



A Curriculum Guide to

Spy School Project X

By Stuart Gibbs

About the Book

In the tenth book in the *New York Times* bestselling Spy School series, Ben Ripley races against time and across state lines—by car, train, boat, and plane—to avoid his new cyber enemies and track down Murray Hill.

Ben Ripley's longtime nemesis, Murray Hill, has put a price on Ben's head *and* accused him of being at the center of a conspiracy on the internet. Now Ben finds himself in his greatest danger yet, on the run from both assassins and conspiracy theorists. Ben must find Murray before his machinations catch up to Ben—but with so much at stake, even some of Ben's most trusted friends might not be at the top of their game, leaving Ben to be tested like never before.

Discussion Questions

The following questions may be utilized throughout the study of *Spy School Project X* as reflective writing prompts, or alternatively, they can be used as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection.

1. As *Spy School Project X* opens, readers learn that Murray Hill has activated Project X to finally rid the evil network of their foe, Ben Ripley. What makes this an incredibly dangerous and highly problematic issue for Ben and his team?
2. Ben receives a message from his principal ordering a top-secret meeting between the two of them, which states, “Your life depends on it.” Why does this note sound so ominous? Based on what is stated in the message, is there a reason to have reservations and concerns?
3. Ben shares, “Everyone has their strengths. Mine happen to be more cerebral. I’m quite skilled at deducting what bad guys are plotting and then figuring out how to defeat them.” (Chapter one) Based on what you know about Ben’s experiences at spy school and in the field, what are some of your favorite ways he’s been able to prove this statement to be true?
4. Based on what is discovered about Project X, are there ways in which this particular mission is more challenging than their earlier assignments? If so, what might those be?
5. As Zoe tries to convince Ben that he’s been extraordinarily lucky to have gotten the field experience he has while still a student, she states, “Do you even hear yourself? Do you realize how fortunate you are? Most students don’t get to defuse a bomb until their sixth year here—and those are just pretend ones for class.” (Chapter one) Do you agree with Zoe? Do you see Ben’s real-world experiences as lucky or not? Explain your position.
6. While discussing how Ben previously destroyed his office, the principal tells Ben, “You’re a menace . . . not only are you insubordinate, you’re also a walking disaster area.” (Chapter one) How does another explosion in his office, once again destroying his desk, cause the principal to lay blame on Ben rather than the actual culprit? Do you see this as unfair, and if so, in what ways?
7. Jawa tells Ben, “You’re connected to everything weird that happens around here.” (Chapter two) Based on Ben’s history at the Academy of Espionage, do you see this as a fair assessment? Why or why not?
8. As Sal Minella, otherwise known as Sal the Knife, attempts to shoot Ben, Professor Crandall attacks him and says, “You were threatening those children . . . I did what I had to do.” (Chapter four) Though they often feel like they are working alone, how do the actions of adults like Professor Crandall prove that there is an adult support system in place for Ben and his team? Who do you believe are the grown-ups they can most regularly count on?

9. After being pressured by Crandall, Sal tells the group, ““Murray Hill initiated Project X. . . The piece I know is that he put a price on Ripley’s head.”” (Chapter four) How does being targeted by assassins affect Ben? In what ways is this reality even worse than the danger Ben has faced in the past?
10. Erica asks the group, ““How is anyone supposed to learn if you don’t tell them what they did wrong?”” (Chapter eleven) In what ways does this philosophy embody how Erica typically approaches others? What are the general consequences of such behavior?
11. In what ways are the Hales overprotective of Trixie? Do you believe they’re making the right choice?
12. Using what you know about similar groups in the real world, what makes the “Truth” and Truthers so dangerous? What are some of the specific things you can do to keep yourself from being vulnerable to believing such outlandish things?
13. Why are the Hales so sure Murray Hill is still imprisoned at Falcon Ridge? How does the frequency in which Ben has faced Murray give Ben an advantage over them? Why does Ben never underestimate how wily Murray can be? Explain your answer.
14. Though she’s the only non-spy in her family, how does Trixie prove her intelligence, cleverness, and usefulness in this mission?
15. Zoe shares that ““Murray is as romantic as an intestinal parasite...It’s one of the several thousand reasons I will never date that weasel. The main one being that he’s evil, of course.”” (Chapter fourteen) Given her disdain for him, why do you think Murray continues to pine for Zoe?
16. What does learning that Murray convinced the CIA to move him from prison and put him in witness protection imply about both him and the agents that made the deal?
17. In *Spy School Project X*, for the first time, readers witness Erica having self-doubt and not being perfect at all she attempts. Did this surprise you? What is your takeaway from discovering this about her?
18. Though he is at fault for creating X, what valuable lesson does Murray Hill learn about the dangers of creating and circulating conspiracy theories?
19. Thinking about the events of *Spy School Project X* and the Spy School series in general, what is your favorite mission that Ben and his team have undertaken so far? Why?

