days a week. Her biggest challenge as a writer is to "get out of the way" so that her characters can tell her their stories. About India Opal Buloni, the protagonist in *Winn-Dixie*, she says, "India Opal Buloni seems so real to me, I don't think I could have made her up. Rather, I feel like I discovered her."

written and developed by Marilyn Bousquin and Rhonda Berkower

BEFORE READING

The following prereading activities set a context for the story, spark students' interest, and set a purpose for reading.

MAKE PREDICTIONS

Encourage students to make predictions about the setting, characters, and plot of the story based on the information provided on the book cover. Prompt students to check and modify their predictions as they read.

WHOSE POINT OF VIEW?

Read aloud the first page of the novel. Talk with students about the author's use of the first-person voice. Ask: *Who is telling the story? What can you tell about Opal from the way she speaks? What do you think of the opening sentence? Does it make you want to read more?*

ASK QUESTIONS

After reading the first page of the book, ask students, What are some things that you would like to know about Opal? What are some things you would like to know about the dog? What other questions do you have about the story? Record students' questions on a chart to revisit during reading.

DURING READING

Encourage students to apply the following **COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES** and **SKILLS** as they read or listen to the story. Read aloud Chapter One and model the strategies and skills for students. Ask students to think about how these strategies can help them to understand the story and its characters.

MAKING CONNECTIONS helps readers draw on prior knowledge as they incorporate and assimilate new information from a text. Encourage students to make text-to-self connections between the story and their own lives. Ask questions such as the following to help students make meaningful connections:

- Does Opal remind you of anyone in your life? Who? Describe him or her.
- Opal compares her father, the preacher, to a “turtle hiding inside its shell, in there thinking about things and not ever sticking his head out into the world” (pp. 16–17). Do you know anybody like that? Describe him or her.

- Opal is afraid that the preacher will get mad if she asks him about her mother. Have you ever been afraid to ask someone something? When?

SUMMARIZING portions of a text during reading helps students identify main ideas and remember what they have read. Have students brainstorm a title that sums up the main idea and reflects the plot, character, or mood of each chapter. For example, in Chapter One, Opal rescues Winn-Dixie from the pound and takes him home. Students might title this chapter “Opal Meets Winn-Dixie” or “Winn-Dixie: Lost and Found.” Write the chapter titles on a large chart. When students have finished reading the book, prompt them to use the chapter titles to help them recall and retell the story. You may also want to prompt students to summarize what happens “because of Winn-Dixie” as they read the novel. For example:

- Chapter Three: Because of Winn-Dixie, Opal finds the courage to ask her father about her mother and the preacher starts to come out of his shell.

UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERIZATION helps readers to explore the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of the characters. Review Chapter Four with the class and create a list of the ten things Opal learns about her mother. Point out that list *characterizes* Opal's mother, giving the reader a sense of who Opal's mother is, even though she doesn't actually appear in the story. Ask: *Do these ten things paint a whole picture of Opal's mother? What else might Opal want to know about her mother? What else would you like to know?*

As students read or listen to the book, have them create character collages for the characters. Their collages should include a drawing or sketch of each character framed by expressive adjectives (for example, *splendid* or *grand* as opposed to *good*) as well as phrases and sentences that describe the character's physical appearance, personality traits, and behaviors. Encourage students to use quotes from the book when possible. Use the collages to discuss what students know and would like to know about each character.

POINT OF VIEW is the perspective from which a story is told. *Because of Winn-Dixie* is narrated in the first person by the main character. In the first-person point of view, everything the reader learns is through the perspective of one character. Have students experiment with point of

view by retelling scenes from different characters' perspectives. For example, challenge students to retell the opening scene in which Opal meets Winn-Dixie in the grocery store from Winn-Dixie's perspective. *How does a different perspective change the scene? What can we learn from Winn-Dixie's perspective that we can't learn from India Opal's?*

APPRECIATING THE AUTHOR'S CRAFT helps students become better readers and writers. Conduct a mini-lesson that explores the vivid language Kate DiCamillo uses to describe her characters. Explain that a *simile* is a direct comparison of two things that are usually not alike. Similes use words such as *like* or *as* to make the comparison. Writers use similes to help us to see things in new, often surprising, ways. For example, Kate DiCamillo writes that Winn-Dixie "looked *like* a big piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain" (p. 11). Have students note in a journal the similes they encounter as they read. Discuss these similes and the images they evoke. Help students visualize these similes by folding a piece of paper in half, then drawing the objects being compared on either side of the fold. Encourage students to write and illustrate their own similes that describe a favorite character.