Extension Activities

1. In the author’s note, author Stuart Gibbs reveals that the Spy School series is influenced by the James Bond book and film series. Have you ever seen a Bond film? Even if you haven’t, it is likely you’ve heard some Bond-isms before. Working alone or with a

partner, research the history of James Bond. Based on what you learn, answer the following:

- What makes the book and film series so iconic and impactful?
- What did you learn about the author?
- In what ways have the Bond series and/or characters changed over the series of movies?
- In your opinion, what are the most interesting things you learned?

After conducting your research, create and share a digital artifact that highlights your findings.

2. In hopes of getting Murray to call off the hit, Ben and the team travel to Philadelphia, a city that played an essential role in the founding of the United States. Using the library and internet resources, research to learn more about the dynamic city of Philadelphia, being sure to discover more about the following:

- What role did Philadelphia have in the founding of the United States?
- What landmarks and monuments are considered the most notable within the city?
- Who were the more important citizens during that Independence era?
- What are other noteworthy events and locales today?
- How has Philadelphia played a prominent role in modern media and entertainment?
- What are some of the most unusual or noteworthy places you discovered?

After completing this research, share the three most interesting things you learned with your peers.

3. In *Spy School Project X*, readers learn that Murray has started an internet conspiracy theory that not only puts Ben's life at risk but endangers others, too. Working with a partner, learn more about how conspiracy theories proliferate and strategies to combat them. As a group, read the following article, "It's Only Fake Believe: How to Deal with a Conspiracy Theorist" here: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/29/how-to-deal-with-a-conspiracy-theorist-5g-covid-plandemic-qanon> and then also "#ThinkBeforeSharing—Stop the spread of conspiracy theories":

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/thinkbeforesharing>

After reading these two selections, review what was learned from the articles and discuss what strategies can be utilized when dealing with conspiracy theories or inaccurate or fake online information.

For more in-depth media literacy information, check out *What the Fact? Finding the Truth in All the Noise* by Seema Yasmin: <https://www.simonandschuster.net/books/What-the-Fact/Seema-Yasmin/9781665900034>

4. Due to the ongoing potential danger to his family, Ben's parents have remained in domestic reassignment by the CIA, a program similar to that of the United States Federal Witness Protection Program (WPP). Research the WPP to learn the following:
 - How is the Witness Protection Program defined?
 - Why are individuals and families typically put in this program?
 - What are the general statistics of the number of people placed in the WPP?

- Are there ways in which this program has similar characteristics to the program in which the Ripleys are placed? Are there any notable differences?

After completing this research, share your new knowledge with others.

5. Benjamin Franklin is considered to be one of the most influential founding fathers and creative minds in United States history. Using resources from the library and the internet, investigate the life and work of Franklin, being sure to look closely at the following:
 - When and where did Franklin live?
 - What was his educational background?
 - What were his most important contributions?
 - What were his goals as an inventor?
 - How did his contributions reshape the world?
 - What are some other additional facts you found interesting?

After conducting your research, create and share a digital artifact that synthesizes the highlights of your findings.

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