VOCABULARY

Encourage students to note unfamiliar words in a Word Log and try to define them from the context of the story. Use words from students' Word Logs as often as possible in class discussions, and encourage students to look and listen for these words outside class. You may want to preview the following words before reading:

missionary (p. 13)

exception (p. 15)

peculiar (p. 47)

identical (p. 61)

pathological (p. 76)

roundabout (p. 91)

imitated (p. 92)

notion (p. 105)

melancholy (p. 121)

amuse (p. 151)

complicated (p. 153)

wheezed (p. 175)

AFTER READING

Open-ended questions encourage students to think critically about the book's themes. Cross-curricular activities help extend students' understanding of the story through writing, art, drama, science, geography, and math activities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Family

- How would you describe Opal's relationship with her father at the beginning of the book? How does their relationship change by the end of the book?
- Why do you think the preacher cries when he and Opal can't find Winn-Dixie?
- At the end of the book, Opal imagines that she is speaking to her mother and says, "I miss you, but my heart doesn't feel empty anymore. It's full all the way up." What does Opal mean? Why do her feelings about her mother change?

Love, Friendship, and Community

- Do you think *Because of Winn-Dixie* is a good title for this novel? Why or why not? How does Winn-Dixie change Opal's life? How does Opal change Winn-Dixie's life?
- Because Gloria doesn't see well, she tells Opal to "tell me everything about yourself, so as I can see you with my heart" (p. 66). What does she mean by this? What do you think it means to see someone with your heart? How is that different from seeing with your eyes?
- What does Opal learn about friendship? What did you learn about friendship from reading *Because of Winn-Dixie*?
- How do the people in Naomi act like a community? In what ways is Naomi, Florida, like your community? In what ways is it different? *Encourage students to notice differences and similarities in race and class, as well as the ways people treat and help one another.*

Understanding the Characters

- Opal often finds that her first impression of the

people she meets is not always accurate. Choose a character from the book and describe how Opal's impression of him or her changes by the end of the story. What causes Opal's impression to change?

- Gloria says that she made her mistakes before she learned “the most important thing” (96). What do you think Gloria means by “the most important thing”? Why does Gloria say that “the most important thing” is different for everyone?
- Kate DiCamillo says, “I love strange names and I love making them up.” Names often contain other meanings and can influence a reader's perception of a character. Choose a character with an interesting name. Is there a story behind the character's name or nickname? Does the name influence the way you see and understand the character? Does the name reflect the character's personality and character traits?
- Why do you think Otis kept on playing music even after the police told him to stop? What do you think Otis means when he tells Opal that “the music is better if someone is listening to it” (p. 130)?
- At the end of the book, Opal observes that Amanda no longer looks “pinch-faced” (p. 182). What causes Opal to see Amanda differently?

Loneliness and Sorrow

- Why is Opal lonely when she first moves to Naomi, Florida? In what ways does Opal deal with her loneliness?
- Opal tells Winn-Dixie that they are a lot alike. In what ways are Opal and Winn-Dixie alike? In what ways are they different?
- How does the Littmus Lozenge taste to Opal? The preacher? Gloria? Amanda? Otis? Why does the Littmus Lozenge taste different to each character who tastes it?

To learn more about these and other reading comprehension strategies, see **Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop** by Ellin Keen and Susan Zimmerman (Heinemann, 1997) and **Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding** by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (Stenhouse Publishers, 2000).

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Using a Thesaurus

When the preacher eats his Littmus Lozenge, he tells Opal it tastes *melancholy*, then explains that *melancholy* means “sad.” Have the class look up the word *melancholy* in a thesaurus. How many other words are similar in meaning to the word *melancholy*? (*Unhappy, depressed, dejected, low, glum, gloomy, miserable, etc.*) List these words on the board. Then organize the class into small groups and assign each group a word from the list. Ask each group to come up with several sentences that use its word to describe the setting, mood, plot, and/or characters in the story.

Partner Interview: Ten Things About Me

As a class, brainstorm interview questions for students to use to find out more about one another. For example: *What is the first thing people notice when they see you? How did you get your name or nickname? What is your favorite thing to do? What is something you don't like? How would you describe your personality? What is something unique about you? Do you have a hobby?* Have partners help each other create a Ten Things About Me list by interviewing each other. Encourage students to create Ten Things About Me posters, and display these posters around the classroom.

WRITING

Small-Group Character Sketches: Who Am I?

Organize the class into small groups and assign each group a character from the book without letting groups know who each other's character is. Instruct each group to write a short description of their character in the first person, without revealing the character's name. For example, a group describing Winn-Dixie might write, *I like to smile and sometimes I sneeze. I am afraid of thunderstorms, and my best friend thinks I look like a big old piece of brown carpet that's been left out in the rain. Who am I?* Encourage groups to refer to their Character Collages as they create their sketches. Remind groups to use vivid language to describe their character's physical appearance, personality, and behavior. Ambitious writers may want to incorporate original similes into their descriptions! Invite groups to read their descriptions aloud and guess each other's characters from the sketches presented.

Extension: Have students pick each other's names out of a hat, and write a Who Am I? description for that person. Have the class listen to each description and guess who the sketch describes.

Letter Writing

Imagine that you are Opal. Write a letter to your mother telling her everything that has happened over the summer because of Winn-Dixie.

Narrative Writing: Because of . . .

Have students think about how India Opal's life changes "because of Winn-Dixie." Have students write a first-person narrative about a person (or pet!) who has made a difference in their life. Before they begin writing, encourage students to make a list of ten things about this person or pet. Suggest that they use this list to create their characterization of the person or pet.

ART

Dioramas

Invite students to use shoe boxes and art supplies such as pipe cleaners, fabrics, colored paper, toothpicks, beads, feathers, etc., to create three-dimensional dioramas that reflect some aspect of *Because of Winn-Dixie*. Students may want to re-create a favorite incident from the book or create a three-dimensional scene that represents a dominant theme or relationship in the novel. Encourage students to present their dioramas to the class and to explain the meaning and importance of the objects that they use to create it.

DRAMA

Character Role-Play and Interview: The Party!

Character role-plays and interviews deepen students' understanding of the story by encouraging them to explore the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of the characters. Have students act out the party scene, using Chapter Twenty-three as a guide for creating a script. (You may want to include egg-salad sandwiches, pickles, and Dump Punch as "props" for the scene!) Ask for volunteers to play each of the characters: Opal, the preacher, Sweetie Pie, Amanda, Gloria Dump, Stevie, Dunlap, Otis, and Miss Franny. Instruct the "actors" to remain in character after the role-play, and have the audience ask each character questions about his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

For example:

- *Miss Franny, what were you feeling and thinking as you got dressed for the party?*
- *Opal, how did you feel when you realized Winn-Dixie was missing?*
- *Dunlap, how did you feel when you waved to Opal and she didn't wave back?*
- *Otis, what was it like to meet so many new people?*
- *Gloria, what were you feeling when you yelled "Good luck" to Opal as she went outside in the rain to look for Winn-Dixie?*

Encourage the actors to answer the questions from the perspective of the character they are playing.

SCIENCE

Gathering Information: Animal Facts

Ask students to choose a specific animal they would like to have as a pet. Encourage students to be specific in their choice. Instead of choosing "birds," they should choose a parrot or gold finch; instead of "dogs," a dachshund or beagle. Encourage students to use the library and the Internet to find out ten things about their animal, then present their findings to the class. Questions to guide their research include: *Where does the animal live? What does it eat? What are its habits? Is it a mammal? Reptile? Amphibian? What is its average life span? How big does it get?* Invite students to create a word that describes the sound the animal they researched makes. Point out that Kate DiCamillo uses such words (known as onomatopoeia) on page 34 to describe the sounds Winn-Dixie makes when he is tied up outside the church: *Aaaaaarrooo Arrroooooowwww Arrriiiiiipppp*, and *Owwwwwww*. You may want to hold a name contest and offer a "strange-name prize" (p. 65) to the student who comes up with the most unusual and descriptive name for his or her animal.

MATH

Installment Plan

Opal plans to buy Winn-Dixie the red collar and matching leash from Gertrude's Pets on an installment plan. The collar costs \$8.75 and the leash costs \$11.25. Ask students to use their math skills to answer the following questions:

- What is the total amount Opal will pay for the collar and leash?
- If Gertrude pays Opal \$3.50 an hour and she works three hours a week, how much does she earn in one week?
- If Opal pays Gertrude's Pets \$4.00 a week, how many weeks will it take her to pay off the collar and leash?
- How many hours will Opal have to work to pay off only the collar? Only the leash?
- How much would Opal earn in three and a half hours?
- If Opal were to purchase one collar and two leashes, how many hours would she have to work? Round your answer to the nearest hour.

You may also want to challenge students to create their own installment plans for something they (or the class) would like to purchase.

GEOGRAPHY

Where Is Florida?

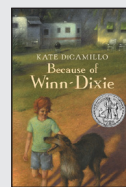
Have students locate Florida on a map of the United States. Encourage them to measure the distance between Florida and the state where they live. Tell students that Winn-Dixie is a chain of supermarkets with locations in the Southeast. Point out that Florida is located in the portion of the United States known as the Southeast. Students may want to take a virtual tour of a Winn-Dixie store at www.winndixie.com.

AWARDS

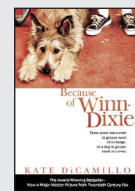
Because of Winn-Dixie has won numerous awards and has received countless accolades. We have room to list only major awards, but *Because of Winn-Dixie* has also been selected or nominated for more than 25 individual state reading awards, including the Texas Bluebonnet Award, the California Young Reader Medal, and the Sunshine State Young Reader's Award.

- A Newbery Honor Book
 - A #1 *New York Times* Bestseller
 - An American Library Association Notable Children's Book
 - An International Reading Association Young Adults' Choice
 - A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's Book of the Year
 - A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year
- ★ "Lyrical, moving, and enchanting. . . . A well-crafted tale of community and fellowship, of sweetness, sorrow, and hope. And it's funny, too. A real gem."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ "An exquisitely crafted first novel. This bittersweet tale of contemporary life in a small Southern town will hold readers rapt."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

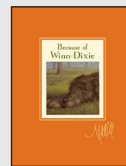
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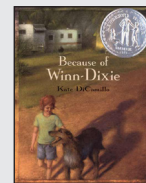
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